

A mixed verdict in road rage case

Man guilty of lesser offense, but not assault

BY KATIE WANG
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A Pennsylvania man involved in a road rage incident on the New Jersey Turnpike was convicted yesterday of a disorderly person's offense, but acquitted of the more serious aggravated assault charges he had faced.

The Essex County jury delivered the verdict shortly before 1 p.m. in a tense courtroom in Superior Court in Newark. The verdict means Paul Baker will be spared the five- to seven-year prison sentence that the state was seeking and instead will likely serve probation or a short jail sentence.

Baker sat composed as the jury foreman read the decision aloud, while his wife, Robin Baker, began to shake and cry silently in the courtroom. Across the aisle, Asante Adler, the woman who accused Baker of punching and kicking her, clutched her father's arm and let out a small sigh.

Afterward she said she had hoped Baker would have been convicted of the harsher charges, but was pleased he will have to take some responsibility for punching her in the eye after their cars brushed against each other during a lane merge on Sept. 20, 2003.

"I still have stitches, and going to the eye doctor will be a permanent part of my life now," said Adler, a 20-year-old toll booth worker from Jersey City.

Baker hugged his attorney Timothy R. Smith and then embraced his wife while she cried tears of relief.

"I'm glad it's all over," he said. "It's been two years. I just want to thank God and my attorney."

If he could relive that incident, he said, "I never would've gotten out of the car."

His wife, who has commuted to Newark from their Pocono-area home every day for the trial, said she had faith that the jury would return a favorable verdict, but it was just a matter of waiting for it. She expressed sympathy for Adler.

"We're sorry for her, and we pray for her healing," Robin Baker said.

Baker is scheduled to be sentenced by Superior Court Judge Thomas McCormack on Jan. 20.

The verdict closes the book on a routine lane merge that escalated into a road rage incident. Both Baker and Adler were heading toward Interchange 14 to Jersey City when they found themselves squeezing into the same lane on

the New Jersey Turnpike.

Baker said Adler cut him off, clipped his mirror and then verbally and physically attacked him. He admitted he punched her in the eye and knocked her to the ground but said he did in reaction to her punching him.

Adler accused Baker of throwing objects at her car and then attacking her after they got out of their cars to examine the damage.



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Adler and two other witnesses said Baker kicked her while she was on the ground. Baker denied that charge.

Their cars suffered minor if any damage. Over the course of two weeks, jurors in McCormack's courtroom sat and listened to two completely different versions of the incident — Adler's and Baker's. In order to convict Baker of aggravated assault, the jury had to decide if Baker meant to cause serious bodily harm to Adler.

Baker, a father of two, was remorseful on the witness stand, saying he didn't realize how severely damaged Adler's eye was. When Adler testified, she was emotional, tearing up when she recounted the incident and when she spoke of her injuries.

The case took two years to get to trial because Baker changed attorneys several times. He also rejected a plea offer by the state that would have landed him in prison for three years.

Linda Nevadomski, the assistant Essex County prosecutor who tried the case, said she plans to ask the judge to sentence Baker to a six-month jail sentence.

"I'm just assuming that it was a compromise verdict given it was such a severe injury," Nevadomski said. Baker's lawyer, Smith, said he does not think his client should serve any time in jail.

"I believed he was an incredibly just and kind person who was thrust into a bad situation and spontaneously reacted the only way he knew how," Smith said. "I never believed he had the intent to hurt anyone, including Miss Adler."

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State Police testified in court, however, that they could not find any evidence of any objects being thrown at Adler's car that night.