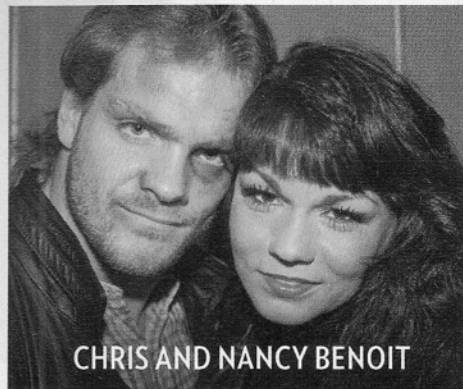
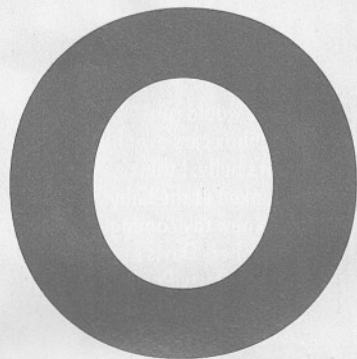


# WHAT CAUSED WWE CHAMP CHRIS BENOIT TO KILL HIS WIFE AND 7-YEAR-OLD SON AND HANG HIMSELF AT HIS HOME GYM?



CHRIS AND NANCY BENOIT



Of all the bad-guy scenarios played out in professional wrestling, nothing could match the horrific final hours of Chris Benoit. According to police, the popular gladiator known as Rabid Wolverine subdued his wife, Nancy, 43, on the wooden floor of their home office in suburban Atlanta June 22, tied her wrists and feet together, wrapped her in a blanket and strangled her with a cord. Hours later he strangled their 7-year-old son, Daniel, face-down on the boy's bed.

At some point Benoit placed a Bible by each of the bodies. Then, according to authorities, he went to the basement exercise room, looped a cable from a weight machine around his neck and, with a nearly empty bottle of wine at his feet, dropped a stack of weights and strangled himself. "Bizarre," said Fayette County District Attorney Scott Ballard. "I don't think we'll ever be able to wrap our minds around this."

Which is one reason why, at press time, police were reluctant to give a motive. Ballard says steroids and other medications were found in Benoit's home, and talk of homicidal "roid

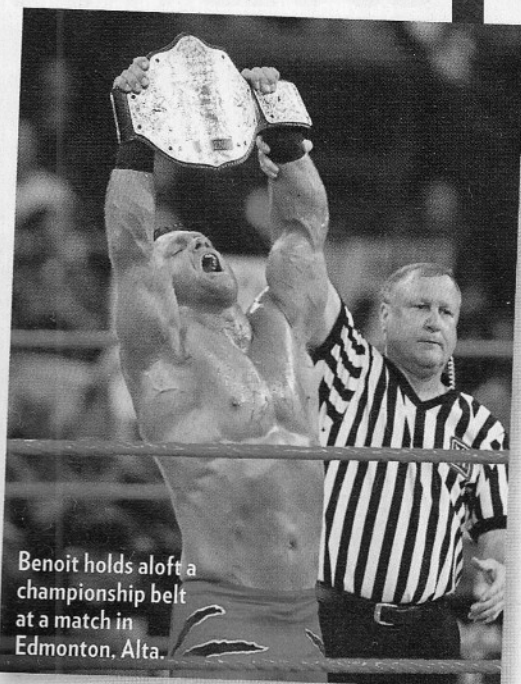
rage" (see box) spread across the Internet. But World Wrestling Entertainment, Benoit's employer, countered that in an independent drug test April 10, "Benoit tested negative."

Court papers suggest that Benoit, ferocious in the ring, could also be violent at home. Nancy Benoit, who was Chris's manager, filed for divorce in May 2003 and requested a restraining order against her husband. She said that he had threatened her and had broken furniture in their home. But Stanley W. Levitt, an Atlanta attorney who represented the Montreal-born Benoit in the divorce action, notes that Nancy dropped her petition three months after filing. "Chris was very much in love with his wife, and they wanted to get back together," Levitt says. "The Chris that I knew was a kind, gentle and compassionate person."

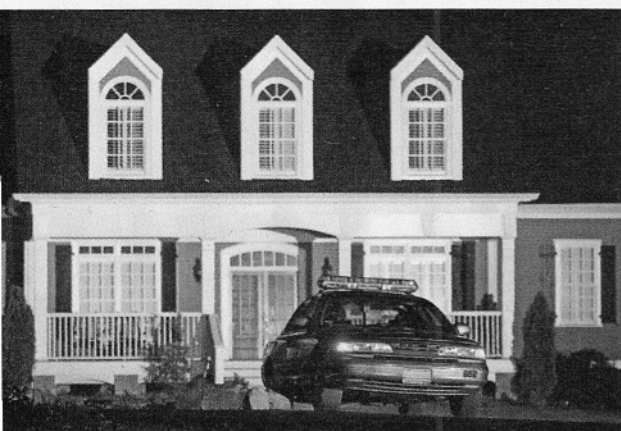
Coming at the height of his career, his appalling death left his fans in a state of deep confusion. "He was definitely one of the more popular wrestlers in the company, both amongst the wrestlers themselves and with the fans," says Phil Lowe, editor of the wrestling Web site *Wrestlemag.com*. "He'd played both a good guy and a bad guy during his career but enjoyed more success as a good guy." Outside the ring "he was well respected by his peers and was very much a family guy." He was also, Lowe says, very good at his craft. "One of the best technical

wrestlers in the history of this industry, no doubt about it."

Benoit, 40, began his career as a teenager with Canadian wrestling star Stu Hart's Calgary-based enterprise Stampede Wrestling. Soon he was working in Japan, eventually making his way to promoter Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation (now the WWE). Real life and the fantasy of the wrestling ring collided in the late '90s, when Benoit (after another relationship that produced two children) met Nancy Sullivan, a wrestling manager who went by the name Woman. Her husband at the time, wrestler Kevin Sullivan, had concocted a storyline to entertain fans



Benoit holds aloft a championship belt at a match in Edmonton, Alta.



A police car sits outside the Benoit home in Fayetteville, Ga., where neighbors said the family led a low-key lifestyle.

that involved a rival—in this case, Benoit—stealing his wife. The act turned into an off-stage romance, and Nancy soon left her husband for Benoit.

After their son was born, Nancy was not as active in wrestling circles, fans say. Jimmy Baswell, Benoit's driver—who last talked to Chris June 17—says the wrestler adored his son. "When we were at their house, he would always let Daniel walk around with championship belts, running around and saying 'I beat my daddy and I'm the new champion of the world' . . . He carried that boy on a pedestal." Investigators found posters of Benoit on the walls of his son's bedroom. They also found nee-

dle marks on the boy's arm. Daniel was "somewhat significantly undersized," says Ballard. "Our thought is, somebody had been giving the boy growth hormones for some time, because these were not fresh needle marks."

Benoit was scheduled to appear at weekend shows starting June 23 in Texas. Instead, friends and neighbors received a series of muddled text messages from Benoit: One indicated his wife and son were sick, D.A.

Scott Ballard told PEOPLE. Another, about the family's pets needing attention, may have been written just before Benoit killed himself, possibly as a way of bringing someone to the scene. Neighbors are relieved, says Ballard, that no killer is at large. But the mystery of Benoit's final acts confounds both those who knew him and those who merely watched him on TV. "People tend to connect to the characters they see on TV and think they know who they are," says lifelong wrestling fan Shannon Scott, 23, of Radford, Va. "But we don't."

**Larry Sutton.** Reported by **Jeff Truesdell, Mary Green, Sean Scully** and **Elizabeth Cobb**

## COULD IT BE STEROIDS?

Athletes and bodybuilders who use anabolic steroids—synthetic testosterone that boosts production of muscle and red blood cells—are at risk for psychological side effects, including aggression and paranoid jealousy. Steroid users can also experience withdrawal symptoms, including depression. "These are relatively dangerous drugs," says Larry Bowers of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. (Other steroids with no such side effects are used in the treatment

of asthma, arthritis and other inflammation.) Were steroids a factor in the Benoit case? Fayette County D.A. Scott Ballard says prescription drugs and anabolic steroids—which are illegal unless prescribed by a doctor—were found at the family's house, but only toxicology tests will detect whether Benoit had them in his system.

Until then there is only speculation. Dr. Clarke Holmes, Georgetown University director

of sports medicine, says not all steroid users suffer extreme side effects. "It's not dose-related; it's not linked to a specific kind of steroid," he says. And the elaborate details of Nancy's and Daniel's murder would make it an "unusual case" of steroid rage, says doping expert Dr. Gary Wadler of New York University, but "it is fair to say they may have played a part in what happened."  
—Macon Morehouse