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Jesse James Hollywood gets life sentence in killing of teen

Jury declines to issue the death penalty to the former drug dealer in the 2000 slaying of Nicholas Markowitz, 15. Defense plans to seek a new trial, citing possible jury misconduct.

By Steve Chawkins

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Reporting from Santa Barbara — After three hours' deliberations, a jury on Wednesday gave a life sentence rather than the death penalty to Jesse James Hollywood, the former marijuana dealer convicted last week in the slaying of a 15-year-old West Hills boy.

Found guilty of kidnapping and first-degree murder, Hollywood, 29, was portrayed by prosecutors as the ringleader of a convoluted plot to avenge a \$1,200 drug debt owed by Nicholas Markowitz's older half brother. Hollywood was the target of an international search before his arrest four years ago in a Brazilian beach town.

After Wednesday's verdict, defense attorneys said they will ask for a new trial, citing possible jury misconduct.

"It's not over," attorney James Blatt said.

He contended that Santa Barbara County Superior Court Judge Brian Hill had not taken a juror's complaints seriously enough.

The accusations came to light Tuesday, when a juror told the judge she had been bullied by the foreman and others into a guilty verdict, Blatt said. The woman also said another juror had prejudged Hollywood's guilt, joking after an electrician's testimony about Hollywood being electrocuted.

Blatt again raised the issue of the 2007 film "Alpha Dog." He had unsuccessfully asked for a change of venue, charging that the movie and intense media attention in Santa Barbara jeopardized his client's right to a fair trial.

The movie's producers received confidential investigative files from Ron Zonen, a deputy district attorney who prosecuted four others in the case. Blatt had tried to block the movie's release.

After Wednesday's decision, jurors were unwilling to talk with attorneys or reporters.

Jeff and Susan Markowitz, the slain boy's parents, expressed no regret over the sentence of life without parole rather than death by lethal injection.

"Another son's dying isn't going to bring Nick back," Jeff Markowitz said.

Family members on both sides gave emotional testimony this week.

Dressed in black, Susan Markowitz described the moment in 2000 when she learned her missing son's body had been found in a shallow grave at a Santa Barbara hiking spot called Lizard's Mouth.

"Five men in black suits showed up at our door," she said. "They had that look in their eyes and that smell of death."

She spoke of the emptiness she has felt since the murder. Responding to questions from prosecutor Joshua Lynn, she said she could not imagine what her son would be like now -- "he's forever 15," she said -- but sometimes requests a hug from young men about his age "just to see how it feels."

Asked for the story behind some family photos, she identified one as "my son's new home." It was Nicholas' headstone.

"He died a month shy of his 16th birthday," she said, recalling the learner's permit on the refrigerator door. "Instead of a car, he got a coffin."

In arguing for the death penalty, Lynn alluded to Hollywood "sunning himself in Brazil" on his long flight from the law, describing him as "callous, self-absorbed, narcissistic -- and now, a child-killer."

On the defense side, Hollywood's attorneys urged jurors to consider their client's respectful demeanor in court, the lack of violent acts in his past, and testimony from family members that painted him as a caring young man whose friends got him in deep trouble.

"If you believe Jesse Hollywood has the capacity to love, to be responsible to others, to give love back to others -- then his life should not be extinguished," Blatt told jurors.

In her testimony, Hollywood's mother, Laurie Haynes, described a happy home life that revolved largely around the family's passion for baseball. Her ex-husband Jack Hollywood was a Little League coach even before the couple had children.

Later, friends and relatives would gather to watch Jesse, who was described as a "phenomenal" player.

Off the field, Jesse would help out a sick aunt, dropping by with groceries -- an image at odds with the criminal mastermind portrayed by prosecutors.

"I don't believe he did this," his mother, an oncology nurse, told jurors, answering defense attorney Alex Kessel's question about why her son's life should be spared. "It would be a great

injustice to deprive a son of his father, and to deprive the rest of the family of having any more interactions with him," she said, her voice cracking.

Hollywood had a son with a Brazilian girlfriend, who was pregnant when he was caught.

In court, witnesses, including a nurse at the Santa Barbara County Jail, described him as a doting father who speaks glowingly of the son he has not met, a boy who turned 4 this week.

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