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Closing arguments begin in Hollywood murder trial : Over defense request, judge bans cameras from the courtroom

ANGEL PACHECO, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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The final showdown in the capital murder trial of Jesse James Hollywood begins today with closing arguments, a chance for the prosecution and defense to take a final swing at swaying jurors.

Accused of masterminding the kidnapping and murder of 15-year-old Nicholas Markowitz five years ago, 29-year-old Mr. Hollywood has a lot riding on the outcome of the trial -- namely his life, as prosecutors are pushing for the death penalty.

A Hollywood associate -- the triggerman -- is already on California's death row.

In custody since being tracked down in Brazil in 2005, Mr. Hollywood spent Monday's court session sitting at the defense table as his attorneys, prosecutors and Superior Court Judge Brian Hill arduously constructed a series of instructions that will be presented to jurors this morning.

Among the decisions the 12-member jury will have to make during deliberations is whether Mr. Hollywood is guilty of first-degree murder. Such a conviction would involve jurors finding that the killing of Nicholas was committed wilfully, deliberately and was premeditated, or that the crime was committed in the perpetration of a kidnapping.

Jurors will not have the option of convicting Mr. Hollywood of the lesser crime of second-degree murder because attorneys on both sides stipulated to keep that choice off the table.

Nicholas was shot dead in the foothills of Santa Barbara on Aug. 9, 2000, by an associate of Mr. Hollywood -- Ryan Hoyt, the man now on death row -- over a drug debt owed Mr. Hollywood by the victim's half-brother, Ben Markowitz, that prosecutors say amounted to \$1,200.

Mr. Hollywood, while denying involvement in the killing, testified that Ben Markowitz was \$2,500 in the hole.

Nicholas was kidnapped from the streets of the San Fernando Valley on Aug. 6, 2000.

Jurors will receive their instructions first thing when the trial resumes today, and from there, attorneys on both sides will have a chance to present their closing arguments.

First up will be Joshua Lynn, the District Attorney's Office chief trial deputy, who told Judge Hill to expect a closing argument of no more than two hours. The defense will go next, but prosecutors will then have a chance to get in the last word, with a rebuttal because they carry the burden of proof.

Lead defense attorney James Blatt expects arguments to finish up on Wednesday.

One thing attorneys may not have to worry about while delivering their arguments today is looking good on camera. At the end of Monday's hearing, Judge Hill reaffirmed his decision on banning cameras in the courtroom, sighting time restraints.

Defense attorneys brought the topic up earlier in the day, and Mr. Lynn stated his opposition to the use of cameras in the courtroom. Although Judge Hill did not immediately make a ruling, he said the courtroom was not set up to accommodate media.

In April, the judge ordered there would be "no cameras in the courtroom of any type," and when opening statements began May 15, Judge Hill additionally issued a gag order on everyone involved in the trial, barring them from speaking with reporters.

Judge Hill upheld his decision on cameras just after he adjourned Monday's proceedings, but defense attorneys argued in favor of media as a sheriff's deputy scooted the loan reporter in the room outside.

e-mail: apacheco@newspress.com