

Duane Benson State senator, business leader, NFL player

Talent for tackling tough issues with a smile served state well

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Duane Benson, executive director of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation who counted legislator, cattle rancher and professional football player among his many roles, died Saturday at Mayo Clinic Hospital in Rochester after a five-year battle with cancer. He was 73.

Through nearly four decades in public life, Benson was universally respected as smart, savvy and measured, with a mischievous sense of humor. A longtime resident of Lanesboro, Minn., he played the role of sly, country bumpkin to the hilt.

Benson once said that while he wasn't the smartest guy, "I'm really good at trying. I'm not afraid to try," according to his daughter, Brooke Worden of St. Paul.

He served in the state Senate from 1980 to 1994, including a stint as Republican minority leader. "His uncanny ability to walk into any situation, any meeting, anywhere and bring his humility, his compassion, his intelligence — and most of all his humor — was something we should all strive for," Sen. Julie Rosen, R-Vernon Center, said on the Senate floor Monday.

In 1994 Benson became executive director of the Minnesota Business Partnership, a coalition of CEOs from the state's largest companies. It was a high-level assignment that required charming and wrangling strong personalities into coalescing around policy initiatives.

"Whenever there was a tough issue to be hammered out, he was always in the room," said Vikings vice president Lester Bagley, who worked for Benson at the Business Partnership and called him a mentor from whom he learned the skill of reaching practical solutions.

In recent years, Benson was one of the original members appointed to the Minnesota Sports Facilities Authority

(MSFA), the public body that built and now operates the \$1.1 billion U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis. He publicly challenged the panel's leaders on their accountability and transparency, and they were eventually ousted.

Throughout his career, Benson commuted to the Twin Cities from Lanesboro and showed up at the State Capitol in lived-in cowboy boots that showed the grit from horse riding and working on his cattle ranch. Worden said her dad loved his horses and cows.

"When I'd go down to visit, that was one of the first things he wanted to do — walk the pasture and show me the new calves. He named them all," she said.

Benson taught Sunday school for years at a Methodist church in Lanesboro until it folded, then helped start Discovery Faith Community Church where he occasionally preached, Worden said. "One of my earliest memories of him as a child was him reading the Bible," she said.

The sixth of seven children, Benson was born in Belmond, Iowa. He graduated from Hamline University in St. Paul, where he met his wife of 50 years, Melissa.

A standout linebacker for the Pipers, he was drafted by the Oakland Raiders and launched a nine-year NFL career that included playing in Super Bowl II in 1968. He also played with the Atlanta Falcons and Houston Oilers before retiring after the 1976 season.

Worden said that her father had two vertebrae removed on Christmas Eve, but was doing well and walking daily until the pain returned in early January.

In addition to his wife and daughter, Benson is survived by his son, Jess, of Burnsville; brother, Reggie, and sister, Val Jean Thorsen, both of Grand Meadow, Minn.; sister, Dixie Mathews, of Rhinelander, Wis.; and four grandchildren. A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. Thursday at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 200 Kenilworth Av. S., Lanesboro, with visitation starting at 9 a.m. Condolences can be shared at www.rileyfuneralhomes.com.

Staff writer Torey Van Oot contributed to this report.

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