

Horse Farm Owner Dies When Pinned Under Golf Cart Incident Number: 04KY060



An example of a cart and hay bale similar to the hay bale configuration which pinned the farm owner.

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Kentucky Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program

Incident Number: 04KY060
Incident Date: January 31, 2004
Release Date: May 9, 2005
Subject: Horse Farm Owner Dies When Pinned Under Golf Cart

Summary

On January 31, 2004, a 45-year old female horse farm owner (decedent) died when she was pinned under a golf cart. The woman had driven a gas-powered golf cart from her house on the farm to the horse barn to muck stalls and put horses in the barn. After driving the golf cart into the barn, the farm owner placed two square bales of hay on the golf cart; one on the back and one on the passenger side of the front seat. Leaving the ignition key of the golf cart in the “on” position, she left the golf cart in the aisle at the end of the barn. She then walked the length of the barn, entered a stall, mucked it out, exited the stall into the barn aisle, and leaned the pitch fork against the wall next to the stall door. Unbeknownst to the farm owner, the bale of hay on the passenger seat had slipped off the seat and fallen onto the gas pedal of the golf cart. With the pedal depressed by the hay bale and the key in the “on” position, the golf cart proceeded down the barn aisle, striking the victim and pinning her underneath. Several hours later, the farm owner’s daughter went to the barn and found her mother pinned underneath the golf cart. Upon finding her mother, she called a friend then went to the farm manager’s house located nearby on the farm. The daughter informed the farm manager that her mother was in the barn pinned underneath the golf cart. The farm owner’s daughter returned to the barn with the farm manager to find the daughter’s friend and her friend’s mother on the phone with emergency services. Emergency services arrived and contacted the coroner who arrived and declared the horse farm owner dead at the scene due to “compression asphyxia with hypothermia”.

To prevent future occurrences of similar incidents, the following recommendations have been made:

Recommendation No. 1: When exiting a golf cart, the operator should always turn the ignition switch to the “off” position and remove the key.

Recommendation No. 2: Golf cart seats should only be used for human occupancy.

Recommendation No. 3: A golf cart should be equipped with appropriate accessory equipment specific for the task.

Background

On August 5, 2004, via the Kentucky Office of Vital Statistics, the Kentucky Fatality Assessment Control & Evaluation Program became aware of an occupational fatality involving a horse farm owner and a golf cart. A field evaluator for KY FACE contacted the coroner and on

November 3, 2004, a site visit was made to the farm where the coroner, farm manager and his wife were interviewed. Photographs were taken during the site visit.

The horse farm owner purchased the farm in the late 1980's. The farm housed approximately 22 horses (including 15 boarders) on 55 acres that were divided into 7 paddocks. A round pen was available for training purposes. The farm owner's background was in training horses, and working with jockeys and breeders. The farm owner trained riders in dressage, hunter/jumper and cross country. Thoroughbreds and Paints were the main breeds on the farm at the time of the farm owner's death. In 2002, the farm had been used to quarantine a mare which had been shipped to the United States from Ireland. To ensure no horses enter the United States with Contagious Equine Metritis (CEM) a contagious venereal disease, a period of quarantine is required. Kentucky is one of eleven states approved by the USDA to accept quarantined horses shipped to the United States from other countries. When a horse arrives in the United States, a blood sample is drawn and the horse is transported in a sealed vehicle to a quarantine farm. After arriving at the farm, another blood sample is obtained and over a period of 16 days, 2 more blood samples are drawn. After being quarantined for 16 days and all blood samples are determined negative for CEM, the horse is considered disease-free and released.

Also on the farm were the farm manager and his wife who had lived and worked on the farm for 1½ years prior to the incident. At the time of the interview with the farm manager and his wife, the golf cart involved in this incident had been removed from the farm. The golf cart's location was unknown as was the make, model and year.

According to a weather center in Kentucky, weather temperatures on the day the farm owner died ranged from -6 degrees Fahrenheit to 19 degrees Fahrenheit. The Death Certificate states the approximate time of death was approximately 2:30 pm.

Investigation

On January 31, 2004, a 45-year old female horse farm owner (decedent) died when she was pinned under a golf cart. The woman had driven a gas-powered golf cart from her house on the farm to the horse barn to muck stalls and put horses in the barn. After driving the 650 – 750 pound golf cart into the barn, the farm owner placed two square bales of hay weighing 50 – 70 pounds each on the golf cart; one horizontally on the back and one vertically on the passenger side of the seat. Leaving the ignition in the "on" position, she left the golf cart in the aisle at the end of the barn. Both sets of barn doors were closed. The seats of the golf cart were leather and the gas pedal was equipped with a "kill" switch that will not allow the cart to move until the gas pedal is depressed. She then walked approximately 50 feet to a stall door, entered the stall, mucked it out, exited the stall, and leaned the pitch fork against the wall next to the stall door. Unbeknownst to the farm owner, the bale of hay on the passenger seat had slipped off the seat and fallen onto the gas pedal of the golf cart. With the weight of the hay bale depressing the gas pedal and the key in the "on" position, the golf cart proceeded down the barn aisle, striking the victim, pinning her underneath, and spinning its wheels until it ran out of gas.

Approximately three hours after the farm owner had left for the barn and not returned, the farm owner's minor daughter wondered what was taking her mother so long in the barn and went to

the barn to check on her mother. The farm owner's daughter entered the barn and found her underneath the golf cart in the barn aisle. Upon finding her mother pinned under the golf cart, she called a friend then went to the farm manager's house onsite located approximately 1,000 feet from the barn. The daughter informed the farm manager that her mother was in the barn pinned underneath the golf cart. The farm owner's daughter returned to the barn with the farm manager and a farm laborer to find the daughter's friend and friend's mother, who were also neighbors and lived nearby, in the barn. The daughter's friend's mother was on the phone to emergency services. While waiting for emergency services to arrive, the farm manager, the farm laborer, and the neighbor lifted the golf cart off the farm owner's body. Emergency services arrived and contacted the coroner at 5:16 pm. The coroner arrived at 5:24 pm and declared the horse farm owner dead at the scene.

Cause of Death

The Certificate of Death states the immediate cause of death was "compression asphyxia with exposure (hypothermia) / entrapment under golf cart in extreme cold (0 – 20 F)".

Recommendations and Discussions

Recommendation No. 1: When exiting a golf cart, the operator should always turn the ignition switch to the "off" position and remove the key.

Golf carts are equipped with a "kill" switch in the gas pedal. A "kill" switch allows the ignition switch to be in the "on" position, but the cart will not move until the gas pedal is depressed. Depressing the gas pedal is similar to shifting a car into "drive". Relieving pressure on the gas pedal of a cart acts like applying the brake in a passenger car. Leaving the ignition switch of a golf cart in the "on" position allows the driver to start and stop the cart simply by depressing or releasing the pedal. According to several golf pros and a golf cart dealer, it is common practice for golf cart users to step out of a golf cart and leave the ignition switch in the "on" position. This practice allows a quick start when the driver is ready to resume operating the cart so the operator can skip the step of turning the ignition switch to the "on" and "off" positions. In this incident, if the ignition switch had been in the "off" position, the hay bale would have fallen onto the gas pedal but not activated the cart into forward motion.

Recommendation No. 2: Golf cart seats should only be used for human occupancy.

Golf cart seats are designed for human use with a lot of leg room between the seat and the front of the cart. According to a golf cart vendor, it is not uncommon for dogs or objects on the passenger side to slip off the seat and depress the gas pedal. A dog climbing into or out of a cart could easily depress the pedal and if the ignition switch is in the "on" position, cause the cart to move. Likewise, objects such as square hay bales left unattended on the seat can slip off the seat onto the floor board and depress on the gas pedal, exposing anyone in the vicinity to serious injury.

Recommendation No. 3: A golf cart should be equipped with appropriate accessory equipment specific for the task.

To move small amounts of hay, straw or tools on a farm, golf carts are an inexpensive alternative to using a tractor or pickup truck and are more maneuverable in close spaces. To perform these duties with a golf cart, it should be retrofitted with a basket on the back, large enough to accommodate a few bales of hay, straw or tools. An alternative to the basket would be to purchase a wagon cart to pull behind the golf cart. With these modifications, golf carts can be a safe alternative to using a large tractor and wagon.

Keywords

Golf cart
Hay bale
Kill switch

References

Golf cart dealer
Golf cart vendor
Kentucky Climate Center

Acknowledgements

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Golf Cart Dealer
Golf Cart Vendor

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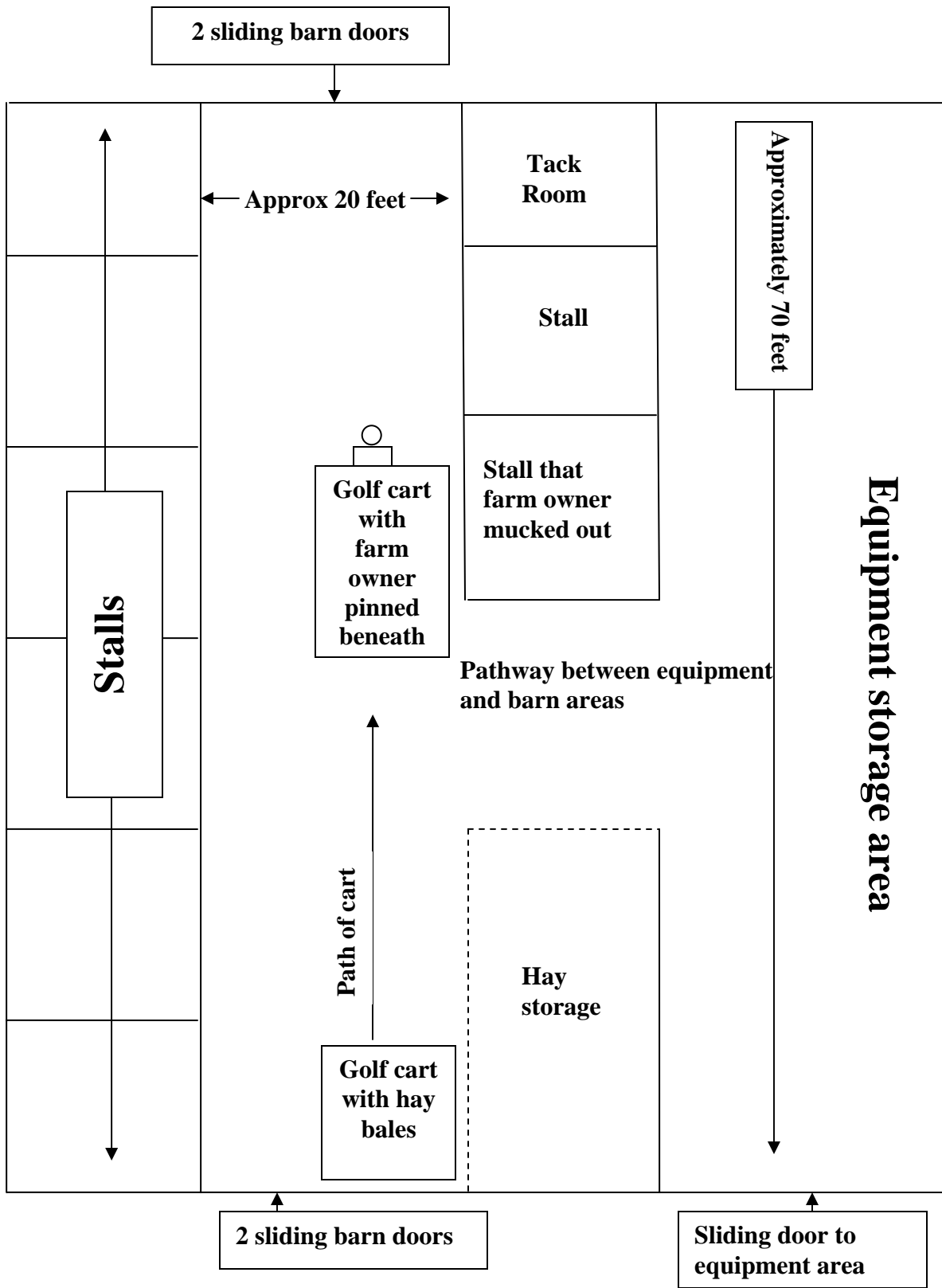




Photo of barn where incident occurred. Both sets of doors were closed at the time of the incident.