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Long Delayed “Alpha Dog” Murder Trial of Jesse James Hollywood Set To Begin

By Greg Risling, AP

The murder case against Jesse James Hollywood read like a screenplay even before it was turned into the 2007 movie "Alpha Dog."

A 15-year-old boy was kidnapped and killed over a \$1,200 drug debt owed by his half-brother. A 4-year manhunt ended on a beach in Brazil. And allegations of misconduct by a prosecutor prompted a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Now, the ending of the real-life story is about to be written.

Nine years after the killing, the trial of Hollywood is finally set to begin Friday to determine if he ordered the kidnap-murder of Nicholas Markowitz. If convicted, Hollywood could face the death penalty.

The case has become a distant memory for many observers - lost among school shootings, salacious celebrity trials and other high-profile crimes across the country.

But back in the summer of 2000, Southern California and much of the nation were intrigued by the brazen daylight kidnapping of Nicholas and the discovery of his body in a shallow grave in the hills above tony Santa Barbara.

Karen Sternheimer, a sociologist at the University of Southern California, said people were interested because the clean-cut players came from middle-class families and appeared to have been swept up in something unusually sinister.

"A case like this, unfortunately, people can relate to a little bit more," Sternheimer said.

Prosecutors believe Nicholas was kidnapped by Hollywood and his cohorts in August 2000, presumably to put pressure on his half-brother Ben Markowitz to repay money he owed Hollywood for marijuana.

For the next few days, authorities said Nicholas partied with his captors and felt he wasn't in any danger. He was even left unattended by his kidnapers at one point but didn't try to leave or call anyone.

Prosecutors said Hollywood decided to get rid of Nicholas after learning from an attorney that he could face life in prison for kidnapping.

The witness list includes Ben Markowitz and the victim's parents, Susan and Jeff Markowitz, who declined to comment about the upcoming trial. Four co-defendants who already have been convicted, Hollywood's ex-girlfriend and the attorney who advised him are also on the list of possible witnesses.

Defense attorney James Blatt said Hollywood is innocent.

"There is no question Mr. Hollywood was not present at the time of the shooting, and we are going to prove he did not give any direct or indirect order to commit this murder," Blatt said.

For Hollywood, now 29, nearly a third of his life has either been spent in jail or on the run after the Markowitz slaying.

Though small in stature - he stands 5 feet, 5 inches - prosecutors said Hollywood once lived large supplying marijuana to dealers in the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles.

Prosecutors claim he enlisted Ryan Hoyt, one of his dealers, to kill Nicholas and delivered a gun and car for Hoyt to use in exchange for erasing his drug debt.

"Hoyt understood that he had to take care of the problem, i.e, that he was to kill Nicholas," Santa Barbara County Deputy District Attorney Joshua Lynn said in court documents. "Hoyt would have his \$1,200 debt to Hollywood extinguished if he did so."

Prosecutors said Hoyt hit Nicholas over the head with a shovel and then shot him nine times before burying him. Hikers discovered the body several days later.

Hoyt was found guilty of kidnapping and murder and sentenced to death.

Hollywood fled soon after the killing, stopping in Las Vegas and Colorado before heading to Canada. He was finally captured by authorities on a beach in Brazil, using a different name, and brought back to the United States.

The case stalled for years after it was learned that Deputy District Attorney Ron Zonen had turned over probation reports, police files and other documents to Nick Cassavetes, who directed "Alpha Dog" starring Bruce Willis, Sharon Stone and Justin Timberlake.

Zonen said in court documents that he gave the files to Cassavetes to help publicize the hunt for Hollywood.

Blatt, however, claimed Zonen acted unethically and the resulting movie demonized his client.

An appeals court removed Zonen, but the state's highest court and the U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled that he and the district attorney's office could stay on the case.

Still, Zonen's bosses assigned another prosecutor to try Hollywood.

Blatt also unsuccessfully tried to block the release of "Alpha Dog," arguing that a jury pool could be tainted by the film, hurting Hollywood's chances of a fair trial.

During a break this week in jury selection, Blatt said he was encouraged because only about 25

percent of the prospective panelists had seen the movie.

"The defense team is confident we will receive a fair trial," he said.