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Buggy mishap kills horseman

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A respected Kiwi harness racer has died after a freak horse and buggy accident in the US.

Derek Arthur Heckler, 58, died on Tuesday from injuries suffered two weeks ago when he fell from the carriage he was driving in San Francisco.

His daughter, Angela Heckler Knox, said her mother Alison, who also drives carriages, called her when she heard reports of a horse on the loose near where Heckler worked.

"She was concerned about dad, then the hospital called and said he had arrived there," Heckler Knox said.

"I went to the hospital and they said he had suffered a severe brain injury. Basically, his skull was cracked.

"We don't know what actually happened, whether the horse reared or got startled. He was the only one in the carriage, there were no passengers."

Heckler was in a coma for two weeks before he died. His three other children flew to San Francisco from New Zealand and Australia to be at his side.

"It was really difficult," said Heckler Knox. "We spent time with him but he was in a coma the whole time, he was not responsive. The doctors tried everything ... they were really sad when they realized he wasn't going to recover."

Heckler had been a horse and carriage driver in San Francisco for about three years.

"He loved horses," said his daughter. "He was a big name in harness racing in the 70s so he was really happy to be back working with horses."

In 1971 Heckler paid \$600 for a horse named Final Decision and, despite no harness experience, readied the pacer for racing by March 1972.

Heckler raced Final Decision around New Zealand before taking him to the US where he won several races.

Heckler Knox said her father grew up in Hamilton and lived in West Auckland and Warkworth before moving to San Francisco.

He worked as a youth group leader in Warkworth.

"He was really shy but he was really good at getting know people and making a difference in their lives. He was one of those quiet people who tried to go unnoticed but always made a huge impact."

She said her mother, siblings and Heckler's five grandchildren were finding his death "pretty tough".

They were going to hold a memorial service for him in San Francisco before bringing him home for a funeral in Warkworth.