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Owen Hart dies in fall: Calgary wrestler plummets four storeys

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A four-storey fall in front of thousands of fans and a worldwide pay-per-view audience on Sunday killed wrestler Owen Hart, a member of Calgary's famous wrestling family.

Hart, 33, fell head first from a cable suspending him more than 12 metres above the ring in Kansas City's Kemper Arena Sunday afternoon, killing the World Wrestling Federation superstar.

The 13-year wrestling veteran is survived by his wife, Martha, son Oje, 6, and daughter Athena, 4.

The accident occurred between matches as Hart prepared to enter the ring from the rafters in his role as the Blue Blazer.

Stu Hart, Owen's father, tried in vain to gather information on the accident while watching the event on TV.

The accident occurred while a video montage of Hart played and the cameras panned the crowd while paramedics worked on Hart for about 15 minutes before removing him from the ring.

It wasn't until WWF chairman Vince McMahon called Owen's wife around 5 p.m. that the family discovered their youngest of 12 children was dead.

"I don't know what happened, what went wrong," said a distraught Helen Hart, his mother. "But he fell and landed on his head and he's gone."

Hart was wearing the costume of the Blue Blazer, a character he portrayed on the WWF circuit. He is the younger brother of Bret (The Hitman) Hart, a star with World Championship Wrestling.

Stu Hart said that Owen has done the stunt before and didn't fear it.

"It should be safe enough, he was in kind of a sling," said Stu Hart. "It's part of being a professional wrestler. Owen was quite a spectacular wrestler. He was known as one of the high-flyers in the business. He was actually a very skilled wrestler.

"I heard about it on pay-per-view television a little bit. He was up in the air about 50 feet or so, and he had to swing down on this cable. And I don't know whether the hook came down or broke," said Hart. "Something happened, he came down about 50 feet, and crushed his heart from what I've gathered."

The arena fell into silence. A few seconds later, several WWF officials and Kansas City police officers rushed to Hart's aid.

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Kansas City Fire Department spokesman Jim Bradbury said the harness carrying Hart was not properly attached.

"He was up on some scaffolding above the ring," Bradbury said. "They were going to lower him down on some sort of cable, and apparently the cable wasn't hooked up. He landed in the ring."

Witnesses said the crowd couldn't determine if the fall was staged or not.

"Once he hit the ground, I turned to the guy next to me and said, 'I don't think this was planned,' " said Todd Feedback, a photographer. "He said, 'It was planned.' Then paramedics came and worked on him and the referee was there just stunned.

"I said, this is not an act. It was very quiet, nobody was sure if it was part of the show."

McMahon issued a statement following the tragedy. "We at the WWF are saddened by the tragic accident that occurred here tonight," he said at a news conference. "We don't have any answer as to why this happened. There is an ongoing investigation."

Paramedics rushed Hart to Kansas City's Truman Medical Centre where he was pronounced dead. As he was being carried out of the arena, the crowd burst into applause for the fallen wrestler. The matches continued. That upset some fans.

"I think they should have stopped the show out of respect for Owen," said Richard Lisenbee of Kansas City. He left with his five-year-old son, Zane.

Kevin Brice left the show with his 12-year-old nephew and 10-year-old daughter in tow.

"It was disgusting" for them to continue the show, said Brice. "For kids to see that, for this to be so-called family entertainment, for them to continue on as if nothing has happen, is just sad."

Helen Hart said Owen would always try to call or be present for the Hart family on Sunday dinner. She always worried about one of her sons becoming disabled in the ring.

"It's a dangerous sport in more ways than you can know," his mother said. "I just never thought one of my boys would be killed."

Owen was a popular member of the Hart wrestling family. Stu Hart said there were few people who could take issue with his easy-going manner.

"Owen was one of the most popular individuals that I've ever known. He was my son, I shouldn't be talking that freely," said Hart. "But I'd say he had very few enemies and many, many friends. He was much loved in the wrestling business."

Ed Whalen, the host of Stampede Wrestling until it ended about 10 years ago, remembered Owen as an extremely talented amateur wrestler -- and dedicated.

"He learned all the skill and science of the ring. And his speed. He was extremely agile," said Whalen, who learned the news late Sunday and immediately called the Hart family to express his sympathies. "I mean he had real talent as a wrestler. He was not just one of these stomp and groan types.

"But more than that he was just a hell of a guy. Would you believe he didn't even swear? He was a good, clean-living guy. Wrestling was his life, and more than that, his family."

Whalen remembered the youngest Hart hanging around the ring and the dressing room as a child hoping to learn the moves.

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"I knew him when he was wetting his diapers. I'm absolutely, totally stunned," he said.

When he grew up to become a wrestler himself, Owen never tired of talking to children and signing autographs like some athletes, said Whalen.

Whalen said though Hart was under contract with the WWF, he thinks he was trying to move away from the theatre of the WWF and get back into the sport of wrestling.

Hart was a Canadian champion as an amateur wrestler, and also fought with the University of Calgary Dinosaurs.

With reports from Juliet Williams, Calgary Herald and the Kansas City Star

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GRAPHIC: CP Color Photo: Todd Feedback, Associated Press / Paramedics work on wrestler Owen Hart after he fell to his death Sunday, at a pay-per-view card in Kansas City, Mo.

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