

Revised charges filed against O.J. Simpson, 3 co-defendants

By KEN RITTER
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LAS VEGAS (AP) - O.J. Simpson and three co-defendants were hit with new charges Wednesday in the alleged armed robbery of two sports memorabilia dealers last month in a Las Vegas hotel room.

Prosecutors increased to 12 the number of charges against Simpson, Clarence "C.J." Stewart, Michael McClinton and Charles Ehrlich, adding a second felony coercion charge against Simpson and two new coercion with a deadly weapon charges against Stewart, McClinton and Ehrlich.

The four men did not have to appear in Las Vegas Justice Court, where a judge overruled the objections of defense lawyers and allowed Clark County District Attorney David Roger to file the rewritten criminal complaint.

"I'll allow the second amended (complaint)," Justice of the Peace Joe M. Bonaventure said after Roger noted that prosecutors are allowed to amend complaints up to and during a preliminary hearing.

The memorabilia taken from the hotel room included football game balls signed by Simpson, Joe Montana lithographs, baseballs autographed by Pete Rose and Duke Snider, photos of Simpson with the Heisman Trophy, and framed awards and plaques, together valued at as much as \$100,000, according to police reports.

The coercion charges allege that the men threatened collectibles dealer Bruce Fromong and took his cell phone, while taking a baseball cap and sunglasses at gunpoint from memorabilia dealer Alfred Beardsley.

Simpson, Stewart, McClinton and Ehrlich are due for a preliminary hearing Nov. 8 on 11 felonies _ including kidnapping, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, conspiracy and coercion _ and one gross misdemeanor, conspiracy to commit a crime.

A kidnapping conviction alone could result in a sentence of life in prison with parole. Coercion carries the possibility of up to six years in Nevada state prison.

Ehrlich's lawyer, John Moran Jr., complained Wednesday that the revised complaint contained wholesale changes in prosecutors' theories of the crimes and was filed so late it put defense lawyers at a disadvantage.

"It violates due process and fair play for us, this far down the road with the preliminary hearing set, to have to come into the courtroom because the prosecutor decided to change the language of the complaint based on two purported people who have decided to flip in this case," Moran said.

Walter Alexander and Charles Cashmore were dropped from the complaint after pleading guilty Tuesday to reduced charges and agreeing to testify against the others.

According to their lawyers and police reports, Alexander, Simpson's golfing buddy, and Cashmore, a union laborer, disc jockey and bartender, can testify that guns were brought to the Palace Station casino hotel room where the aging football star went to retrieve items he said belonged to him.

Simpson, who lives in Miami, has maintained no guns were involved and he did not tell anyone to bring guns.

After learning of the new charges, Simpson's lawyer Yale Galanter said his client "is not guilty and we continue to say he is not guilty of any crime." Galanter added that he looked forward to cross-examining Alexander and Cashmore.

Stewart's lawyer, Jose Pallares, denied allegations in the revised complaint that Simpson and Stewart conspired to persuade the others to tell authorities that no guns were used in the Sept. 13 confrontation.

"We absolutely deny that he, A, helped plan this event, B, that he knew in advance that there would be any weapons, or that C, he saw a weapon present in the room," Pallares said outside the courtroom.

The complaint outlines two theories of kidnapping: one in which Simpson, Stewart, McClinton and Ehrlich are accused of using trickery to lure Fromong and Beardsley to a hotel room for an armed robbery, and one in which guns were displayed to prevent the dealers from leaving.

It also names Thomas Riccio, who is not charged in the case, and describes the role the California collectibles broker played in arranging the meeting between Simpson, Fromong and Beardsley.

Riccio's lawyer, Ryan Okabe of Redondo Beach, Calif., said Roger long ago promised Riccio immunity from prosecution. Riccio also has provided authorities with an audio tape he said he recorded during the encounter.

"Mr. Riccio has been telling the same thing from the beginning," Okabe said. "He was asked to arrange the meeting. He never knew guns or anything like that was going to be involved. He never once changed his story."

Riccio, Cashmore and Alexander are expected to be key witnesses for the prosecution at the preliminary hearing, when Bonaventure will decide whether there is enough evidence to send the case to trial in state court.

Alexander pleaded guilty Tuesday to felony conspiracy to commit robbery, and Roger said he would seek a suspended sentence, which could get Alexander probation instead of one to six years in prison

Cashmore pleaded guilty to felony accessory to robbery. He could get probation or up to one to five years in prison at sentencing, according to his agreement with the district attorney.

Sentencing for both men will come after an April 15 status check.