

Wrestler Hart had a big heart

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OWEN Hart, who died Sunday night in a freak accident, wasn't the biggest wrestling star.

But he was probably the hardest worker, definitely the most respected and one of the really good guys.

A few years ago, I brought some children backstage before a World Wrestling Federation show at The Summit. It was a prize their parents had won at a charity fund-raiser.

Hart had arrived early and was stretching his leg muscles against a wall. I asked him if he would say hello to some fans.

"I'm really hurting tonight. My knee is torn up and if I don't stretch it out, I can't wrestle. Normally I'd do it, but could you ask somebody else?" he said.

Hart looked beaten, and the night hadn't even started. While the ring action is choreographed, the bumps and bruises are real.

Wrestlers live in pain. Hart's knee was purple. It had a lump on it the size of a baseball. I told him, "no problem" and started looking for another wrestler.

When he heard a few other wrestlers say no to me, he called back, "Are these children or adults you want me to meet?" I said, "They're kids. They're about 10 years old."

Hart stood up from the chair. "OK, bring 'em over. I could use something to cheer me up."

He spent 15 minutes answering the children's questions. He gave them autographs and flipped them upside down for photos. He dug into his suitcase and gave the kids T-shirts and wristbands.

As we were leaving, he shook each of their hands and asked them to "cheer real loud" for him. The children were thrilled to meet him and kept saying how "cool" Owen was.

After thanking Hart for taking the time, he said, "I have two children at home. What am I going to do, say no to kids?"

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The Today Show (7-9 a.m., Channel 2) begins its "Summer Concert Series" Friday. First up: Jimmy Buffett.

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There's no reason to be lost - or hungry - in your car ever again.

McDonald's Web site (www.mcdonalds.com) has a service called "Trip Planner." You type in the addresses of where you're starting and where you're heading, and the computer will tell you just where to go.

Here's what makes McDonald's road map different from other Internet travelers aides: This one gives you the location of every McDonald's hamburger restaurant along the way.

As a test, I typed in the address of my sprawling palatial estate in West University and the address of the apartment house where I grew up on Canton Street in Elizabeth, N.J.

Five seconds later . . .

Turn left on West Point Street and then right on Bissonnet. Hang a left on Wesleyan to the Southwest Freeway. Take I-10 East for 269 miles until you hit I-12. Get on I-59 for 444 miles. . . .

The route goes through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware. When you reach New Jersey, it says which exit to take off the Turnpike, then says to go right on Elmora Avenue and left on Canton Street.

If you see David Smith, tell him to give me back my football.

The trip is exactly 1,627.73 miles and should take you 1,569.71 minutes driving time (about 26 hours). Of course, that doesn't count pit stops for Big Macs. There are 93 McDonald's on the way.

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* Today's trivia: Reed Richards, Susan Richards, Johnny Storm and Ben Grimm are better known as . . . ?

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Throughout the year, ESPN is counting down the Top 50 athletes of the 20th century. They reached No. 34 this week, baseball's Iron Horse, Lou Gehrig.

Here are my predictions for the Top 10:

10. Multisports star Jim Thorpe.
9. Hockey scoring machine Wayne Gretzky.
8. NBA great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.
7. Golf legend Arnold Palmer.
6. Tennis queen Billie Jean King.
5. Astros bullpen catcher Stretch Suba.
4. Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens (or Carl Lewis).
3. Basketball superstar Michael Jordan.
2. Baseball slugger Babe Ruth.
1. "The Greatest" Muhammad Ali.

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Good seats remain for the World Championship Wrestling spectacular Monday night at the Astrodome. The three-hour show will be telecast worldwide, so comb your hair. The last time WCW came to the Dome, 35,000 screaming fans showed up - a Houston record for wrestling.

Wrestlers scheduled to appear include Hulk Hogan, Diamond Dallas Page, Kevin Nash and Ric Flair. Bell time is 6:30 p.m.

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Trivia answer: The Fantastic Four in Marvel Comics.

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