

LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

Jury acquits horse trainer (6:30 p.m.)
By Lauren E. Toney/Sun-News reporter
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LAS CRUCES — With a smile, horse trainer Greg Collier placed his cowboy hat back on his head and prepared to exit the courtroom Saturday, freed of an extreme animal cruelty charge in the death of a 10-month-old colt.

Collier, 38, of Lubbock, Texas, was acquitted by jurors of the fourth-degree felony charge in a four-day trial before District Judge Stephen Bridgforth.

Jurors were given the option to consider a lesser misdemeanor charge of animal cruelty, but again were unable to reach a verdict. Bridgforth said 11 of the 12 jurors favored a guilty verdict on the lesser charge.

Although Collier appeared pleased as the verdict was read, he declined to comment on the outcome of the trial.

Defense attorney Lawrence Pickett said, however, that "after long years dealing with the case, justice has prevailed."

Nearly three years ago, Collier was accused of beating the thoroughbred colt to death in Chaparral.

Horse owner Kevin Williams of El Paso fought back tears Saturday after watching Collier and his family leave the courtroom.

"I just can't believe it," he said.

Earlier in the week, four eyewitnesses, including Williams, testified they watched Collier repeatedly strike the colt, named Cowboy, with the handle of a whip.

Because of the colt's bloodline, Williams said he hoped Cowboy would become a racehorse, and hired Collier to train it to lift its hooves for trimming.

Williams discovered Cowboy, a descendent of Alydar, dead the morning of Feb. 14, 2006 — the day after Collier conducted a three-hour training session with the yearling.

Richard Wellborn, senior trial prosecutor, said that while the verdict was disappointing, he didn't anticipate the District Attorney's Office giving up on the case.

"I don't expect that we will stop," he said of pursuing a retrial for the lesser animal cruelty charge.

"It's a low charge," Wellborn said. "But the stakes are high here. People care."

Mary Collier, the defendant's stepmother, said while exiting the courtroom that if the state chooses to retry Collier on the misdemeanor, the family "has the funds to fight it." Collier's father is president of American State Bank in Lubbock.

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