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The Washington Post (1974-Current file); May 25, 1999;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post

pg. D2

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From News Services and Staff Reports

This was not the first time that pro wrestler Owen Hart made his entrance into the ring by being lowered from the rafters as the high-flying "Blue Blazer," with the feathers of his sky-blue costume fluttering in the arena lights.

But on Sunday night, something went wrong.

The 34-year-old member of a legendary Canadian wrestling family fell 90 feet from the ceiling of Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Mo. His head hit a padded turnbuckle, a metal coupling that holds the ring's ropes together, and snapped backward. He was pronounced dead at a hospital.

Hart's death happened in front of 16,200 fans in the arena. The World Wrestling Federation's pay-per-view national TV audience was watching archive footage and did not see Hart fall.

Mahy thought the fall was part of the staged theatrics that have helped fuel the explosion of popularity in pro wrestling in recent years.

Homicide detectives yesterday were inspecting the rigging that was to lower Hart by cable from the arena catwalk and talking to the stagehands to determine what went wrong, police spokesman Floyd Mitchell said.

Mitchell said the cable did not break, and detectives believe something went wrong when Hart's harness was being hitched to the cable.

WWF President Vince McMahon Jr. said he believes Hart may have accidentally pulled a release mechanism.

The WWF is one of the biggest draws on cable and pay-per-view TV, but critics say the matches often are sexist, homophobic and violent. The WWF admits its events are more entertainment than sport.

McMahon said WWF wrestlers will stop performing the aerial move that killed Hart, but said other stunts will continue.

Stunts like this are performed at major sporting events on a routine basis in Holly-

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BY ALEX TROWH—ASSOCIATED PRESS

Italian Mario Cipollini exults after winning 10th stage of Tour of Italy race. He outsprinted large pack for second Tour win this year.

wood," he said. "We compete with Hollywood for entertainment."

Hart was the youngest son of Stu Hart, a member of Canada's Olympic wrestling team in the 1940s. All seven of Stu Hart's sons went into wrestling, including Bret "The Hitman" Hart, a longtime World Championship Wrestling star who canceled an appearance yesterday on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno."

Auto Racing

IRL's Safety System

The IRL, following the lead of rival Championship Auto Racing Teams and Formula One, said it will have a "wheel energy restraint system" on its cars for Sunday's Indianapolis 500.

The announcement came almost a month after an accident in Concord, N.C., in which debris killed three spectators and injured eight others in the grandstand.

Leo Mehl, executive director of the IRL and a vice president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, said the system is designed to keep suspension parts from flying off open-wheel cars.

The changes will be made before Thursday's two-hour "Carburetion Day" practice. That is the only time between the end of qualifications and the start of the 500 that the 33 starters will drive on the 2½-mile oval.

Colleges

Terps Ousted in Tennis

The Maryland women's tennis season ended abruptly in the NCAA tournament in Gainesville, Fla., as senior Meg Griffin lost in singles and Griffin and junior Lorraine Bittles lost in doubles. Griffin (20-5) was defeated by the University of Georgia's Esther Knox, 6-3, 6-2. Griffin and Bittles fell to Allison Bradshaw and Katy Propstra of Arizona State, 6-0, 4-6, 7-5.

Hockey

Schoenfeld Fired

The Phoenix Coyotes fired coach Jim Schoenfeld after the team was eliminated in the first round of the NHL playoffs both years he held the job.

Schoenfeld, 46, led Phoenix to a 39-31-12 record this season and a second-place finish in the Pacific Division. The Coyotes started the regular season 17-3-2, including a streak of 14 straight games without a loss.

Schoenfeld said he and team management were at odds on the direction of the team.

The Capitals let Schoenfeld go after the 1996-97 season. . . .

Brian Leetch has a new contract with the New York Rangers that reportedly will make him the highest-paid defenseman in the NHL.

The Rangers made the announcement at a news conference, but declined to discuss terms of the deal, in which Leetch's reported annual salary of \$8.75 million would make him best paid player in team history.

Lacrosse

League Formed

The creation of an eight-team pro outdoor lacrosse league was announced, though the final structure still was under development, according to the founders.

"Its existence is a reality," said Jack Steinfeld, who played collegiate lacrosse at Cornell State in New York.

Major League Lacrosse will be structured as a single entity. The league will maintain financial control and offer league-wide marketing programs.

Basketball

WNBA Moves

The WNBA's Cleveland Rockers traded guard Cindy Blodgett to the Sacramento Monarchs for center Quacy Barnes. . . . The New York Liberty waived forwards Bridgette Gordon, Vanessa Nygaard and Dale Hodges.

Football

Milanovich Released

The Cleveland Browns released former Maryland quarterback Scott Milanovich, along with wide receivers Freddie Solomon and Justin Armour. . . .

The Carolina Panthers signed tackle Chris Terry and re-signed running back Fred Lane and punter Ken Walter.