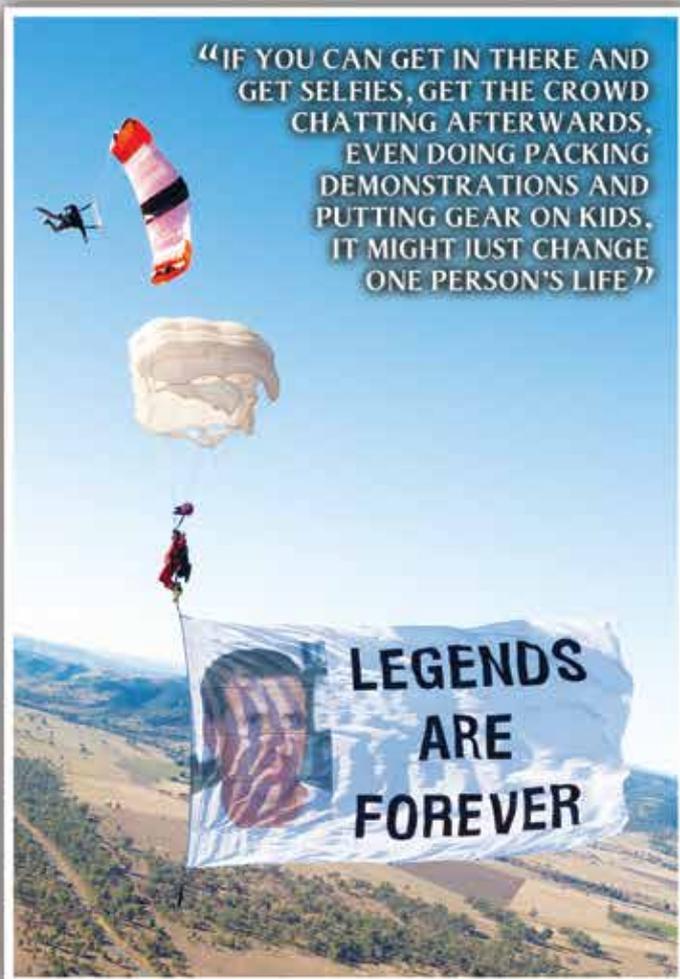


— ROD BENSON — THE GREATEST SHOWMAN

By Kelly Brennan Photos by Steve Fitchett and Archie Jamieson



FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS

Rod Started jumping at Wilton in 1988, after spending about 10 years as a DZ kid watching his dad, Dave Benson. Rod remembers hanging around with Poo Smith and making little parachutes to throw from high rise buildings. The excited youngsters would wait at the airstrip for teddy bears to fall from the planes. Rod's two sisters weren't interested in jumping but it was a natural progression for him.

Within a few short years of his first jump, Rod was working with his father on display jumps and using flags to promote corporate clients. It began with a Coca Cola flag, soon after the famous Coke TV ad of 1991 that also launched the skysurfing trend.

The flags soon grew into something much bigger. "We'd seen something in one of the US magazines and it was a real tiny flag," Rod explains. "We wondered how big we could go with this, and that's when we decided to trial (and error) a lot of flags."

On Australia Day 1992, they went public with a 4,200ft flag, the largest ever flown, at Sydney's Eastern Creek raceway. They also won the flying award at that year's Avalon Airshow because nobody had ever seen a flag of that size.

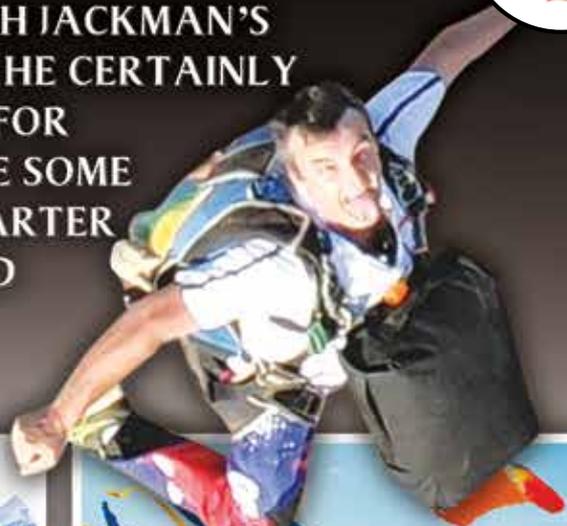
CHALLENGES AND CHOICES FOR DISPLAYS

Rod says display jumping is a challenging niche within skydiving, just like bigways, or head-down or swooping. "You have got a lot of pressure to perform and it's a lot different to jumping on a regular drop zone," he says. He

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ROD BENSON MIGHT NOT HAVE HUGH JACKMAN'S SINGING AND DANCING SKILLS, BUT HE CERTAINLY HAS STAR POWER AS A SHOWMAN FOR AUSTRALIAN SKYDIVING. HE'S DONE SOME 2500 DISPLAYS OVER THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY, FLYING GIANT FLAGS AND ENTERTAINING MASSIVE CROWDS AROUND THE WORLD.



has seen a lot of experienced people over the years, even with seven or eight thousand jumps, who've never done too much away from drop zones. "If they go on a demo and see that one little oval, surrounded by houses, it gets a bit daunting for a lot of people."

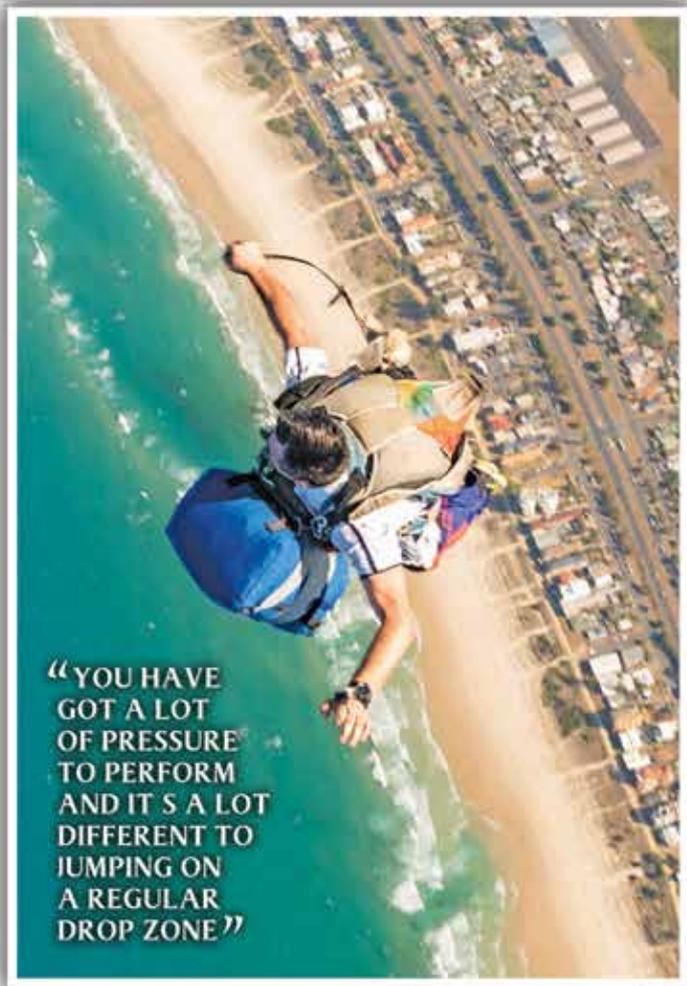
Rod reckons there are very few people who can swoop in accurately with a small canopy and look cool all the time. Often, it's the slow and steady accuracy jumpers who win the fans. "You see a lot of people jumping high performance canopies and the person who gets the biggest cheer is always the person who lands on the cross," he laughs.

"When they're doing a display, skydivers really have to remember that they're doing it for the general public, not for the skydivers!"

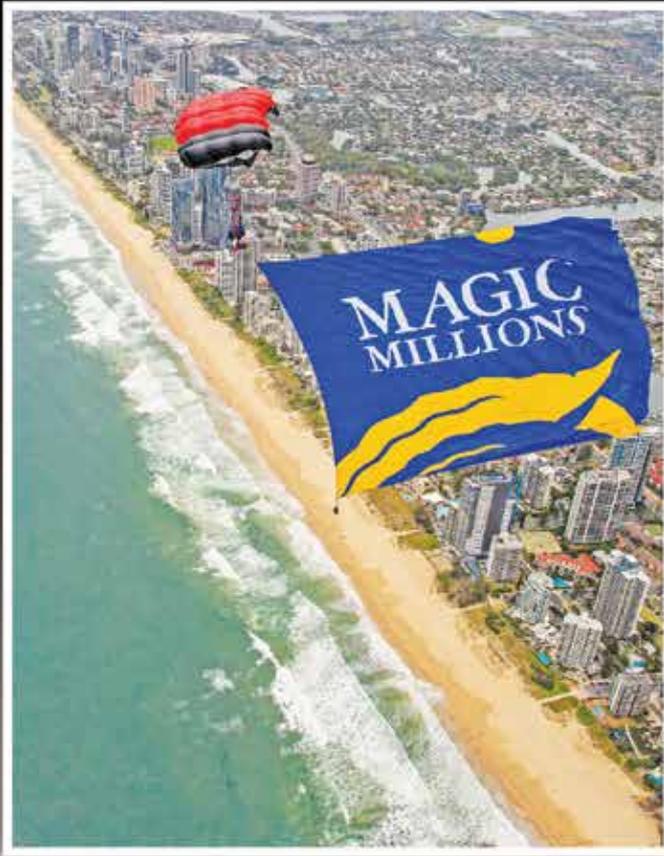
He gets the most enjoyment after the jump, when it all comes down to showmanship and involving the crowd. "Be a rock star for five minutes because that's your glory!"

He advises jumpers to chat with crowds, pose for selfies, put your gear onto little kids and show people how to pack.

Rod says the ground crew is always the backbone of any display and a lot of people don't realise how much stress is involved. "Especially when you're doing F1 Grand Prix and events like that where it's time critical," he says. Event organisers often complicate things by changing exit times or adding landing obstacles just before you jump, and this info needs to be communicated to jumpers. "The ground crew can break or make your display."



"YOU HAVE GOT A LOT OF PRESSURE TO PERFORM AND IT'S A LOT DIFFERENT TO JUMPING ON A REGULAR DROP ZONE"



MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Rod has several 'favourite' jumps from his display adventures around the world. In the mid-nineties, he did a demo for a South Korean airshow. *"They actually shut the gates at 300,000 people,"* he recalls. *"And there was probably another 600,000 standing outside."* Rod felt nervous on that one, even though there was no wind and the landing area was an airfield. *"The conditions were perfect, but just to see how many people were there, that was probably one of the highlights of my jumps."* Another standout was doing a series of night jumps throughout Los Angeles on the Millennium New Years, including downtown LA.

He's had many other remarkable memories, including landing on top of high rise buildings with flags at the Gold Coast. Or the recent enthusiastic crowds at a PNG display.

But what about things going wrong? *"Touch wood, I've never had a malfunction and that's over five and a half thousand jumps,"* he reveals nervously, knowing he's well overdue. But there have been flag malfunctions to keep things interesting. Very large flags need weights of up to 70kg on the bottom corner to make them fly properly, and the flag can sometimes come out like a spinnaker on a yacht, creating a downplane for the jumper. *"You've just gotta fly your canopy differently to try to get it out. You're working very hard all the way."*

Rod says malfunctions like this are always at the back of his mind when the wind starts getting up. *"If I'm right on the edge of the wind limits and I've got no outs, I'll can it."*

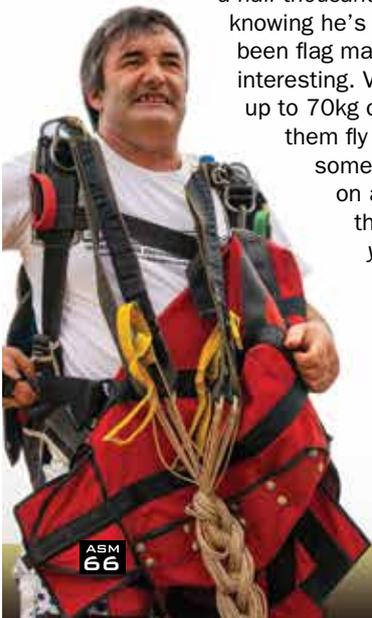
GOING STRONG

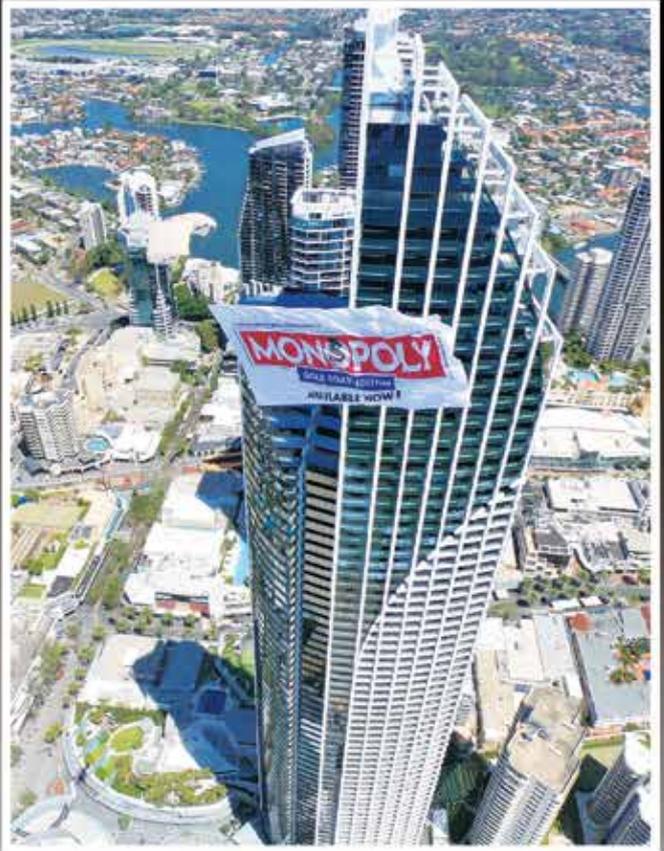
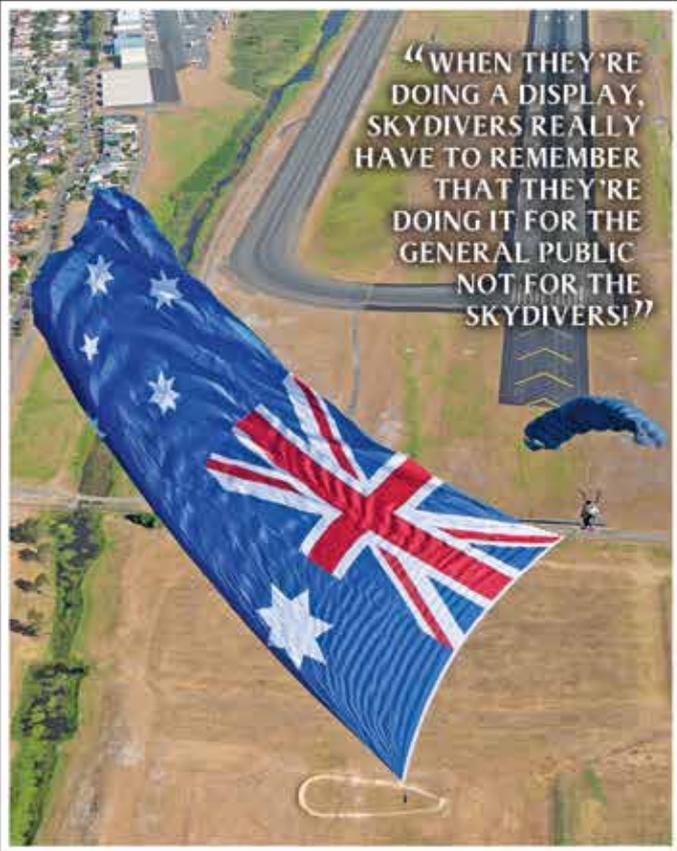
It's six years since Dave Benson died and Rod re-branded the family business as *"Rod Benson Skydive Australia."* He manufactures flags for display jumps around the world and for helicopter tows as well.

Rod lives near the Toogoolawah DZ in Queensland and heads there for test jumps with new flags. Over the last couple of years, he's been working with a new team. *"We've been putting some stuff together that's totally different to what we've done in the past,"* he says. Rod believes they're all enjoying the work and it has given them a fresh urge to get back into displays.

Dave Benson was famously strict on his displays. Clean jumpsuits, shoes and punctuality were not negotiable. Rod has worked hard to keep the professional standards high, and he's proud to carry on the family tradition.

He still thinks of Dave when he's doing a display that they used to do together. Rod will sometimes feel like he's mentally checking in with Dave when he asks himself if the spot is right and they're good to go. *"I hear him screaming at me sometimes,"* he laughs.





“ON TIME & ON TARGET”

- Developed the large flag concept
- Spent over two years R&D before going public
- First team in the world to start jumping large flags
- First flag jump in 1992 at Eastern Creek Raceway with a 5,000sqft flag
- Average exit weight of flag & weights = 60kgs
- Biggest flag jumped = 15,000sqft
- Exit weight of big flags = 115kgs
- Size preference = large!
- Performed at many major sporting events throughout Australia, America, Asia, Europe & the Middle East.
- Olympic Games, Formula 1 Grand Prix, Indy Cars, Super Bikes, NASCAR, V8 Supercars, AFL & International Airshows
- Many Corporate events

ROD'S TOP TIPS

ADVICE FOR SKYDIVERS WHO WANT TO GET INTO DISPLAY JUMPING.

- When you're at the drop zone, have a fixed target area that you're aiming for. Focus on where you're going to land, and be ready for changing conditions.
- If you are thinking about downsizing, ask yourself if you really want a smaller canopy over the city.
- Always have a good ground crew because your ground crew is the backbone of your displays. Grab the chance to see or join a ground crew in action.
- Remember that you're doing it for the general public who are watching, not the skydivers.
- Be a rock star for five minutes after you land! It's showmanship and it's advertising the sport.

