

THE OAKLAND PRESS

NBA stars appear in different court

Seven late-summer trial dates set for those accused in brawl at Pistons-Pacers game
Of The Daily Oakland Press

ROCHESTER HILLS - If practice makes perfect, Assistant Oakland County Prosecutor Paul Walton will be a master of the misdemeanor assault and battery case by the end of summer, after a judge on Friday set trial dates for seven cases related to the Nov. 19 brawl at The Palace.

The nine defendants remaining - five Indiana Pacers players and four of the fans - will be tried in July and August.

"Seven trials? If need be, yeah," Walton said after the hearing.

On Friday morning, 52nd-3 District Judge Lisa Asadoorian held brief hearings for all of the parties involved, simply scheduling their trial dates. The charges are misdemeanors that carry up to 93 days in jail.

The Pacers players - Ron Artest, who is suspended for the NBA season after charging into the stands after being hit with a cup; Anthony Johnson, who was congratulated by the judge for a key three-pointer against the Chicago Bulls this week; an injured David Harrison, who declined an offer by the judge to sit down; Jermaine O'Neal; and Stephen Jackson - will have their trials start on Aug. 1.

The five successive trials will be held one after another, if the players all demand a trial. Asadoorian said she hopes to have the cases concluded by the end of August.

However, the players might have to appear earlier to serve as witnesses in fans' cases.

The players reportedly returned immediately to their team for practice after the hearing. The Pacers, who struggled this season due to brawl-related suspensions and other injuries, play in Boston tonight for the first round of the

playoffs.

It was a simple procedure Friday, taking only about a quarter of an hour to complete before several cameras, reporters and about three dozen students from Stoney Creek High School in Rochester Hills, who were in the courthouse to watch various criminal proceedings.

Each player and fan - including David Wallace, brother of Pistons' fan favorite Ben Wallace - made brief individual appearances before Asadoorian, lasting only a minute or two. Artest was in court for only 55 seconds.

The players, dressed in suits and flanked by attorneys, smiled at the several cameras in the jury box after their individual appearances.

The fans will have their trials first, Asadoorian ruled.

First up on July 11 will be John Ackerman and William Paulson, fans who fought with players separately. Their lawyers, Geoffrey Fieger and Neil Rockind, requested their trial occur first, which Asadoorian approved.

Walton questioned that move, because the players could not be forced to testify.

"Good luck (getting them to testify)," Walton said. "They all have Fifth Amendment rights. I honestly figured he'd want to go to trial last."

Rockind said it was important for jurors to see the players. Both Paulson and Ackerman claim self-defense.

"The law allows you to defend yourself," Rockind said. "All they did when they saw these giants approaching, they defended themselves. They should be applauded. These jurors have to see these men are real-life giants."

Next up on July 15 is David Wallace, who lives out-of-state, and John Green, the accused cup-thrower. They will be tried together because neither sought a separate trial.

While Walton is ready for seven trials, he said he expects some might plead out. He has said his office will not push for jail time for defendants with no criminal records. Only Green has a criminal record.

Walton, a veteran prosecutor who also will be trying at least two murder trials

and will handle several armed robbery cases this summer, said it is all part of the job. His only conflict might come in the trial of Joshua Campbell, the 22-year-old Royal Oak man accused of killing Bloomfield Township police officer Gary Davis last May. That trial is set to go on July 7 before Oakland County Circuit Judge Rae Lee Chabot.

"I think we've got good evidence on them," he said, referring to the lengthy footage of the brawl, recording punches thrown and landed as well as cups tossed and beer spilled. "It takes up basically two months of my individual docket."

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