

The Simpson Verdict

How Much is Simpson Worth?



Daniel Petrocelli, left, attorney for the family of Ronald Lyle Goldman, walks into Santa Monica Superior Court on Thursday with Mark Roesler, a celebrity licensing expert who testified about O.J. Simpson's potential wealth.

Jurors hear vastly differing estimates in punitive phase

By Matt Krasnowski

COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

O.J. Simpson is either flat-broke or will be wealthy for life because of his notoriety, jurors considering whether to hit the former football star again in the wallet were told Thursday.

The civil trial's punitive damages phase got under way with Simpson's lawyer saying his client is more than \$9.3 million in debt—most of it from the \$8.5 million jurors awarded in compensatory damages earlier in the week. But witnesses for the victims' families testified the former football star is worth \$15.7 million.

Jurors could begin deliberation the punitive award today. When they return with a decision, Simpson's two-and-a-half-year legal odyssey may finally come to an end.

In Thursday's hearing, Simpson's longtime personal lawyer, Leroy "Skip" Taft, testified that demand for the fallen celebrity has been "drying up" since the celebrity's arrest in the killings of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Lyle Goldman.

Taft gave a downbeat view of Simpson's financial state: "He cannot pay his bills."

That contrasted starkly with testimony of two plaintiff experts who said Simpson's name and image equal \$2 million to \$3 million a year for the rest of his life.

Plaintiff witness Mark Roesler said Simpson will earn that by selling autographs, a book, possible movie

income and trademaking his image for coffee cups and other collectibles.

Jurors are now considering whether and how much to award in damages to punish Simpson for the June 12, 1994, deaths of his ex-wife Nicole Simpson and Goldman. On Tuesday, the jury found Simpson legally liable in the slayings and awarded Goldman's parents \$8.5 million. The punitive award could be much higher.

Autograph value tripled

Roesler said the value of an autographed photo of Simpson tripled from \$20 to \$60 since his arrest and he could make \$1.5 million a year by signing photos and footballs. Roesler also said Simpson could make as much as \$5 million for a book and \$3 million in the movies.

The Indianapolis-based celebrity licensing expert testified that only five

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living athletes get more than \$60 for autographs on a photos, including Mike Tyson, who \$100-per-signing fee increased after he was convicted on rape charges. Others who earn more include baseball greats Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams, and basketball legends Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell.

Roesler added that Simpson had made several applications to trademark various uses of his name including: "Team O.J. Justice for All," "O.J." and "Juice."

It was a financial assessment that Simpson lawyer Robert C. Baker found hard to swallow.

Baker suggested the novelty of any Simpson collectible has worn off and said his client, now branded by a jury as a killer, is being "blackballed" even by the football world that adored him.

"You want to buy his exclusive rights for \$25 million?" Baker asked Roesler sarcastically. "Done."

The judge sustained an objection to the question.

"How about \$20 million?" Baker then chirped. Jurors giggled.

Simpson was not in court as details of his finances were made public, including that he made \$2.8 million by "virtue of the murders," said forensic accountant Neill Freeman.

Simpson made nearly \$1 million on his jail house book *I Want To Tell You*, \$1 million from selling autographs and memorabilia since his arrest, \$303,000

from the telephone-order video "O.J. Simpson: The Interview," \$434,000 for post-acquittal pictures and \$75,300 for interviews.

But Taft said Simpson made just \$600 in autographs last year and his income in the past six months was \$30,000.

Taft testified Simpson had no chance of making \$5 million from a second book. At least four publishing houses rejected \$1 million post-trial book offers from Simpson.

"We've never received an offer," Taft said. "Everyone else has, but we have not."

Hidden funds?

Freeman also suggested that Simpson was hiding \$3 million, including \$1.25 million Simpson earned from the sale of his share of a string of Honey Baked Hams shops and a \$1.75 million insurance settlement used to cover some of Simpson's civil lawyers' fees.

"I don't understand where the cast went," Freeman testified.

Taft said the money from the Honey Baked Hams went to cover income taxes Simpson owed, personal and business expenses, attorneys' fees, payments to expert witnesses, the cost of upkeep at his Tudor-style estate and the salary for Simpson's personal secretary, Cathy Randa.

Under the gentle question of Baker, Taft also tried to put to rest something

long suggested by the plaintiffs throughout the case.

"Has at any time Mr. Simpson sent assets out of the country?" Baker asked.

"Absolutely not," Taft said, staring at the jury of six men and six women. He returns to the stand today.

Punish, not destroy

The day started with lawyers on both sides giving jurors their views of Simpson's finances and Baker urging the panel that under California law punitive damages are to punish Simpson "but they are not to destroy."

A low-key Baker said the verdict they reached earlier in the week means Simpson can never gain anything financially from his celebrity status.

John Q. Kelly, lawyer for Ms. Simpson's estate, said: "This is going to be your one opportunity to act on behalf of Nicole's estate. One thing I'm going to urge you people to do is not let Mr. Simpson hide behind his children."

Baker objected, but Kelly continued. "It will be the only protection these children have for the rest of their lives," he said.

Goldman lawyer Daniel Petrocelli told jurors they cannot punish Simpson by sending him to prison but they can penalize him.

"All we can do is make him pay money," he said. "That is all we can do."

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