
The Tragic Death of Owen Hart: A Turning Point in Wrestling History

Description

The world of professional wrestling is known for its high-octane entertainment, larger-than-life characters, and dramatic storylines. However, it is also a world fraught with risks and dangers. One of the most tragic and impactful incidents in wrestling history is the death of Owen Hart. This article delves into the events leading up to his untimely demise, the immediate aftermath, and the long-term changes it spurred within the wrestling industry.

Owen Hart: A Brief Biography

Owen James Hart was born on May 7, 1965, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, into the legendary Hart wrestling family. The youngest of 12 children, Owen was trained by his father, Stu Hart, in the infamous Hart Dungeon. Known for his technical prowess and charismatic persona, Owen quickly rose through the ranks of professional wrestling. He performed in various promotions, including Stampede Wrestling, New Japan Pro-Wrestling, and eventually the World Wrestling Federation (WWF, now WWE).

Owen was beloved by fans and peers alike for his in-ring skills and his ability to entertain. He held multiple championships throughout his career, including the Intercontinental Championship, the European Championship, and the Tag Team Championship. Despite his success, Owen remained humble and dedicated to his craft.

The Incident: Over the Edge 1999

On May 23, 1999, Owen Hart was scheduled to perform a stunt at the WWF pay-per-view event "Over the Edge" in Kansas City, Missouri. As part of his Blue Blazer character, Owen was to descend from the rafters into the ring using a harness and grapple line. The stunt was intended to be a comedic entrance, poking fun at superhero tropes.

Tragically, the equipment malfunctioned, and Owen fell approximately 80 feet to the ring below. The fall resulted in fatal injuries, and Owen was pronounced dead shortly after arriving at the hospital. The incident occurred in front of a live audience, and the broadcast was temporarily halted. However, the event controversially continued after the accident.

Immediate Consequences

The immediate aftermath of Owen Hart's death was marked by shock, grief, and controversy. The wrestling community was devastated by the loss of one of its most beloved performers. The night after the incident, WWF dedicated an entire episode of "Monday Night RAW" to Owen's memory, featuring heartfelt tributes from his colleagues and friends.

Owen's family, particularly his widow Martha Hart, was deeply affected by the tragedy. Martha filed a wrongful death lawsuit against WWF, alleging negligence in the planning and execution of the stunt. The lawsuit was eventually settled out of court for \$18 million. The settlement included provisions for the establishment of the Owen Hart Foundation, a charity dedicated to providing scholarships and housing for those in need.

Changes in Safety Procedures

Owen Hart's death prompted a significant reevaluation of safety protocols within the wrestling industry. WWF, now WWE, implemented several changes to prevent similar tragedies in the future:

- Revaluation of Stunts:** High-risk stunts were scrutinized more closely, with stricter regulations and precautions put in place. Performers were no longer required to perform dangerous stunts without thorough safety checks and rehearsals.
- Equipment Standards:** The equipment used during live events underwent a comprehensive overhaul. WWE ensured that all gear met higher safety standards, reducing the risk of malfunctions.
- Safety Protocols:** WWE introduced more rigorous safety protocols for live performances. This included better training for staff and performers involved in stunts, as well as the presence of medical personnel at all events.
- Wellness Policy:** In the years following Owen's death, WWE also implemented a wellness policy aimed at promoting the health and well-being of its performers. This policy included regular medical check-ups, drug testing, and support for mental health issues.

Long-Term Impact on the Wrestling Industry

Owen Hart's death had a lasting impact on the wrestling industry, leading to several significant changes:

- Increased Awareness of Performer Safety:** The tragedy highlighted the inherent risks of professional wrestling and underscored the importance of prioritizing performer safety. This awareness has led to ongoing efforts to improve safety measures and reduce the likelihood of accidents.
- Legal and Ethical Considerations:** The legal battle between Martha Hart and WWE brought attention to the ethical responsibilities of wrestling promotions. It emphasized the need for companies to prioritize the well-being of their performers over entertainment value.
- Tributes and Memorials:** Owen Hart's legacy continues to be honoured through various tributes and memorials. The Owen Hart Foundation, established by Martha Hart, has provided significant support to those in need, reflecting Owen's generous spirit and commitment to helping others.
- Cultural Shift:** Owen's death contributed to a cultural shift within the wrestling industry, encouraging a more compassionate and supportive environment for performers. This shift has been reflected in the increased focus on mental health and wellness programs.

Other Notable Incidents in Wrestling History

Owen Hart's death is one of several incidents that have profoundly impacted the wrestling industry. Other notable events include:

- The Montreal Screwjob (1997):** This controversial incident during the Survivor Series pay-per-view event saw WWE Chairman Vince McMahon order the referee to end the match prematurely, causing Bret Hart to lose the WWE Championship to Shawn Michaels. The event led to a major shift in the wrestling landscape and is often cited as the beginning of the "Attitude Era."
- The Death of Eddie Guerrero (2005):** Eddie Guerrero's sudden death due to heart failure shocked the wrestling world. His passing led to increased awareness and changes in WWE's wellness policy, focusing more on the health and well-being of its performers.
- The Chris Benoit Tragedy (2007):** Chris Benoit, a well-respected wrestler, was involved in a double murder-suicide, killing his wife and son before taking his own life. This tragedy led to significant changes in WWE's approach to mental health and concussion protocols.
- The Plane Ride from Hell (2002):** This infamous flight involved several WWE wrestlers engaging in inappropriate and dangerous behaviour, leading to multiple suspensions and firings. It highlighted the need for better conduct policies and stricter enforcement.
- The Steroid Scandal (1990s):** WWE faced significant scrutiny and legal challenges over the use of steroids among its performers. This led to the implementation of the WWE Wellness Policy, aimed at curbing drug abuse and promoting healthier lifestyles.

The death of Owen Hart remains one of the most tragic and impactful events in wrestling history. It served as a wake-up call for the industry, prompting significant changes in safety protocols and performer welfare. Owen's legacy continues to be honoured through the Owen Hart Foundation and the ongoing efforts to improve the safety and well-being of wrestlers. While the wrestling world has faced numerous challenges and controversies, the lessons learned from Owen's tragic death have helped shape a safer and more compassionate industry.

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