

Tribute to a Murderer

JUST AS THE EYES ARE THE WINDOWS to the soul, the decision by World Wrestling Entertainment to stage a three-hour tribute to Chris Benoit on the USA cable network's June 25, 2007, edition of *Raw* vividly illustrated the depravity at the heart of a peculiar genre. But tepid moralism exaggerates or misunderstands the lesson. Or to put it more precisely, the exaggeration becomes an excuse for the misunderstanding. While respectable opinion can legitimately lament the cliché of wrestling's festival of poor taste, the lament soon becomes its own cliché, and does nothing to prevent more performers from dying — by the bushel. An intelligent perspective on the Benoit tribute goes on to take a hard look at everything a huge corporation achieved when it brought its considerable resources to bear on containing the fallout of the Benoit crime.

Dan Abrams, on MSNBC, was among those who, at the time, denounced “spending three hours celebrating a guy . . . the authorities now say is a murderer.” Worse, the tribute plotline echoed, mocked, and, in its inimitably weird way, validated the sentimental exploitation of

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previous non-homicidal wrestling deaths for TV ratings. The most pungent ironies began — but, like all wrestling “angles,” never really ended — with the fact that this particular tribute happened to bump an already planned and fictitious parody show in which WWE chairman Vince McMahon’s own violent death was to have been memorialized.

Still, the prosaic questions raised by the *Raw* tribute are much more troubling than the postmodernist mind games of a TV show cranked out on the fly. As critics speculated, but never followed through on, McMahon and his key people did indeed know that Benoit was the killer well before 8 p.m. eastern time on June 25. So, how much earlier did they know? Why did they want to know? And what did they plan to do about it? Those questions are the basis of the next chapters of this book. The answers are not clear-cut.

The next day, June 26, WWE would issue a press release headlined, “WWE Shares Internal Timeline and Details Relating to Chris Benoit Tragedy.” A facsimile of the release is on the following two pages.

After closely examining WWE’s asserted timeline of the Benoit death weekend, we can say that, unsurprisingly, it was sliced, diced, and ground through a processor of lawyers and PR specialists. But we can also say that the timeline is wildly implausible.

As this project unfolded, WWE lawyer Jerry McDevitt sent me a series of legal threats over some of the content of my blog. Tellingly, though, neither McDevitt nor anyone else from WWE has ever challenged the veracity of the conclusion that the Benoit *Raw* tribute was broadcast with substantial knowledge by the decision-makers that the Benoit family deaths were not a random triple

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**WWE® Shares Internal Timeline And Details
Relating To Chris Benoit Tragedy**

STAMFORD, Conn., June 26, 2007 – World Wrestling Entertainment today released additional details of what it knows concerning communication with Chris Benoit and authorities before and after the tragic double homicide-suicide involving Benoit, his wife Nancy, and their son, Daniel.

WWE's timeline of events began on Saturday:

- On Saturday, June 23, Chris Benoit was slated to appear at a WWE live event in Beaumont, Texas. That afternoon, Benoit contacted WWE to inform them that his wife and child were ill, and that he would not be able to attend the show.
- WWE executives rebooked Benoit's flight for the following morning, allowing Benoit to miss the Beaumont event and making alternate arrangements for him to attend the pay-per-view event in Houston on Sunday.
- WWE employees attempted to confirm with Benoit his travel plans but were unable to contact him.
- Early Sunday morning, between 3:51 and 3:55 a.m., Benoit sent five text messages to co-workers:

Text Message 1 to two co-workers (sent 6/24 at 3:59am)- Chris Benoit's cell phone
"My physical address is 130 Green Meadow Lane, Fayetteville Georgia, 30215"

Text Message 2 to two co-workers (sent 6/24 at 3:53am)- Chris Benoit's cell phone
"The dogs are in the enclosed pool area. Garage side door is open"

Text Message 3 to two co-workers (sent 6/24 at 3:54am)- Nancy Benoit's cell phone
"My physical address is 130 Green Meadow Lane, Fayetteville Georgia, 30215"

Text Message 4 to two co-workers (sent 6/24 at 3:58am)- Nancy Benoit's cell phone
"My physical address is 130 Green Meadow Lane,

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Fayetteville Georgia, 30215

Text Message to our co-workers from Chris at 3:50 pm: Nancy
Benoit's cell number

"My address is 130 Chasen Meadow Lane, Fayetteville Georgia, 30215"

- Throughout the day on Sunday, WAVE made numerous attempts to contact Benoit both at home and at local hospitals in the Atlanta area. As of 11:00 p.m., WAVE officials were unable to establish contact with Chris Benoit.
- At 12:20 p.m. on Monday, June 28, WAVE officials were notified of the text messages sent to the co-workers the previous day. By 12:45 p.m., WAVE has contacted Fayetteville County Sheriff's office requesting they check on the Benoit family.
- Fayetteville County Sheriff's office made contact with WAVE at approximately 4:00 p.m. advising that they had entered the house of Chris Benoit and found three deceased bodies -- an adult male, adult female and a male child. WAVE learned that Benoit's home was now considered a major crime scene.
- The decision to open the live event scheduled in Corpus Christi that night was made between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. In keeping with company policy, and with limited knowledge regarding facts of the case, WAVE chose to air a memorial dedicated to the career of Chris Benoit. As facts emerged surrounding the case, all tributes to Chris Benoit were removed both on-air and on WAVE.com.

WAVE was stunned and saddened by the details released today by local authorities and is continuing to cooperate for the ongoing investigation.

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murder, but a double murder-suicide committed by Chris. That finding is unassailably true.

* * *

At 3 p.m. eastern time on June 25, Detectives Ethon Harper and Joshua Shelton joined Deputy Mundy and Lieutenant Alden, along with next-door neighbor Holly, at the crime scene. Lieutenant Tommy Pope (later promoted to captain) arrived minutes later. Pope supervised the ongoing tasks of assembling evidence and preserving its chain of custody. Harper did his own quick inspection, confirming the obvious signs that Chris had murdered Nancy and Daniel before hanging himself. Harper then drove eight miles back into central Fayetteville, to the Fayette County Justice Center, where he obtained a search warrant from Circuit Judge Christopher Edwards. Harper called Pope to advise him that a signed warrant was in hand before making the eighteen-minute return trip to Green Meadow Lane.

The head of the Crime Scene Unit team, Lieutenant Tray Powell, oversaw the photographs and, with Bee Huddleston of the coroner's office, arranged for the removal of the three bodies to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation Crime Lab. The task of notifying family members fell to Detective Bo Turner.

A minor controversy would ensue over the failure to collect blood tissue samples from the bodies at the scene. Powell observed a discolored smudge on Chris's left index finger near the knuckle on the thumb side, and hypothesized that it was a friction burn from tying the knots of the cable that bound Nancy. Powell also saw dried blood on the bridge of Chris's nose and in the nail

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bed of his right index finger. The lieutenant decided to transport the bodies to the crime lab “as is” and to have tissue samples collected during the autopsy. At the lab the next day, however, Powell could no longer locate the areas of suspected blood, and he was therefore unable to collect samples. Powell would write in his report, “The blood that was noted on his nose . . . had been removed by the moisture of the body or rubbed off in the bag. The blood splatter noted on his left index finger showed no signs of injury either. I noted no marking of injury where the blood smear was on his nose. The blood was . . . most likely produced by another source. The source likely being the wife, Nancy Benoit.”

Searching for motives, Detective Harper collected paperwork, most of which was in folders in Nancy’s office above the garage: financial records, household utility and credit card statements, insurance and tax documents, medical reports, business and legal correspondence, fan mail.

Inside a small refrigerator in the office’s wet bar, Detective Mitchell Howard found several small bottles labeled “Recombinant Human Growth Hormone” from a Chinese company called GeneScience Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd. The bag with the growth hormone bottles also contained three insulin syringes.

A Hewlett Packard desktop computer was removed from the office for a forensic examination. Later the Benoit side of the family would dispute the thoroughness of that exam, which involved making an image of the hard drive with a tool called FTK and creating an index of the data files.*

* The sheriff did not release the full Internet and email history, images, and

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The cell phones near Chris's body and the home phone answering machine were impounded. Before removing the answering machine, Detectives Shelton and Howard played back and made a secondary digital audio recording of the messages on it. The recording, ultimately released with the public records, was crude due to background noise during the general commotion at the crime scene.

In the upstairs master bedroom, Lieutenant Powell and Detective Bryan Hergesell spotted two boxes with prescription labels from Jones Pharmacy in Fayetteville. The prescribing physician was Phil Astin of Carrollton. The boxes contained March and May 2007 prescriptions of testosterone 200 mg/ml. That night and the next day, investigators would locate supplies of many other prescription medications for both Chris and Nancy. These included Carisoprodol (Soma), a muscle relaxer; Lorcet (Hydrocodone), a narcotic pain reliever; Alprazolam (Xanax), which is used to treat anxiety and panic disorders; Naproxen, an anti-inflammatory drug; Ambien, a sedative or sleeping drug; and Sertraline (Zoloft) and Cymbalta, both antidepressants. Still later, over a period of weeks, Nancy Benoit's family members staying at the house would discover additional steroids, syringes, and other prescription and over-the-counter drugs in a suitcase and in a walk-in closet.

video files, asserting that they were exempt under Georgia open records law: "None of this information is relevant to the incident and had any bearing on the investigation." Whether the entirety of the computer's Internet and email history was irrelevant seems highly questionable, but at least the assertion of a legal exemption was made directly. As will be seen later, the sheriff in other areas fudged the very existence of a supporting record.

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* * *

At around 3:30 p.m. mountain time (5:30 eastern) on June 25, Margaret Benoit, Chris's mother, answered the phone at the home she and her husband shared near Sherwood Park, a suburb of Edmonton, Alberta. The caller was Carl DeMarco, who had risen through the ranks as the person who drove former champion Bret Hart to his appearances in Canada. DeMarco was then the president of WWE Canada.

"I considered Chris one of my best friends . . ." DeMarco began.

Confused, Margaret Benoit said, "Why are you telling me this?"

Only then did DeMarco realize that the Benois hadn't yet gotten the news. He made an excuse and told Margaret he would call her right back.

In Georgia, Detective Turner hadn't called either the Benoit family in Alberta or the Toffolonis, Nancy's side, in Florida.* Perhaps the Georgia authorities were hoping to assemble more information before talking to the

* The publicly released home answering machine messages would include a series of late Monday afternoon/early Monday evening calls from Nancy's parents, Paul and Maureen Toffoloni, escalating in confusion and worry. Though neither DeMarco nor Turner would grant an interview to confirm this, it seems overwhelmingly likely that DeMarco called Turner or got a message to him after DeMarco spoke the first time with Margaret Benoit. Also on the answering machine was a message left at some undetermined point by Daniel Benoit for his father, whom the little boy affectionately called "pooh-bear." Finally, the answering machine still retained — probably for sentimental reasons — the very last known recordings of the voice of Eddie Guerrero, in two messages left the day before Guerrero died in Minneapolis in 2005. The answering machine audio is included in the companion disk. See "Order the DVD" at the back of this book.

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families. But some time before 4:30 p.m. mountain time (6:30 eastern), Turner did call Margaret Benoit. As promised, DeMarco then also called Margaret back.

DeMarco — whose concern the family would describe as genuine and appreciated — took note of how distraught Margaret became. DeMarco called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment in Strathcona County and requested that Emergency Medical Services attend to Mrs. Benoit.

At 4:47 mountain time, RCMP Constable Rob Morris drove to Sherwood Park to assist the medical team. While en route, Morris would write in his report, “The following information was confirmed: The son who had passed away was World Wrestling Entertainment star Chris Benoit, along with his wife, Nancy, and their 7 year old son, Daniel. Information was received of this by Detective TURNER of Atlanta/Fayetteville Police [*sic*] and the president of World Wrestling Entertainment Canada, Carl DEMARCO. Det. TURNER had already notified Margaret of the incident.”

Five minutes later Morris called Turner to confirm details:

Detective Turner had already spoken with Chris’s mother, Margaret BENOIT, and informed her of Chris’s passing. The incident was being investigated as an alleged murder-suicide. . .*

* Facsimiles of the RCMP “Occurrence summary” and “General Occurrence Report” are included in the companion disk. See “Order the DVD” at the back of this book.

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Morris also called DeMarco, who said he had enlisted Scott Zerr, an Edmonton journalist who was close to Chris Benoit, to drive to the house and lend his additional support to Margaret and Michael Benoit. Margaret had called Mike at work and asked him to come home immediately, without telling him why. When Mike pulled into the driveway around 4:45, Zerr greeted him outside “and told me that Chris had taken the lives of Nancy and Daniel and then taken his own life,” Mike would later write in an email to me. “This information had been given to him that afternoon by WWE.”*

Forty minutes earlier in California, wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer had received the same news in a call from Canada. Meltzer said the call came from one of Chris Benoit’s best friends, whom a WWE executive had told matter-of-factly of the murder-suicide at around 5:30 eastern time. Meltzer would later confirm to me that the WWE executive was DeMarco.

According to WWE’s published timeline, “In keeping with company policy, and with limited knowledge

* After some of the information in this chapter was published on my blog, Zerr denied to Josh Stewart, a wrestling columnist for the *Long Island Press*, that he was the one who had told Mike Benoit that Chris was the perpetrator. Mike linked Zerr’s puzzling denial to Mike’s earlier refusal to sign a legal release authorizing a book Zerr was planning to write. Mike reemphasized the accuracy of my account and said he believed Zerr to be part of “a coordinated attempt to discredit” my work.

Zerr — whom I have never met or spoken to — also falsely told others that an essay I had published months after the Benoit deaths failed to mention Chris’s concussion syndrome, and he spoke of me in disparaging terms to Mike Benoit. A wrestling insider told me, “The fact that Zerr would run you down in combination with the denial shows it’s likely coming directly from DeMarco, and that they have no defense. DeMarco is the type — clumsy in covering his tracks.”

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regarding facts of the case, WWE chose to air a memorial dedicated to the career of Chris Benoit,” making this decision between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. eastern.

* * *

World Wrestling Entertainment had substantial experience in public relations crisis management, specifically in inconvenient high-profile deaths. In 1997, Brian Pillman was found dead in a motel room in Bloomington, Minnesota, outside Minneapolis, just as he was supposed to have a leading role in a pay-per-view that was about to be broadcast from the Kiel Center in St. Louis. McMahon shot a straightforward opening cut-in, explaining to the audience why Pillman wasn't there, and carried on with the show. The next night *Raw* was devoted to a Pillman tribute; McMahon even had Pillman's tearful widow on a satellite hookup discussing his lost battle with various addictions.

In 1999, another pay-per-view was just getting under way in Kansas City when wrestler Owen Hart crashed into the ring from the rafters of Kemper Arena. In a stunt entrance gone awry, Hart's harness broke and he was killed on impact. Again, McMahon continued with the show — later maintaining, in part, that he feared a riot by fans if the show were canceled — and he dedicated the next night's *Raw* to a tribute to Hart.

In 2005 Eddie Guerrero also got the full tearjerker treatment on *Raw*. In the age of reality TV, the Guerrero tribute garnered great ratings. And the Owen Hart tribute had been one of the two most-watched episodes in *Raw* history.

By coincidence, exactly two weeks before the Benoit

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tribute — on June 11, 2007 — McMahon had pulled off a modern-day poor man's version of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* hoax. That night's *Raw*, from the Wachovia Arena in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, revolved around a "Mr. McMahon Appreciation Night," which turned into an orgy of tragedy and terror at the conclusion, when a bomb exploded inside McMahon's limousine just as he was entering it. The explosion had been shot over the course of the previous two nights, then edited into the live Monday night feed, in a stunt production coordinated by Zenith Pyrotechnology of Deer Park, New York, which secured local permits and had the area blocked off.

wWE's corporate website, designed to separate public disclosures to investors from wrestling story lines, merged the two in a news release whose tongue-in-cheek nature sailed over the heads of some fans:

The shocking ending raised a myriad of questions: Could Mr. McMahon have survived the fiery explosion? And who could've committed such a heinous act? Although full details have not been disclosed, initial reports indicate that Mr. McMahon is presumed dead. An official investigation into Monday night's events is currently underway with no one being ruled out as a suspect. Throughout the night, people from Mr. McMahon's past — from Donald Trump to Snoop Dogg to Bob Costas to Stone Cold Steve Austin — had less than flattering things to say about the WWE Chairman, but would any go so far as to actually blow him up? The question of "whodunit," as well as the fate of Mr. McMahon, will be on everyone's minds as the WWE saga continues on "Monday Night RAW" on USA (9 p.m. ET/8C).

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On the CNBC business news network, sports business specialist Darren Rovell questioned whether the fake death broke any laws, and concluded that the answer was no: “McMahon isn’t creating any sort of phony documentation or cashing in on a life insurance policy; it doesn’t seem like there’s any exposure here. *But I still think there’s a possibility the organization could be sued by a shareholder.* By announcing that he is ‘presumed dead’ on their official website, they could be charged with misleading stockholders.”

wWE responded to Rovell’s report by releasing a deadpan statement adding him to the list of suspects in McMahon’s murder.*

On the June 18 edition of *Raw*, Stephanie McMahon Levesque — Vince’s daughter and a wWE executive, as well as an on-screen wWE personality and the wife of wrestler Paul Levesque (“Hunter Hearst Helmsley” or “Triple H”) — confirmed that her father was “presumed dead” and said the next week’s show would be a celebration of his snuffed-out life.

Instead, in mid-afternoon in Corpus Christi, Vince

* Generally speaking, does wWE, a publicly traded company listed on the New York Stock Exchange, run afoul of federal securities law prohibitions against issuing materially false statements when it hypes wrestling story lines on its corporate website, outside the boundaries of its entertainment television shows, website, and magazines? In a related example, wWE in the spring of 2008 staged a news conference to announce that boxer Floyd Mayweather was being paid \$20 million to appear at *WrestleMania* — a figure surely many multiples higher than Mayweather’s actual payoff. If there were factual misstatements in wWE’s published internal timeline for Benoit, the same issue might arise. And in June 2009, wWE shares plunged seven percent after a TV storyline, supported by a USA cable news release, had Donald Trump purchasing wWE’s *Raw* brand.

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gathered the talent ringside at Citizen Bank Center in Corpus Christi and informed them that the Benoit's had been found dead. McMahon did not elaborate. The wrestlers were in street clothes — some in the black suits they had been asked to bring for “Mr. McMahon’s” goof memorial. Chris Masters saw Randy Orton, a star wrestler, break into tears talking with Michael Hayes, the head writer and a former wrestler. Masters later told *WrestleZone.com* that there had been “a buzz about some odd text messages Chris had sent to Chavo Guerrero and one of the ECW referees.” Masters suspected the worst. “I mean, how many different scenarios can there be? Either home invasion or Chris snapping. Not many others shared my thoughts on a double murder-suicide.”

McMahon told the crew that, in lieu of wrestling, Benoit’s colleagues would give interview testimonials and remembrances on *Raw*. McMahon said anyone who wanted to go home had permission to do so. Few, if any, took up the offer — there was comfort in remaining enveloped in the numbers of this spontaneous wake. Ted DiBiase, a retired wrestler who had become an evangelical Christian minister, had been flown to Texas to be part of the McMahon death story line; now DiBiase found himself enlisted as a real-life grief counselor.

At 8 p.m. eastern time on June 25, Vince McMahon stood in center ring in the empty arena. Eyes blurred by tears, voice choking and reduced to the hoarse growl characteristic for him at the end of a long day of stress, McMahon broke character as he delivered the *Raw* opening:

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Tonight's story line was to have been the alleged demise of my character, Mr. McMahon. However, in reality, WWE superstar Chris Benoit, his wife Nancy and their son Daniel are dead. Their bodies were discovered this afternoon in their new suburban Atlanta home. The authorities are undergoing an investigation. We here in the WWE can only offer our condolences to the extended family of Chris Benoit. And the only other thing we can do at this moment is, tonight, pay tribute to Chris Benoit. We will offer you some of the most memorable moments in Chris's professional life and you will hear, tonight, comments from his peers — those here, his fellow performers — those here, who loved Chris and admired him so much. So tonight will be a three-hour tribute to one of the greatest WWE superstars of all time. Tonight we pay tribute to Chris Benoit.

With that, taped highlights of Benoit's career were played to the accompaniment of the song "One Thing" by the Canadian grunge band Finger Eleven. *Raw* announcers Jim Ross and Jerry "The King" Lawler reflected on Benoit's legacy. Retired wrestling legend "Stone Cold" Steve Austin spoke via videotape. John Bradshaw Layfield talked about Benoit's devotion to his family. Tazz, C.M. Punk, Dean Malenko, Triple H and his wife Stephanie, and others said their pieces. The tribute culminated with footage of Benoit's 2004 *WrestleMania* championship victory, followed by the emotional in-ring celebration with Nancy, Daniel, and Eddie Guerrero.

One of the live testimonials was by William Regal, one of Benoit's original Fayette County wrestling neighbors. Regal's segment came off as unintentionally chilling. Just before Regal went out for the shoot, Layfield remarked to him, "You don't think Chris killed

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that boy, do you?” Spooked, Regal proceeded to deliver an eerily detached eulogy; while calling Chris the best wrestler he had ever faced, Regal also said he would rather reserve comment on anything else until the facts came in.

“If you watch the *Raw* tribute carefully, it doesn’t appear that the wrestlers, as a group, had an inkling that it was murder-suicide,” Meltzer said. “But the McMahon family had to know.” Meltzer’s assessment was too generous. Though the power of denial cannot be discounted, my investigation has unearthed plenty of evidence that a substantial group of people had “an inkling.”

During the hour from 10 p.m. to 11 p.m. (eastern time) — two thirds of the way through the tribute’s live feed — Doug Evans of Fox 5 News in Atlanta became the first journalist to report to a wide audience that the Fayette County crime scene investigation was focusing on murder-suicide. Minutes later the WWE website’s own home page was headlined, “Double Murder-Suicide,” with the text: “It has been ruled that the deaths . . . were the result of a double murder-suicide from within the home. WWE.COM will have more as soon as it becomes available.”

“Here is what has always bothered me,” Evans said in a later email to me. “I got a tip about the murder not long after the investigators arrived, and it came from inside the gates. Pretty fresh you would think, right? I started heading immediately to Fayette County. On my way, a radio reporter from Canada called me (he was given my cell number by our staff in Atlanta) and he wanted to know about the murders and suicide. He said it was already on the WWE web page. How did that happen so fast? My source couldn’t reveal the names at the time but gave me the location. However, there it was

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already in full detail for the whole world to read. How did that happen?”

The last hour of the Benoit tribute forged ahead on USA cable, after which the repeat feed to the West Coast was broadcast intact. The WWE website home page, alongside the news bulletin, continued to stream a tribute video package along with exclusive studio-produced testimonials.

Inside the ring and in TV skits, WWE's verbal agility is always striking, and it was on full display here. The company had concealed the overwhelming suspicion of murder-suicide, of which at least higher-ups had been aware since, at the latest, around the hour of four to five o'clock eastern time. Turning on a dime, WWE.com now exaggerated the report of the preponderant investigative theory, calling it a "ruling." At the same time, the phrase "within the home" continued to keep the identity of the killer vague. Recalling the murder of comic actor Phil Hartman by his wife, many of Chris's fans continued to hold out the perverse hope that Nancy, and not Chris, would prove to be the perpetrator.

Of course, that was not to be. The next night, at the start of another cable show, on the Sci Fi network, McMahon said Chris Benoit would never be mentioned again on WWE television. By then all references to Benoit had been expunged from the website, and all Benoit-related videos and merchandise were being pulled from physical and virtual store shelves "as facts emerged surrounding the case," according to the company's timeline. The passive construction "as facts emerged" was key. When they emerged to Vince McMahon did not compute; only when they emerged to the public at a pace and in a manner McMahon tightly controlled.



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It was the end of the following week, Friday, July 6, by the time McMahon got around to calling Mike Benoit in Alberta. "I suppose that I could have called earlier," McMahon said. "But we were both trying to deal with this."

Screening calls, Benoit heard the message live as it came through on his answering machine. He chose not to pick up. Nor would he ever return McMahon's call.

