

Baltimore Crime Beat

Police and court news

Charges dropped against top target in 18-month Baltimore dogfighting investigation

By Justin Fenton
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Baltimore prosecutors abruptly dropped charges against one of the top targets in a major dogfighting investigation, after a judge ruled that they had failed to provide key information to his defense attorney.

Jovon Lee was one of 22 men indicted last December, following an 18-month investigation involving wiretaps and confidential informants into an alleged dogfighting ring with ties along the East Coast. Lee, 37, was alleged to be a "high-level" dogfighter and cocaine dealer, according to court records.

Over the course of the investigation, police seized 225 dogs, 50 puppies, 20 guns and items including treadmills made for dogs, chains, harnesses, steroids, bloodstained dogfighting rings and plastic bite sticks to pry apart dogs' jaws.

"I think we're all frustrated," said Katie Flory, chair of the mayor's animal abuse commission, which met Tuesday and discussed the charges being dropped. "As a commission, we feel that pets and people will continue to be in danger in our community until justice is served in this case. We encourage the Baltimore City state's attorney to refile charges in this case."

Julianne Brown, president of an organization called ReLove Animals and a member of the animal abuse commission, said Tuesday that observers were shocked at the decision to drop the charges.

"I don't think anyone really saw what happened coming," Brown said. "From the investigators' point of view, it was a pretty airtight case. Everybody did what they needed to do. This shouldn't have happened."

Judge Karen C. Friedman ruled Aug. 12 that prosecutors had failed to provide information about an expert witness and a newly developed witness to Lee's defense attorney, Kenneth Ravenell. The judge ordered that they couldn't be used in the case against Lee.

A trial was to have begun Monday, a delay of two days so Ravenell would have time to review 1,000 pages of wiretap information that he said had been provided to him just two business days before trial.

But Assistant State's Attorney Dana Middleton instead said she would be dropping the charges altogether.

Friedman expressed surprise at the move.

"I'm assuming if you were able to make an indictment, you're able to make a case even without the couple things I just suppressed," Friedman said. "But this is your case, ma'am."

The state's attorney's office declined to discuss the issue, releasing a statement in which it said, "We take animal cruelty cases very seriously, and this case is under review."

Ravenell declined to comment; in court filings he has challenged the allegations.

Charges against the other defendants remain pending, with trial dates set for November.

The investigation began in June 2013, and police and prosecutors held a news conference in late December 2014 to announce the charges. Authorities raided 15 city rowhouses, two Baltimore County properties and a compound in West Virginia.

According to court documents, authorities intercepted calls on Lee's phone in which he discussed the transportation and "possible fighting and schooling of dogs." Lee was allegedly recorded discussing the delivery of a dog from Mexico, and transporting dogs to West Virginia.

Prosecutors at the time of the indictment called the Baltimore-area operation an "unforgiving underworld" where dogs were trained to fight for entertainment and financial gain. Dogfight purses sometimes surpassed \$100,000, they said.

Lee's case had been severed from the others and set for a trial on Aug. 12. Middleton asked Friedman at the beginning of the hearing for a postponement. Friedman said Judge Wanda Heard, who assigned the case to Friedman, had previously made clear that no additional postponements in the case could be granted.

"I have my marching orders, and this needs to be tried," Friedman said.

Middleton continued to push for a delay. She argued that a new witness had been developed in July and provided a statement, and that he was unavailable due to illness. Middleton also sought a protective order to keep identity of the witness secret from the defense and public, and said the late request was justified because the witness had emerged only recently.

But Friedman said that with trial looming, Middleton had an obligation to turn over the witness' identity.

"At some point, the defense needs to know who this witness is, and the time has come, because trial is here," Friedman said.

Later in the hearing, Friedman said that the witness had been identified inadvertently in open court during a hearing for a co-defendant in the case. That made the request "moot," she said.

State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby has been speaking out recently over concerns about revealing witness information, saying there is a culture of intimidation in Baltimore.

Ravenell, with Lee seated next to him, also argued that prosecutors had failed to turn over key information over the course of several months. He said information should have been provided at an arraignment in January, but prosecutors dragged out the process.

Prosecutors intended to call a veterinarian expert on dogfighting, but Ravenell said they didn't lay out what testimony

the expert would give or what qualified him as an expert. Ravenell said that left him unable to find his own expert, who might have a different view of the evidence.

It's consistent about everything I've seen in this case. They just don't respond," Ravenell said. "There must be real sanctions, not just to Ms. Middleton but to the state's attorney's office, that this is not how you practice law."

Middleton outlined efforts to connect with Ravenell and provide discovery, and said prosecutors were "in no way intending on hiding the ball in this case."

"The state has acted in good faith," she said.

Friedman said there had been "significant discovery violations" in the case and suppressed the expert and the new witness. But instead of tossing out the wiretap evidence, she said she would give Ravenell extra time.

That's when Middleton interjected and said the charges would be dropped.

She said Friedman had "suppressed the evidence necessary for the state to proceed in this matter."

Friedman questioned why the exclusion of the expert and new witness would outweigh the 18 months of investigation on the case.

On Tuesday, Brown said animal advocates plan to keep closer tabs on future proceedings, and she said she "can't see the same situation happening again." But she said prosecutors should place a priority on re-filing charges against Lee.

"I think he needs to see his day in court," Brown said.

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