

Jesse James Hollywood convicted of first-degree murder and kidnapping

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Jesse James Hollywood was convicted this afternoon of first-degree murder and kidnapping for ordering the slaying of a San Fernando Valley teenager in 2000.

The Santa Barbara County Superior Court jury was given the case July 1 after a six-week trial and nine years after the kidnapping and murder of 15-year-old Nicholas Markowitz of West Hills. Hollywood was the alleged mastermind behind the slaying.

The crime was the model for the 2007 movie "Alpha Dog." Defense attorneys argued that the crime's notoriety tainted the testimony of witnesses and prejudiced the public against their client.

Hollywood could receive the death penalty.

Markowitz was beaten up, forced into a van near his home and driven to Santa Barbara by Hollywood and a couple of his friends. Prosecutors contended the aim was to hold Markowitz until his older half-brother Ben made good on a \$1,200 drug debt to Hollywood, an admitted marijuana dealer.

Defense attorneys said Markowitz was free to go shortly after the group arrived in Santa Barbara and that a Hollywood friend named Ryan Hoyt opted to kill the boy to win the defendant's approval. On July 1, prosecutor Joshua Lynn repeated his description of Hoyt as a lackey who would do anything - including commit murder -- for the more popular Hollywood.

"What would not elevate his status would be to do it against Hollywood's orders," he said. Hoyt has been sentenced to death. Graham Pressley, who dug Nicholas' grave in the Santa Barbara foothills, was sentenced as a juvenile and has been released.

In his testimony, Pressley said another accomplice, Jesse Ruge, contended that Hollywood had offered him \$2,000 to kill the boy, which he refused. Ruge was acquitted of murder but given a life sentence for aggravated kidnapping.

Attorney Alex Kessel contended Pressley fabricated the conversation to earn an early parole.

--Steve Chawkins in Santa Barbara