

Drugs not the whole story in Benoit tragedy: Hart

Heath McCoy

Canwest News Service

Friday, May 30, 2008

CALGARY - The personal doctor for Chris Benoit, the Alberta wrestler who killed his wife and child before taking his own life last year, is facing a total of 175 charges linked to the distribution of prescription drugs to more than 17 patients.

Dr. Phil Astin, 52, was already facing seven charges for "the illegal distribution of prescription drugs, including Percocet, Adderall, Lorcet and Xanax, to two patients," a statement from David Nahmias, U.S. Attorney for the northern district of Georgia, said.

After further investigation and a review of hundreds of patient files, "we now see a much broader picture of the disturbing and dangerous distribution of prescription drugs," Nahmias said.

Police say the Montreal-born Benoit killed his wife on June 22, 2007, then killed their son, Daniel, the next day before taking his own life at their Atlanta-area home.

Federal authorities had previously stated that Astin prescribed, on average, a 10-month supply of anabolic steroids to Benoit every three to four weeks between May 2006 and May 2007.

There was speculation that drugs drove the wrestler, raised in Edmonton and trained by Calgary's famed Hart family, to his brutal actions.

Benoit's former employer, World Wrestling Entertainment, has insisted Chris Benoit had been tested for drugs months before he went on his murderous rampage. It maintained there was no definitive link between steroids and the incident.

"In defence of the WWE, I don't know how you can stop guys from taking (drugs) that their doctors prescribe to them," said Bret Hart.

"I feel sympathy for this doctor, because in his mind, he probably thought he was helping."

But Hart predicts the charges laid against Astin could lead to more lawsuits.

"Doctors could be found liable for lawsuits related to the deaths of many wrestlers," he says. "So many wrestlers have died, and they've always had an insurmountable amount of pills and stuff. It's an epidemic in wrestling."

Chris's father, Michael Benoit, maintains his son had severe brain damage after suffering repeated concussions in wrestling rings, and it was the dementia brought on by these injuries that led to his crimes.

Tests done on Benoit's brain by the Sports Legacy Institute - a research group founded in the U.S. to study repetitive brain injuries suffered by athletes - determined last year that damage to the wrestler's brain was significant.

"Benoit was a really hard, physical wrestler, and dropping that head off the top turnbuckle every night for some 20 years, there's a lot of potential concussions in that alone," said Hart.

Michael Benoit believes the Canadian Crippler, as his son was often dubbed in the ring, was heavily medicating himself to combat "the pain and paranoia" he suffered from his brain injuries. He adds that countless wrestlers have fallen into the same death trap, abusing drugs to cope with injuries suffered in the ring.

Hart says he can understand how repeated injuries of that nature might alter one's sense of reality.

"Chris was a really good guy and anybody who (knew him) knows that something had to have gone really wrong that day. I think what happened was more tied in to the concussion, and brain damage from that."



CREDIT: Ian Jackson/Edmonton Journal
Canadian pro wrestler Chris Benoit was found dead in his Atlanta home by police in June 2007.



CREDIT: Ted Rhodes/Calgary Herald
Bret 'the Hitman' Hart: 'So many wrestlers have died.'

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.