

L'EFFET PAPILLON – Canal +, 25 May 2008

“Catch Me If You Can” Reported by Sabrina Van Tassel

*Thanks to **Sybilla Suda** for translating the script*

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http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5kfbv_catch-me-if-you-can-leffet-papillon_news

It's the short news item that made America shudder and thereafter changed wrestling's image forever.

On June 25, 2007, the wrestler Chris Benoit and his wife and seven-year-old son were found dead on their property in Atlanta.

Less than 48 hours after the tragedy, the authorities announced the unthinkable:

Chris Benoit, superstar of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), allegedly strangled his wife Nancy and his son Daniel before hanging himself with the cable from his weight machine

At the scene, police found a staggering amount of anabolic steroids, all prescribed by his doctor. A ten-month dose of steroids which the man had injected into himself in just three weeks.

Dave Meltzer: « His testosterone levels were fifteen times higher than is legally allowed in any other sport Fifteen times higher! How is that possible? »

The media immediately pounced upon the story. And became interested for the first time in the world of wrestling: doped-up gladiators, where the use of anabolic steroids, growth hormones, and anti-anxiety medications are commonplace.

Irv Muchnick: « Guys who want to become wrestlers and want to succeed in this business know what they need to do. That's to say, take anabolic steroids and growth hormones. »

The WWE, the biggest wrestling federation in the country which brings in 345 million dollars annually, has been blamed.

During one of the rare interviews granted to the media, its chairman, Vince MacMahon, tries at all costs to downplay the case.

Vince McMahon: « We're here to entertain people throughout the world and to make our audience smile. That's our job, not to be sullied by such an event. »

Despite a frightening list of wrestlers who all died before the age of fifty.

During our investigation, neither Vince MacMahon nor any spokesman for the WWE expressed a desire to respond to our questions.

Marc Mero: « I wrestled with 27 wrestlers who've since died. You can't even find a soldier in Iraq who knows 27 people who've died. »

It's in this small town near Edmonton in Canada that Chris Benoit grew up. He was a local hero here.

Since the death of his son, Mike Benoit plays back the time of his splendor on videotape. These days he feels very bitter about the world of wrestling.

MIKE BENOIT, father of CHRIS BENOIT

Do you regret that your son became a wrestler?

Mike Benoit: «Yes, I regret the decision I made at the time to encourage him in that direction. »

Mike Benoit is keen on reading us the intimate diary of his son as a form of proof that he descended into madness several weeks before the double murder.

A notebook dedicated to his best friend, Eddie Guerrero, a wrestler dead from a heart attack shortly before the tragedy. Several pages full of paranoid delusions and Christian ramblings.

How many friends had your son lost in recent years?

Mike Benoit: «He had stopped going to funerals. He told me he could no longer bear it. We're talking about dozens and dozens of funerals, not just one or two. »

About twenty friends lost due to steroids, with the sole aim being just to stay in the race.

But for Mike Benoit anabolics do not explain everything. His son also suffered multiple head injuries caused by the repeated shocks he received in the ring.

Mike Benoit: «When they hit each other over the head with a table, they're really using a table. And it's the same with chairs. The human brain isn't made to withstand such shocks. We're talking about someone who had severe brain damage. The paranoia, addiction to drugs and alcohol, aggressiveness, violence, suicide. My son had all these symptoms. »

Chris Nowinski is a former wrestler from the WWE. He quit wrestling after a traumatic head injury and the serious complications that followed.

In 2007, he created the Sports Legacy Institute with Dr. Cantu, one of the leading neurosurgeons in the country.

Two days after the death of Chris Benoit, he asked Benoit's father permission to remove a portion of his brain for analysis.

CHRIS NOWINSKI, former wrestler of the WWE

Chris Nowinski: « Chris Benoit was regarded by everyone as an all-around good guy. I had to find out if his head injuries and brain lesions had caused him to commit such acts. »

ROBERT CANTU, Professor of Neurosurgery

Dr. Cantu: « Here you have a photo of a section of normal brain and, as you can see, the neurons are intact. In the brain of Chris Benoit there are many of these residues. And that's in the brain of a man of forty. A man of that age should never have a brain like this. Even people with Alzheimer's who are between sixty and seventy years old don't have brains in this condition. There are more deaths in the world of wrestling than in any other profession. »

One-hundred-four wrestlers died over a period of ten years. That figure includes eighteen deaths for the year 2007 alone. Most were a result of cardiac complications, kidney failure or hypertension -- diseases directly linked to the excessive use of anabolic steroids.

Three hundred events annually across the country, an infernal pace almost impossible to sustain without the use of illicit substances.

Irvin Muchnick, wrestling expert and author of *Wrestling Babylon*, denounced the far side of the WWE.

Irvin Muchnick: « In the 1980s, Vince McMahon wanted his company to become something like Disney, and he's not far from having realized his dream. He did everything possible to make wrestling pass as entertainment as well as a sport. And that was in order to be able to dodge the anti-doping rules imposed by American sports committees. According to WWE regulations, wrestlers may take any substance so long as it is prescribed by their doctor. »

Since then wrestlers have been able to sanction all excessive use of substances, provided these are prescribed by their doctors. For Muchnick, a way for the WWE to endorse doping while protecting itself legally.

In light of such accusations, we tried to contact the WWE. After a dozen email exchanges and a refusal to meet with us we finally managed to reach them by phone.

Is it a problem for you to talk about the deaths that have occurred in wrestling?

WWE: « If you would like comments from us on this subject, submit your questions to us and we will choose whether to respond or not. »

So, I may not speak to any spokesperson from your organization?

WWE: « No, you may not film anyone. »

Finally we receive this email.

"The media have published lists with a large number of wrestlers who died prematurely, attributing their deaths to the abuse of steroids when these wrestlers died due to accidents, heart attacks, overdoses, suicide...."

"Most of these wrestlers had left the WWE five years before their deaths. Only five deaths concerned wrestlers under contract. Five deaths in all, which is five deaths too many...."

Marc Mero, aka Johnny B. Badd, former star of the WWE. He is one of the only wrestlers who has admitted using steroids.

MARC MERO, former wrestler of the WWE

Marc Mero: « Here are some of my wrestler friends who have died. That's Hawk, who died two years ago. There is Eddie Guerrero. Eddie died from having used steroids for years, combined with anxiety medication, and his heart burst. He died too young. Here is Brian Pillman. He, too, he died because of that. I believe he was only thirty-six years old when he died. And of course, there is Chris Benoit. We all know his story. It's sad that I'm in a sport where so many people have died. For years everyone has said that everything was just fine. Now we're starting to see that there really is a problem. »

Since then Marc Mero has been giving speeches in schools. It's one way for him to alert the public about the dangers of steroids and not to forget his friends who died prematurely.

Marc Mero: « These were my friends. For fourteen years we hung out together and dreamed about what we'd do after we retired from wrestling. »

In light of the emotion stirred up by the death of Chris Benoit and even though it denies any responsibility for the death of its wrestlers, the WWE plans to introduce much more stringent anti-doping tests.

For all wrestlers under contract, brain examinations are from now on mandatory; for those most afflicted, detox cures with all expenses paid have been proposed.