

Plea deal in soccer ref death: Man to serve 8-15 years



(Photo: Jessica J. Trevino, Detroit Free Press)

Bieniewicz was 44. He worked at the pediatric dialysis center at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor.

The recreational soccer player whose sucker punch killed referee John Bieniewicz during a game last summer in Livonia pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter today in Wayne County Circuit Court.

Bassel Saad, 36, of Dearborn will receive 8 to 15 years in prison as part of the plea agreement.

Bieniewicz died July 1, two days after he was punched by Saad in Livonia's Mies Park.

Saad had been facing a second-degree murder charge, and the trial was scheduled to begin Monday before Wayne County Circuit Judge Thomas Cameron in Detroit. If found guilty, he could have faced life in prison. Manslaughter is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Saad, a native of Lebanon, according to his attorney, Cyril Hall, is scheduled to be sentenced at 9 a.m. March 13, before Judge Cameron.

"I want you to understand that the offense that you are pleading guilty to today is a deportable

offense," Judge Timothy Kenny told Saad. "This plea today could have immigration consequences. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, your honor," Saad said.

Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Erika Tusar said that the agreement came after "intense negotiations."

Jury won't hear soccer player's criminal past at trial

In 2005, Saad was involved in another assault on a soccer field. According to the police and court records, Saad hit another player repeatedly in the head. He pleaded no contest to attempted assault and battery and was ordered to serve five days community service and 12 months probation.

Saad has three children and has worked for more than 10 years as an auto mechanic. Hall said that he doesn't know whether Saad will be deported.

"We are not here to litigate that particular controversy," Hall said.

Hall said that Saad is "distraught."

"He is very, very remorseful," Hall said. "He has been writing prayers out for several months. That's all he does. He talks about the (Bieniewicz) family first."

Kris Bieniewicz, the victim's widow, sat in the back of the courtroom but declined comment after the hearing. She spoke to the Free Press later in the day.

"My stomach was in knots," she said. "I didn't know how to feel. I don't know if I could explain how I felt."

She said she didn't know what to feel sitting in court.

"I don't know," she said. "I have mixed emotions. Do I think it's enough? No. At the same point in time, I knew there was a risk if it went to trial. There was a significant difference between Murder 2 and manslaughter. Manslaughter probably would have taken it down to 2 1/2 years. Murder 2 could have been up to life, but it probably would have been 20 plus."

The prosecutor asked her to approve the plea deal. Bieniewicz called it a difficult decision.

"Actually, (Saad) wanted seven," she said. "That's what the defense attorney came back to us with. They asked my opinion. I said I would really like nine, but if we had to go down to eight, I would. But I didn't want to go down to seven. Why 365 days made a difference? I don't know. But it did."

Bieniewicz has become an advocate for bills that would make assaulting a referee a felony. The bills are in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

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