

CHAPTER 21

DOWN THE HOME STRETCH

Eleven days before primary election day, all candidates for public office in Colorado were required to file their initial campaign fundraising and spending reports. This reporting, spelled out by law in Colorado, was designed to give primary election voters a chance to see which candidates had raised the most money and who was contributing the money to them.

This financial reporting was of particular importance to the Bird campaign, because the Bird forces hoped to make an issue of the fact that both Bruce Benson and Roy Romer were raising millions of dollars in campaign funds, much of it from "special interests." The Bird campaigners planned to take this opportunity to once again emphasize the idea that Mike Bird was the true "middle class" candidate in the 1994 race for the Colorado governorship. It also was another chance to hammer home the point that Bird, and only Bird, had set a \$2,500 limit on campaign contributions.

CAMPAIGN SPENDING REPORTS

Mike Bird held a press conference on campaign finance on Thursday morning, July 28, 1994. This was the day before the day the reports were due. Copies of the complete Bird spending and contribution report were distributed to reporters more than 24 hours earlier than they would ordinarily have expected to receive them. The deadline for turning the reports in at the secretary of state's office was 5 o'clock the following afternoon, Friday, July 29, 1994. Mike Bird was available to answer questions, and a press release was distributed playing up the fact that Bird's contributions had come mainly from individual Coloradans rather than from out-of-state special interests.

The goal here was to get the Colorado press corps to pay some attention to what Mike Bird was doing where campaign finance was concerned. Given the millions of dollars in campaign contributions that

Bruce Benson and Roy Romer would be reporting the next day, the Bird campaigners knew they would have to get the press's attention early or else not at all.

Once again the Benson for Governor campaigners topped a Mike Bird press conference with a press conference of their own. The Benson forces scheduled their press conference on campaign finance a day early also, providing the news media with their fund-raising and spending report the same afternoon as the day of the Mike Bird press conference. As was customary for the Benson campaign, Bruce Benson did not appear at his campaign finance press conference but simply issued a statement instead. Reporters' questions were answered by campaign manager Katy Atkinson.

The wisdom of the Benson forces revealing their campaign finance report the same day as the Bird report was borne out in the next morning's newspapers. The Colorado news media gave "front page" and "banner headline" treatment to the size and extent of Benson's campaign war chest. Two major newspapers keyed in on the fact that Benson had raised and was spending more than 10 times as much as Bird.¹ Benson's total contributions were \$2.1 million compared to a little less than \$200,000 for Bird. More than two-thirds of Benson's contributions, \$1.4 million, came out of his own pocket.

There were other comparisons, all of them portraying Bruce Benson as the man with the money. Benson reported spending \$1 million on television advertising compared to only \$35,000 spent on TV ads by Bird, which was almost a 30 to 1 ratio. Benson also took this occasion to reveal that his total net worth was \$24 million, enough money that the millions he was contributing to his campaign for governor would not be overly missed.²

The press did, however, work the Mike Bird viewpoint into the coverage. Bird's comments on "big money" and "special interest" domination were reported although buried in the middle of all of the newspaper stories. Most important from the Bird camp point of view, the *Denver Post* noted that Benson had accepted 65 donations that

equaled or exceeded Bird's self-imposed limit of \$2,500 per contribution.³

The Benson forces were anything but defensive about the large amount of money Bruce Benson was contributing to his own campaign for governor. Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, described the money as "well spent." She added: "It's an investment he believes in."⁴ In the press release distributed at the Benson press conference, Bruce Benson argued that an entrenched incumbent such as Roy Romer could only be defeated if millions of dollars were infused into the campaign. "Modern campaigns are very expensive," the Benson statement read. "But I want every voter to know where I stand and the differences between Governor Romer, my primary opponents, and myself."⁵

While taping the candidate debate for Colorado's public television stations, Bruce Benson continued his forthright defense of why he was raising and spending so much money. He specifically denied Mike Bird's charge that he was receiving money from "special interests." Benson described himself as using a 21st century style of campaign which emphasized lots of TV and radio advertising. "When you have a popular incumbent," Benson added, "you're going to have to spend some money to catch up with him."⁶ Benson then looked directly at Bird and Sargent and told them they were living in the wrong century if they thought Roy Romer could be defeated with a few rounds of handshaking and a series of public debates. "You have to level the playing field against him [Roy Romer]," Benson explained. "I said early on it's going to take me \$2 million to get my name (known). This is not 150 years ago. You've got to be on TV, radio and direct mail to get your message to the voters."⁷

On Friday, July 29, 1994, the day the campaign finance reports were due, Dick Sargent, the third candidate in the race for the Republican nomination for governor, filed his papers. He had raised and spent only \$65,000, despite the fact he had not limited contributions to \$2,500 per source the way Mike Bird had done. The *Denver Post* described Sargent

as "trailing fiscally" and noted that his "donations were small compared with the other candidates, particularly Benson...."⁸

Dick Sargent's campaign expenditures were for what he himself called "routine campaign stuff." There was not enough money to produce a television ad or put it on the air. Sargent spent \$5,000 for radio advertising the week before the Republican primary. The Monday before the Tuesday primary election, Sargent paid \$13,000 to have his "Tax Cut" newspaper distributed with that morning's *Rocky Mountain News*. It was the same newspaper, pledging a 20 percent cut in state taxes, that Sargent had distributed at the Republican State Assembly.⁹

The Bird campaign decided to take one last shot at Bruce Benson on the campaign finance issue. A press release was issued late on Friday afternoon, July 29, 1994, that used yet another animal image, although neither a "chicken" nor a "duck," to try to denigrate both Bruce Benson and Roy Romer on the issue of spending too much money. Dennis Ritchie, the Bird campaign press assistant, argued that newspaper editors would be irresistibly attracted to a story that compared both Romer and Benson to "hogs in the creek." This was a line that Mike Bird had been using in his speeches from the time he first raised the campaign spending issue against Roy Romer.

The press release quoted Bird as saying:

"If those two candidates [Roy Romer and Bruce Benson] are in the race this fall, the public will know that the special interest hogs are going to be in the Governor's Mansion for another four years. As my old grandfather used to say, 'The water won't clear up until you get the hogs out of the creek.' The special interest hogs who are hoping to collect IOUs from these guys aren't interested in the middle class or in fiscal conservatism."¹⁰ The press release worked. The next day the *Rocky Mountain News* headlined and led its gubernatorial election story with the "hogs."¹¹ The Associated Press story, which played in daily newspapers in smaller cities all over Colorado, quoted Mike Bird's "hogs" statement at length.¹²

OUT-OF-TOWN TALENT

During the five years he was state chairman of the Colorado Republican Party, Bruce Benson made many contacts throughout the United States with important and well-known GOP political leaders. Benson reportedly had ingratiated himself with these Republican Party celebrities by contributing generously to their various campaigns for political office. With one week to go before election day, Benson brought in some of this "outside help" to draw a crowd and get some easy earned media for his campaign.

Jack Kemp was the star quarterback for the Buffalo Bills professional football team in the 1960s. When his football playing days were over, he ran for and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from upstate New York, building a national reputation as a thoughtful conservative. He later served as secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) when Ronald Reagan was president. Considered a possible candidate to run for president in 1996, Jack Kemp was the kind of "celebrity" politician who could be counted on to "turn out the masses" and thereby attract major attention to the Benson campaign.

Kemp took a Sunday afternoon off from his summer vacation in Vail, Colorado, to speak at a series of Bruce Benson political gatherings. He campaigned with Benson from Denver to Castle Rock to Colorado Springs to Pueblo. Kemp would warm up the crowd for Benson with a major speech, after which Benson would make a few remarks of his own.

The Kemp-Benson rallies were a success, attracting reasonably-sized audiences and winning the Benson campaign good media coverage on local television and in the local newspapers. The only problem was that many of the people who came out to see Jack Kemp were football fans rather than dedicated followers of Colorado politics. Kemp spent much of his time autographing football cards and joshing with sports fans about the relative merits of his old team, the Buffalo Bills, and the local

professional football heroes, the Denver Broncos. Most of the news coverage dwelt at length on Jack Kemp and covered Bruce Benson as something of an afterthought.¹³

Jack Kemp's one-day swing through Colorado on behalf of Bruce Benson was one of some 125 to 130 similar trips planned by Kemp in the summer and fall of 1994 to campaign for Republican candidates for office all over the United States. As a national Republican Party personality, possibly a future candidate for president, Kemp was careful not to overly antagonize Mike Bird and Dick Sargent supporters in Colorado. Kemp said his appearance in behalf of Benson did not mean he was opposing Bird or Sargent. Although Kemp described Bruce Benson as "the man for the times" and a "progressive conservative who has strong family values," he said he would back whichever one of the three Republicans won the primary election.¹⁴

In a somewhat successful attempt to counter the Benson forces bringing in Jack Kemp, the Bird for Governor campaign brought in Olympic speedskater Bonnie Blair, a multiple gold medalist, that same weekend. The contact was through Bonnie Blair's sister, who lived in Colorado Springs, and who had taught speed skating to Mike and Ursula Bird's children.

Bonnie Blair attended and spoke briefly at a Saturday night Bird fund-raiser in Colorado Springs. The highlight of the evening was a drawing for a box of breakfast cereal with Bonnie Blair's picture on it which Bonnie Blair had personally autographed. She said the box of cereal would be much more valuable in the future if the box were never opened and the cereal never eaten.

When the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* learned that Jack Kemp was coming to town to speak for Bruce Benson, and that Bonnie Blair was stopping by to support Mike Bird, it labeled the two events "the battle of the jocks."¹⁵

THE FINAL WEEK

The Bird campaign's "press release war" against Bruce Benson subsided after the "hogs in the creek" press release went out. Seven days went by - the seven crucial days which constituted the week before election day - and the Bird campaign issued not one press release. The news media appeared to be anxious to cover charges and countercharges, i.e., fireworks, in the last week of the campaign, but the Bird camp did not give the media what they wanted. The result was five business days - Monday through Friday - when there were no big stories in the newspapers about the Republican primary for governor.

The morning newspapers on the Friday before primary day illustrated how quiet the campaign coverage had become, at least from the Bird campaign point of view. Jennifer Gavin of the *Denver Post* did an update story on the Republican governor race that day that she obviously had to dig up herself. All it said about Mike Bird was that he was walking precincts in Arapahoe County (south suburban Denver) and that he was concerned about protecting the state's water supply.¹⁶ Fred Brown of the *Denver Post* devoted his regular Friday political column to Bruce Benson and Roy Romer arguing over whether Benson promised a job to a former Romer loyalist in order to get the Romer loyalist to support Benson in the general election in November. The column never mentioned Mike Bird and left the impression that Benson already had the Republican nomination for governor.¹⁷

The decision to have Bird "take the high road" and reduce his direct attacks on Benson thus cost the Bird campaign dearly in terms of the amount of newspaper coverage it was receiving. It was often said around Bird headquarters that, if nothing happened in the election campaign, Benson would win. He would win because, if nothing happened in the news pages of the newspapers and on television news, Benson's unbelievably heavy load of television and radio advertising would carry the day.

Dennis Ritchie, the press assistant in the Bird campaign, noted that the Bird forces did make some positive accomplishments in the final week before primary election day. He explained:

"Our thinking was that many voters would not know a Republican primary was coming up until they saw it on television. During that last week, we worked to get Mike and the upcoming primary featured on news programs on three Denver television stations and one Colorado Springs television station."

"Mike's appearances on these 'wrap-up' pieces, often almost the only primary election coverage these stations had, were useful because they focused on the issues that Mike had stressed throughout the campaign. We had been very successful in aggressively attacking Benson in the early weeks of the primary campaign. The final week was the time for Mike Bird to show what he believed and what he would do for the state of Colorado."

Dennis Ritchie also questioned whether the Colorado press corps would have paid attention to last minute charges against Bruce Benson. "Print journalists are always hypersensitive to last-second charges before an election," Ritchie said. "Any charge that was not gold-plated or rock-solid stood a good chance of being ignored. The Bird campaign had done very well on the solid ground of showing how Benson was buying the election. Last-minute stunts such as 'the Duck' or something similar could have backfired and blown the high credibility Mike Bird had achieved with the press."¹⁸

Meanwhile the Benson campaign plan appeared to be operating perfectly. Benson ads were all over the television and the radio the last week and weekend before primary election day. The ads concentrated on major issues - crime, welfare reform, bad highways, etc. - and never mentioned either Mike Bird or Dick Sargent.

Bruce Benson himself spent the early part of the week campaigning in his bus in southern Colorado. When a candidate is running a large number of television and radio ads, the best way to make sure the candidate does not make a mistake talking to a newspaper reporter is to have the candidate head out-of-town where the Denver and Colorado Springs newspaper reporters will not be around. The bus campaign in southern Colorado accomplished this purpose for the Benson campaign.

At 7 A.M. on the Friday before primary day, the Mike Bird campaign got back on an aggressive track with the taping of a final television debate at the KWGN-TV Channel 2 studios in Denver. Dennis Ritchie, the Bird campaign press assistant, met Mike Bird at the television studio and handed out a "Flip-flops and Belly Flops" press release to the members of the news media in attendance. The press release reviewed eight instances in which Bruce Benson had first said one thing and then later changed his position. The "flip-flops" ranged from supporting and then not supporting Denver International Airport to supporting and then not supporting government-funded abortions. Of the major newspapers in the state, the *Denver Post*, the *Rocky Mountain News*, and the *Pueblo Chieftain* all had reporters present. Only the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* was missing.

The TV taping really went in the right direction for the Bird campaign. Best of all, Bruce Benson began by accusing Roy Romer of having "flip-flopped" on a number of key state issues. This gave Mike Bird the opportunity to jump in and point out the really long list of "flip-flops and belly flops" that Benson had committed. It was something of the direct confrontation between Benson and Bird that, deep in their hearts, the news media had been looking for throughout the past week. After getting a really scathing lecture from Bird on his many flip-flops and flubs, the best response Benson could come up with was: "So, I wrote a little check for Denver International Airport." Hopefully, from the Bird campaign point of view, the print media would remind their readers that the "little check" was for \$500, a hefty amount of money to most voters, even in a *Republican* primary.

Dick Sargent participated in the KWGN-TV television debate. He continued to bid for the support of the right wing of the Colorado Republican Party. Referring to the beating with a cane of an American teenager in Singapore as court-ordered punishment for vandalizing some automobiles, Sargent said Americans might consider "caning" American teenagers who break the law. He then said he would go down to Cañon City, Colorado, the location of the state penitentiary, and ask the

prisoners on Death Row if they might have been better behaved as adults if they had been "caned" when they broke the rules when they were young.

As Sargent was saying these words at the TV taping, Dennis Ritchie, the Mike Bird press assistant, turned to Terry Walker, Dick Sargent's principal campaign adviser, and said words to the effect that "Sargent really appealed to the Republican right wing with that one." Terry Walker acknowledged that was just about the way it was being done.

Dennis Ritchie was very hopeful that Mike Bird's heavy emphasis on "flip-flops and belly flops" during the KWGN-TV television taping would earn the Bird candidacy a great deal of favorable coverage in the Saturday and Sunday newspapers. There was no hope whatsoever that the debate itself would win Bird any votes when it played on television. KWGN-TV had scheduled it to be broadcast on the Saturday night before election day, exactly at the same time a Denver Broncos exhibition football game was going to be playing on another channel. Once again it would be how the print media played a television debate, and not the telecasting of the debate itself, that would determine the final fate of Bird's bid for the Republican nomination for governor of Colorado.

As it turned out, the newspaper coverage of the final Benson-Bird-Sargent television debate was only fair. The *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* did not cover the TV debate at all. Saturday morning's *Denver Post* said only that "Mike Bird accused Bruce Benson of flip-flopping on the issues." The *Post* gave no details of what the various flip-flops were.¹⁹

The *Rocky Mountain News*, however, gave good coverage to the television debate and the Bird campaign's accompanying press release. The first paragraph of the story centered on Bird's attack on Benson for "flip-flopping on everything from Denver International Airport to abortion aid." The *Rocky* came right out and said that Bird "flustered" Benson with his sharp questions. The *Rocky* even quoted Benson's weak statement that he "wrote a little check one time" for Denver International

Airport but never really backed the now-controversial airport project.²⁰

The Sunday before primary election day the major newspapers in Colorado did large "wrap-up" stories on the Republican gubernatorial primary. There was one last ray of hope in these stories for the Bird campaign. The stories all centered on the fact that Benson's money, and his willingness to spend large amounts of it to get elected governor, was the major issue in the Republican race. The *Rocky Mountain News* headlined its Sunday coverage with a question: "GOP race a battle of the buck?"²¹ The *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* went biblical with the subheading: "Benson emerges as Goliath with a bankroll just as big."²² The Bird campaign had worked very hard to make Benson's money and the cavalier way in which he was spending it the major issue in the primary campaign. The fact that two of the three major newspapers in the state focused their final Sunday coverage on the issue of Benson's money kept hope alive in the Bird camp that Republican voters would revolt against Benson's "big spending" and cast their ballots for Mike Bird instead.

Although the Bird campaign staff spent most of its time at the end working to get "earned" media in the newspapers, there was some good news on the paid-advertising front. So much money was contributed in the last two weeks before primary election day that the Bird campaign was able to place \$12,000 in additional "Mr. TV-Head" television commercials. As soon as these last-minute contributions came in, they were immediately spent on more TV ads. Approximately \$11,000 of this "last-minute" money was placed on Denver TV and \$1,000 in Colorado Springs. The Bird campaign thus was a "visible" presence, if not a "heavy" presence, on Colorado television the last weekend before the primary election.

WALKING STREETS AND WAVING CORNERS

Once the last press release was written and the final ads had been placed on television, the Mike Bird campaign staff devoted much of its

time to distributing literature door-to-door in key precincts and "waving corners" in Denver and Colorado Springs. The Benson campaign at the very end did a last-minute mailing to Republican voters and also waved corners.

Sherman Griffin, the assistant campaign manager, was waving his "Mike Bird for Governor" sign at a key intersection on Arapahoe Road in south suburban Denver when he saw the Bruce Benson for Governor campaign bus go by. Five minutes later the Benson bus returned to Griffin's corner and an entire team of Benson supporters, including Bruce Benson himself, got out and began "waving" the corner too. Bruce Benson and his wife, Marcy, walked right over to Sherman Griffin's corner to wave their signs. A humorous "discussion" soon was underway between the Bensons and Sherman Griffin over which campaign was getting the most "supporting honks" from passing motorists.²³

The Mike Bird campaign finally concluded that the Benson people were intentionally driving around in their bus looking for corners being waved by Bird supporters where they could start waving with superior numbers. Lee Mundt, the Mike Bird campaign's coordinator for El Paso County, was waving the corner of Academy Boulevard and Austin Bluffs Parkway in Colorado Springs. The Benson bus rolled by, and, sure enough, it circled back, stopped, and disgorged Bruce Benson, his wife Marcy, his daughter Ann, and the usual large team of sign-holding corner wavers. The Benson crew was able to wave all four corners of the busy intersection, including the corner Lee Mundt was waving.

Notes To Chapter 21:

1. Angela Dire, "Benson spends to a record," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 29 July 1994, A1. Burt Hubbard, "Campaign spending on record pace: With two millionaires, gubernatorial race may be richest ever," Rocky Mountain News, 29 July 1994, 4A.

2. Jennifer Gavin, "Benson reveals finances," Denver Post, 29 July 1994, 1A. Burt Hubbard, "Campaign spending on record pace: Benson weighs in as wealthiest contender for governor's title," Rocky Mountain News, 29 July 1994, 4A.
3. Jennifer Gavin, "Donations to Romer, Benson revealed," Denver Post, 29 July 1994, 13A.
4. Burt Hubbard, "Campaign spending on record pace: With two millionaires, gubernatorial race may be richest ever," Rocky Mountain News, 29 July 1994, 4A.
5. Angela Dire, "Benson spends to a record," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 29 July 1994, A1.
6. "Benson defends war chest in GOP candidates' debate," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 30 July 1994, B1.
7. John Sanko, "Warning from Bird: Beware the running of the 'hogs,'" Rocky Mountain News, 30 July 1994.
8. Jennifer Gavin, "Sargent files spending report," Denver Post, 30 July 1994, 3B.
9. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Denver, 21 November 1994.
10. Press release for Mike Bird for Governor campaign, 29 July 1994.
11. John Sanko, "Warning from Bird: Beware the running of the 'hogs,'" Rocky Mountain News, 30 July 1994.
12. Jennifer Mears, "Benson defends war chest in debate with Bird, Sargent," Boulder Daily Camera, 30 July 1994, 8A.
13. Pam Zubeck, "Ex-NFL passer upstages Benson," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 1 August 1994, B2.

14. R. Chris Burnett, "Kemp backs Benson to challenge Romer," Pueblo Chieftain, 1 August 1994, 5A.
15. "Campaign Notebook: All-Star Endorsements," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, July 28, 1994.
16. Jennifer Gavin, "GOP candidates heat up campaigns," Denver Post, 5 August 1994, 7B.
17. Fred Brown, "Citizens for Romer could use a subsidiary called GRRR," Denver Post, 5 August 1994, 1B.
18. Dennis Ritchie, press assistant, Mike Bird for Governor, written comments to the author, March 21, 1995.
19. Fred Brown, "Style splits Republican candidates," Denver Post, 6 August 1994, 3B.
20. Thaddeus Herrick, "GOP rivals attack Benson in last debate," Rocky Mountain News, 6 August 1994, 6A.
21. Thaddeus Herrick, "GOP race a battle of the buck?" Rocky Mountain News, 7 August 1994, 6A.
22. Angela Dire, "Governor's race reflects same old story," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 7 August 1994, B4.
23. Sherman Griffin, deputy campaign manager, Mike Bird for Governor, written comments to the author, 7 May 1995.