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The Toronto Star

May 25, 1999, Tuesday, Edition 1

WRESTLING MOURNS A HART

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SECTION: NEWS

LENGTH: 1340 words

Canada's first family of the popular sport loses a son

Wrestling

Wrestling world mourns loss of class-act

STAFF REPORTER

Even in wrestling, Owen Hart tried to do good.

As the Blue Blazer, Hart would tell his fans to "say your prayers, eat your vitamins, and drink your milk."

But in a business that ridicules the good guys and worships its meanies, Hart's superhero character - never mind his goody-two-shoes advice - worked about as well as a clotheslined ring rat.

Hart didn't have to look far for wrestling inspiration. The youngest child in what has often been called Canada's first family of wrestling, Hart's seven brothers all went into the game, and three of his four sisters married wrestlers.

His father Stu, a legendary Canadian wrestler, trained them all. And his mother Helen helped run both the business and the family's 20-room Calgary residence, known as Hart House and home to the storied Dungeon. There, the senior Harts trained the junior Harts, and ran a school for some of the continent's top wrestlers.

Thus Hart became a meanie himself, wrestling under his own name and even pinning - in Wrestlemania 10 - his more famous big brother Bret, known as the Hitman.

So the fans at Kansas City's Kemper Arena couldn't believe their ears Sunday night when ringside announcer Jim Ross, his voice breaking, haltingly told the sold-out crowd of 18,244 that Hart was dead.

It had to be a joke, they figured, part of the byzantine plots and storylines that make the WWF the entertainment spectacle that it is.

But this was reality, something not often encountered at today's wrestling matches.

"Owen Hart was set to make an entrance from the ceiling and he fell from the ceiling," Ross told the stunned fans. "I have the unfortunate responsibility to let everyone know that Owen Hart has died.

"Owen Hart has tragically died from that accident here tonight."

While police and safety officials continue to investigate, authorities said yesterday the accident - an 18-metre fall from the rafters - appears to be the result of a simple mistake.

"He was supposed to be lowered down into the ring (on a wire)," said Michelle Hindorff, a Kansas City paramedic and dispatcher for the city's ambulance service.

"It didn't get hooked on to him. He thought it was hooked on."

One of Hart's sisters, Ellie Hart, blamed the tragedy on the "far out" gimmicks and angles used by the WWF to lure viewers and outwit the rival World Championship Wrestling.

"Frankly, wrestling was getting so far out and my poor brother Owen was a sacrifice for the ratings, that's how I look at it," Ellie Hart said.

"They kept on getting more and more far out with the gimmicks and angles. We figured sooner or later somebody was going to end up with a tragedy because of the direction wrestling was taking with both WWF and WCW."

Hart's father Stu was at home in Calgary with his wife Helen, about to sit down to dinner with some of their 12 children, when the phone rang with the horrible news.

At first, no one quite believed it. Hart's five-storey "fall" must have been scripted, as is virtually everything in today's professional wrestling bouts, the thinking went.

'Owen was a sacrifice

for the ratings'

"I didn't see it, but from what I can gather, somebody slipped up," Stu Hart said yesterday. "You don't get up 60 or 70 feet in the air without being properly anchored down."

It wasn't a complicated stunt, and Hart had practised it earlier in the day.

In keeping with the Blue Blazer's action hero status, Hart was going to slide into the ring along a wire suspended from the rafters 18 metres above.

"It's one of those things that you think should be safe, and he had tested it twice earlier in the afternoon," said Donnie Abreu, host of the Live Audio Wrestling show on Toronto radio station The Fan 590. "They had done a couple of dry runs just to make sure everything was working nicely and it was nice and smooth."

While the fans - and thousands more on pay-TV - watched a planned promotional videotape featuring Hart in his superhero gear, Hart plummeted to the ring in an accident that went by almost unnoticed.

Television cameras panned over the crowd while paramedics fought for 15 fruitless minutes to bring Hart back to life. And when he was rushed out on a stretcher, straddled by a cop doing chest compressions, the fans rose to their feet as one and gave him a standing ovation.

'I wrestled only to

appease my father'

And the show went on. It would be an hour or so until Ross made the horrible announcement that Hart was dead.

While the WWF has come under heavy criticism for going ahead with Over the Edge, as the night was billed, it has belatedly taken some action in the wake of Hart's death. It cancelled plans to replay the event - which cost \$29.95 in

Canada - on pay-per-view here, and called off live cards scheduled for Winnipeg, Hamilton, Montreal, Ottawa and Peoria, Ill.

But a WWF event went on as planned last night in St. Louis, where a crowd of 19,000 jammed the Kiel Center for a show that included a tribute to Hart.

Owen's brother Bret (the Hitman) Hart, a member of WCW, was to have wrestled current heavyweight champion Kevin Nash last night on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, but cancelled his appearance and flew home to Calgary to be with his family.

Growing up in Calgary, Owen Hart didn't plan on becoming a wrestler.

But he never counted on his father. Stu Hart, one of the great amateur wrestlers of his day, had young Owen in the ring at age 4.

"As a wrestler, he loved to work hard to please the promoters and the crowds," Stu Hart said. "He took pride in showing his reliability in making wrestling a career."

Owen Hart didn't quite remember it that way.

"I wanted to be a phys ed teacher," he told Saturday Night magazine in 1993. "I wrestled only to appease my father. I was compelled to get into the ring. Once I started, there was the pressure of having the Hart name - I was expected to be good."

And good he was.

During his 10-year pro wrestling career, Hart won several WWF titles, including four tag team championships, two intercontinental championships and a European title.

Away from the ring, friends and family saw a different man, someone who was devoted to his wife Martha and their two young children.

"When my contract is up, I'm out of wrestling," he recently told Slam! magazine. "I've been smart with my fiscal affairs. At the end of the tunnel, I've kind of made plans. Financially, I'll be set.

"If I continue for five more (years), that's 17 years working at a pretty good clip," Hart added. "I think at that point my family, my wife and kids, have been compromised enough. I need to start focusing on my family and letting go of wrestling."

For Hart's family, the focus now is finding out precisely what happened Sunday night in Kansas City, and speaking out against the ceaseless quest for ratings that they believe contributed to the tragedy.

Hart's wife, Martha, said her husband had always made sure his actions in the ring would be safe.

"From both of us there was deep concern about safety, definitely," she said. "Owen was not a reckless person, he was very careful. I really want to get to the bottom of exactly what happened."

Smith Hart, the oldest of the 12 Hart siblings, also expressed his disgust with wrestling's ceaseless quest to become bigger, louder, more outrageous.

"We're all united in our sadness and perhaps even in disgust," he said.

"I think that in a ratings race, my brother's life was inadvertently taken. We feel bad for how such a tragedy like this

could have happened. I don't think it was necessary."

Hart's body is scheduled to be returned to Calgary today by private jet and family members say funeral services could be delayed to accommodate mourners from across the world.

With files from Star wire services

LOAD-DATE: May 25, 1999

LANGUAGE: English

GRAPHIC: JIM WELLS/CP GRIEF-STRICKEN: Bret (The Hitman) Hart, left, and father Stu, look at pictures of the late Owen Hart at the Hart family home in Calgary yesterday. CP FILE PHOTO FIRST FAMILY: The Hart dynasty includes, from left, Bruce - giving a headlock to columnist Jim Davies - Bret, Keith and Owen.

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