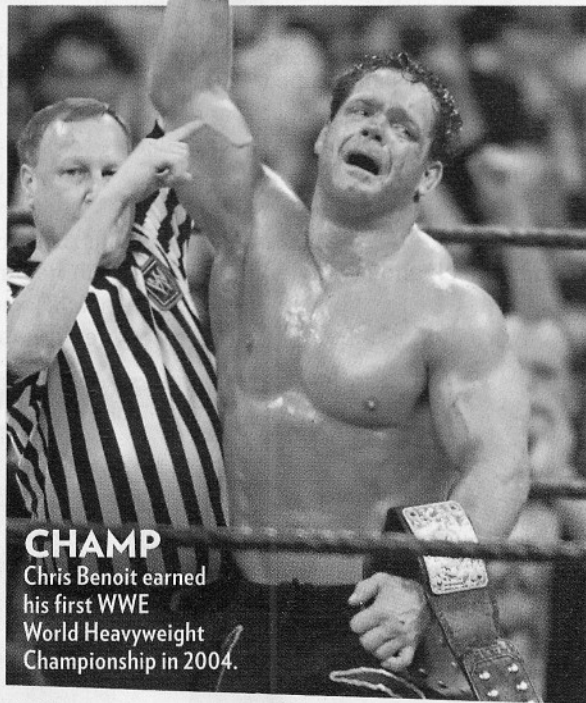


CHRIS BENOIT'S FINAL DAYS

WHAT MADE THE WRESTLER SNAP? ANSWERS—AND MORE QUESTIONS—ABOUT THE BRUTAL MURDERS OF HIS WIFE AND YOUNG SON

Backstage at the Philips Arena in Atlanta last April 29, wrestler Brad Armstrong caught up with his old friend Chris Benoit, who minutes before had successfully defended his championship title at the WWE Backlash event. “I hate to bug you, but after you get showered and cool down, if you have a minute, the kids would love to meet you,” said Armstrong, referring to his 6-year-old daughter and her pals. No problem, answered Benoit. “I’ll stay dressed and show them my championship belt.” When the kids trooped in, Benoit knelt down to get face-to-face with a little boy named Ben. “Hey, buddy, how old are you?” he asked. Seven, came the reply. “I have a son who’s 7 also,” Benoit said, putting his giant belt on the child and posing for a picture.

Could that possibly be the same Chris Benoit who police in Georgia say is behind the stunning double murder and suicide that claimed the lives of his wife, Nancy, and son Daniel? Fayette County investigators released new details of the crime scene to PEOPLE ON



CHAMP
Chris Benoit earned his first WWE World Heavyweight Championship in 2004.



MEMORIALS
Fans left flowers and sympathy notes outside Benoit's Fayetteville, Ga., home.

July 2: Daniel, with what were described as old needle marks on his arm, was found in his bed in his pajamas with his stomach down and head turned to the side; he suffered internal damage to the throat but no sign of trauma around his neck. "By the process of elimination, I arrive at a choke hold [as the cause of death], says District Attorney Scott Ballard, "but that's just a supposition." Benoit him-

crimes, about which Benoit, 40, left no suicide note or other explanation, has only intensified. Did Daniel, 7, secretly suffer from a serious medical condition—or was the idea that his health caused a family crisis merely an attempt by Benoit's employers at WWE to deflect attention away from the world of professional wrestling? Was the wrestler in the grips of a steroid-induced rage—or did his meticulous

under way, of the contents of a safe-deposit box rented by a member of the family), District Attorney Ballard says, "None of it makes any sense. Nobody's ever going to give me a reason that satisfies me for killing that boy."

One early clue proved to be a false start: a contributor to the Wikipedia Web site posted a mention of Nancy's death a full 14 hours before her body had been discovered by police. But the writer, who chose to remain anonymous, later apologized, saying he was repeating an idle rumor that, by a "huge coincidence," turned out to be true. Questions about Daniel's health remain central to the mystery. Two days after the bodies were discovered, the WWE suggested through its attorney that Benoit's son Daniel may have suffered from a medical condition known as Fragile X syndrome, a form of retardation often accompanied by autism. The DA originally speculated that the boy was undersized and that the needle marks were perhaps the result of injections of growth hormone. But the child's maternal grandparents, speaking through their lawyer, said Daniel "was a normal child with no health problems

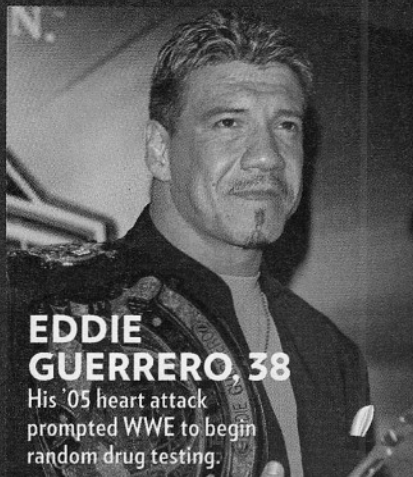
“ We have reason to believe the situation with Daniel was a source of tension in the relationship between Chris and Nancy ” —WWE ATTORNEY JERRY McDEVITT

self, shirtless on the floor of a mirrored basement exercise room, had wrapped a torn white cloth around his neck at the end of his three-day rampage June 24 before looping a cable from a weight machine around his neck and releasing a 240-lb. stack of weights. "The cable pulled up on his neck and strangled him," says Ballard. But the search for a motive behind the

execution of the crimes suggest otherwise? And why would a loving husband and dad, described by numerous friends and relatives as kind, modest and quiet, destroy his own family? "I've never heard Chris say a cross word to anybody," recalls Armstrong. "The aggression was what he put on between the bells" of a match. Pending the results of toxicology reports (and a review, now

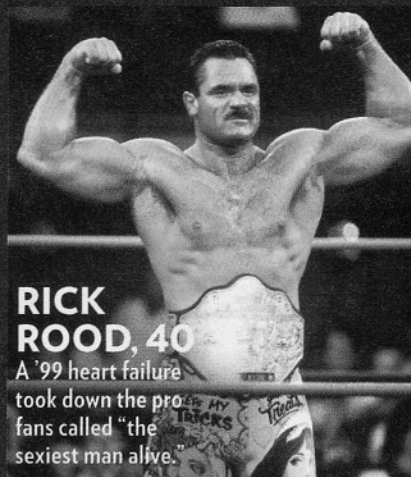
DOWN FOR THE COUNT

DEATHS OF WRESTLERS BEFORE THEIR TIME HAVE PLAGUED THE SPORT



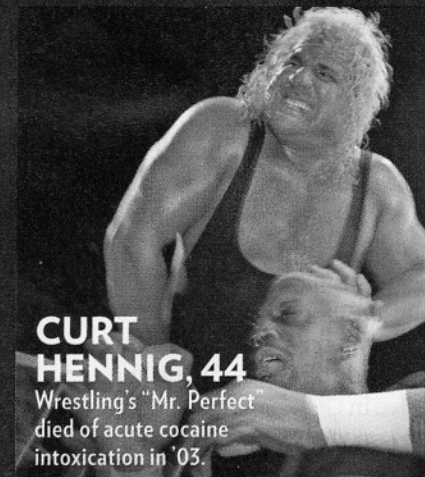
EDDIE GUERRERO, 38

His '05 heart attack prompted WWE to begin random drug testing.



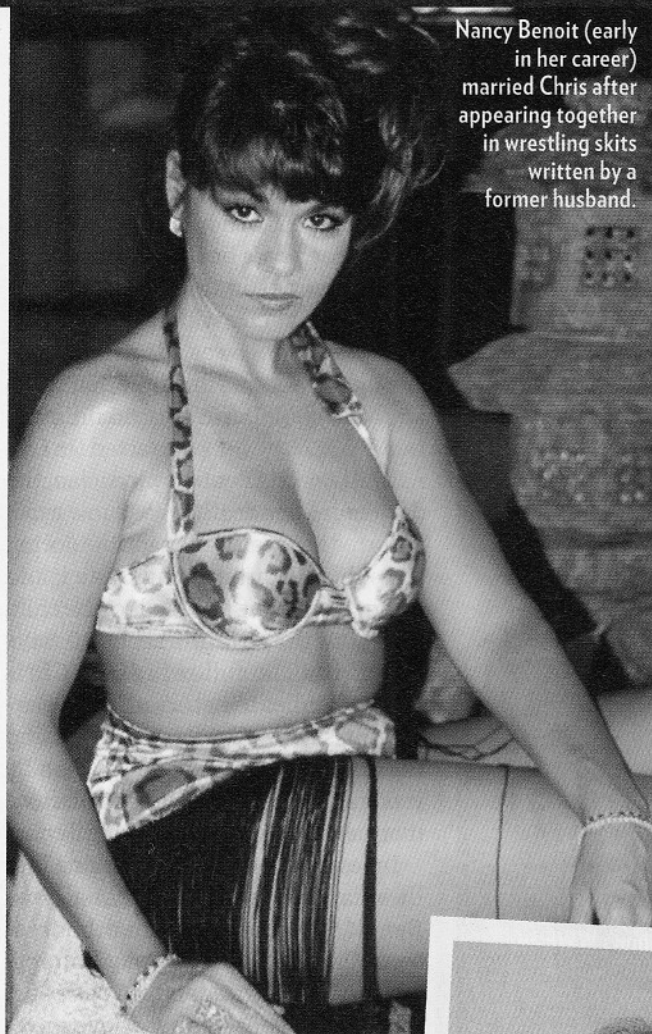
RICK ROOD, 40

A '99 heart failure took down the profans called "the sexiest man alive."



CURT HENNIG, 44

Wrestling's "Mr. Perfect" died of acute cocaine intoxication in '03.

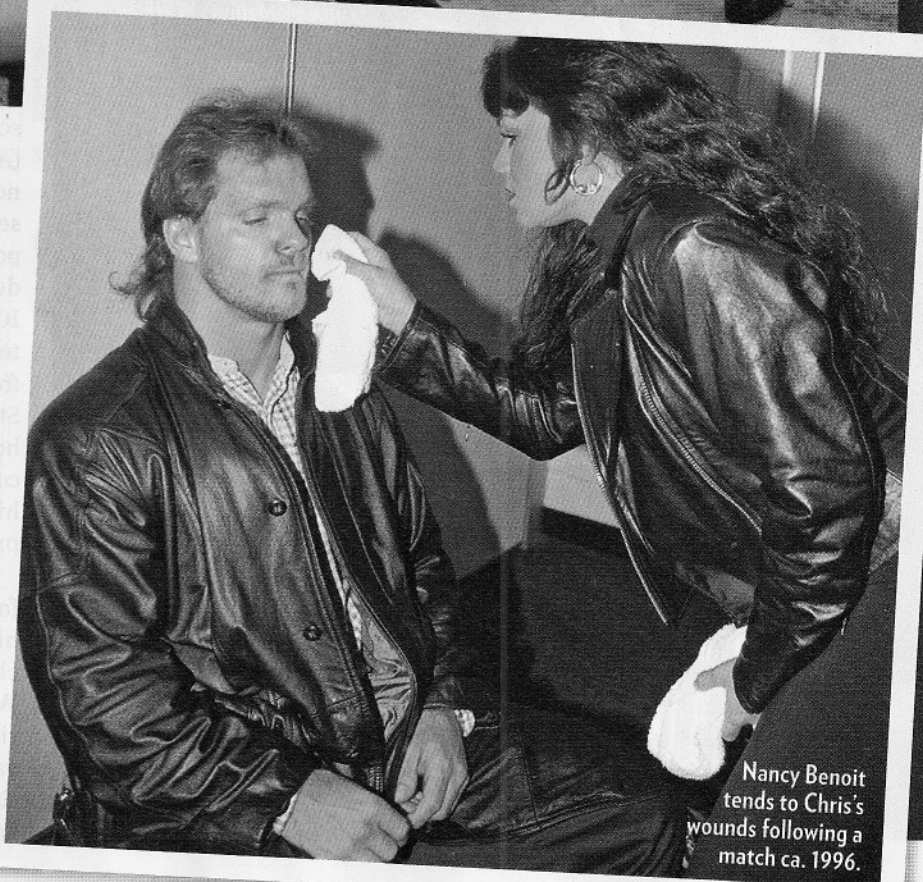


Nancy Benoit (early in her career) married Chris after appearing together in wrestling skits written by a former husband.



Benoit posed with the late Owen Hart (right) in Saskatchewan in 1986, his first year wrestling.

I have wrestled against 25 wrestlers who are no longer with us," says Marc Mero, who faced Chris Benoit in the ring many times in the 1990s. Drugs (steroids for bulking up, painkillers prescribed for injuries), car accidents, heart attacks and suicide have taken a devastating toll. Chris Benoit's own circle of colleagues was particularly hard hit. Six of the "dungeon boys" who started with him in the basement gym of trainer Stu Hart in Calgary, Alta., died early deaths in recent years. Now with the Benoit double murder and suicide, a deeper shadow hangs over their world. "We've had lots of guys die, but nothing like this," says wrestler Dean Malenko.



Nancy Benoit tends to Chris's wounds following a match ca. 1996.

A WRESTLER'S LIFE

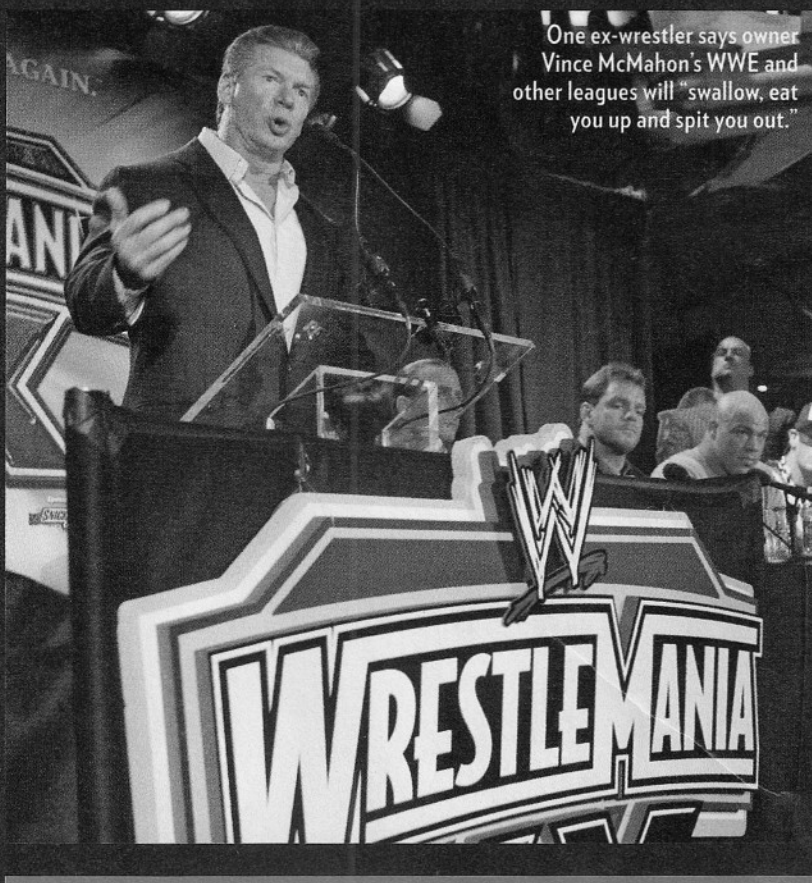
BRUTAL HOURS, BURNOUT, BUT BIG REWARDS

Life on the road as a **wrestler** is not for the weak of body—or heart. “You’re in a different town every day,” says Gary Sabaugh, a slammer who spent 16 years on the road as the Italian Stallion. “You miss the real life, you get lonely.” Adds Dean Malenko, known as the Man of 1,000 Holds during his days in the ring: “We miss birthdays, Christmas plays. . . . It’s hard to have friends.”

Pro wrestlers can spend around 300 days a year on the road, working in a stiffly competitive environment. While the financial payoff can be great—stars earn anywhere from \$300,000 to \$5 million a year, say experts—the burnout factor is high, with many thinking of retirement by age 40.

“There are 10 to 15 guys waiting [in the wings],” says Robert Rechsteiner, who worked the circuit for more than 15 years. “If there is one thing they can do better than you, they will manipulate it in order to take your spot. If you are over 35, you start looking for another career.”

One with better benefits. Most wrestlers, notes Greg Oliver, the founder of SLAM! Wrestling, a Canadian Web site, “don’t have a health plan or a retirement plan—they have to go out and get their own insurance.” The WWE confirms the lack of benefits, although it does cover medical treatment for injuries sustained in the ring. So why do it? “It’s truly passion,” says WWE wrestler Matt Kaye, 33. “We define the term ‘labor of love.’”



One ex-wrestler says owner Vince McMahon's WWE and other leagues will “swallow, eat you up and spit you out.”

that they could discern,” and investigators subsequently said the boy’s medical records showed no evidence of any serious illness.

Still, the pro-wrestling organization, through its attorney Jerry McDevitt, insists the boy’s health was an issue. “We have reason to believe, and we think the evidence will show, the situation with Daniel was a source of tension in the relationship between Chris and Nancy,” McDevitt says. According to the WWE, Nancy, 43, contacted Dr. Phil Astin III, Chris Benoit’s physician, the day before her death. “We know a call occurred between Nancy and the doctor, the subject matter being Daniel, and Nancy discussing the needs of the child and how they would be met,” says McDevitt. The following day, Chris drove 42 miles to Astin’s office in Carrollton, says McDevitt. “He discussed the child and the family situation he was in,” McDevitt would not disclose more about the supposed medical crisis.

Investigators were also looking into the relationship between Dr. Astin and Benoit, but apparently for other reasons. On July 2 federal Drug Enforcement Administration agents arrested Astin on seven counts of over-prescribing pain and anxiety medication. (Astin has pleaded not guilty.) Although none of the charges related to Benoit, a search warrant obtained earlier by police to search his office specified the doctor had prescribed “on average, a 10-month supply of anabolic steroids to Mr. Benoit every three to four weeks from May 4, 2006 through May 9, 2007.” Steroids were found in the wrestler’s house on the day the deaths were discovered, according to police. (Through his lawyer Manny Arora, Astin denies prescribing steroids to Benoit.)

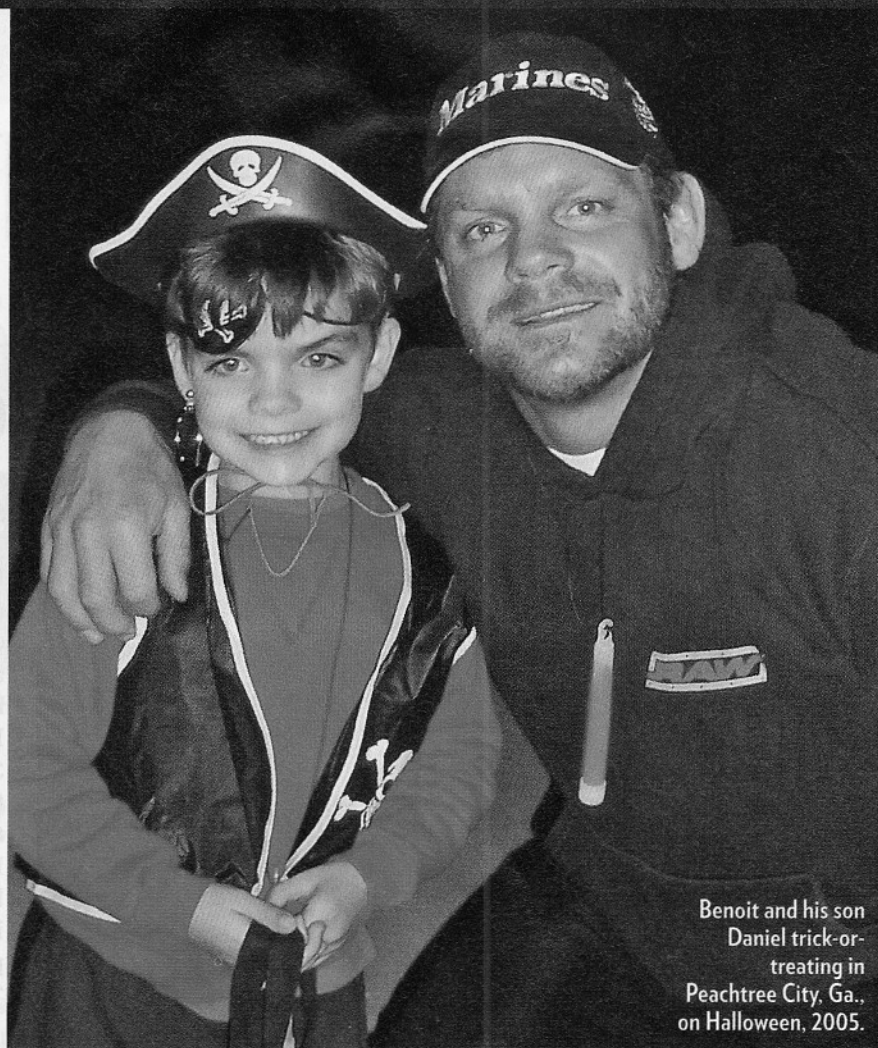
Friends searching for clues have also focused on Benoit’s relationship with his wife, who, before the birth of their child, performed under the name Woman. Years before their 2000 marriage, Nancy was charged with aggravated battery after, according to her then husband, wrestler Kevin Sullivan, she came after him with a knife.

She admitted holding the knife, but the charge from the 1997 episode was eventually dropped. Although she filed for divorce from Benoit in 2003, saying he had threatened her, the couple then reconciled.

Nancy Benoit, like many wrestling wives, complained to friends that her husband's constant touring had turned her into a single mother for much of the year. She assembled and sold gift baskets to earn pin money. "They had a big house, and an entire room was devoted to crafts and making things," says Richard Decker, an Atlanta attorney who represents Nancy's parents, Paul and Maureen Toffoloni. "That was the kind of thing that she and Daniel liked to do together." Former neighbor Melissa Coppage recalls asking Nancy recently if she had any vacation plans. "She said, 'No, it's all wrestling, all the time. The schedule doesn't stop for summer or vacations or holidays.'"

But several of Benoit's friends describe him as a devoted father and husband. Apparently at Nancy's request, Benoit took a four-month leave from work last year to be with his wife while she recovered from surgery. "He wasn't a monster," says friend and former wrestler Dean Malenko. "We're talking about a guy who, a month ago, was in Jacksonville and rather than drive down to Orlando, where he needed to be the next day, he took a flight to be home with Daniel."

If anything changed Benoit in recent years, friends say, it was the death of fellow wrestler Eddie Guerrero in 2005. "His best friend in the business," says Bryan Alvarez, founder of the wrestling site FigureFourOnline.com. "I talked to him a lot after the death, and he was a broken man." Greg Oliver, founder of SLAM! Wrestling, a sports Web site in Toronto, shares an e-mail Benoit sent him after Guerrero's



Benoit and his son Daniel trick-or-treating in Peachtree City, Ga., on Halloween, 2005.

“The answers that everybody wants, we may never have” — D.A. SCOTT BALLARD

death that says in part: "My wife Nancy bought me a diary, and I have started to write letters to Eddie. It may sound crazy, but that is how I'm coping."

The first indication that something might be seriously wrong in the wrestler's life came when he missed a June 23 match in Texas. Speaking to a WWE staffer by phone, he apologized for oversleeping, adding, oddly, "I love you." In a series of calls that afternoon, accord-

ing to the WWE, Benoit described a family emergency, being at a hospital, and his wife and son vomiting blood because of food poisoning. His final communication was an enigmatic text message he sent to a co-worker at 3:58 the next morning: "My address is 130 Green Meadow Lane, Fayetteville Georgia, 30215." By then, investigators believe, his wife and child were dead—and Benoit was perhaps minutes away from ending his own life.

Larry Sutton. Reported by Jeff Truesdell, Siobhan Morrissey, Darla Atlas, Sean Scully, Elizabeth Cobb, Macon Morehouse, Amy Green, Isoul Harris, Debby Waldman, Christina Frangou, Johnny Dodd, Michele Ballard, Sharon Cotliar and Wendy Grossman