

Hopkins man's devastating punch ruled self-defense

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A Hennepin County jury agreed that a Hopkins man was defending himself when he threw a single, devastating punch outside an Eden Prairie pub in February 2010 that resulted in severe facial injuries to another man.

The jury found Brian Bielke, 26, not guilty of first- and third-degree assault, both felonies, Monday morning after five hours of deliberation. If convicted, Bielke, who sells parts for an auto dealership, faced up to seven years in prison. It's a well-deserved acquittal, said Bielke's attorney, Ryan Pacyga, but also serves as a cautionary tale in the aftermath of a scene that plays out in countless bars.

"This is a perfect example of how one punch can change your entire life," Pacyga said after the acquittal.

At the end of the weeklong trial, Assistant Hennepin County Attorney Dominick Mathews contended in closing arguments that Bielke was "a bully looking for a fight" when he threw the single right hook at Billy Mead, then 22, who had confronted Bielke's group of friends after they shouted derogatory comments at Mead's girlfriend outside the Prairie

Pub restaurant in Eden Prairie. Prosecutors say when Mead approached the group, Bielke shoved him, causing Mead to grab onto Bielke's shirt before he threw the punch that broke multiple bones in Mead's face and resulted in permanent facial injuries, requiring metal plates to hold his eye socket together.

Pacyga didn't dispute that Bielke caused serious injury, or that his friends started the confrontation by calling the woman names. However, the circumstances behind the punch were different. He said Mead approached the men, got in the face of one who backed down, then approached Bielke, who three times pushed him away and told him to go home before Mead grabbed his shirt, causing Bielke to throw the punch in self-defense. Mead turned and walked away afterward, and Bielke did not know the extent of the injuries until he was formally charged several months later.

"This is not an ethics class, this isn't a church, this is a criminal court, and the issue is not whether Brian and his friends should have acted differently; it's whether he acted in self-defense," Pacyga argued in court. "Who in the world expects that one punch can cause that type of damage?"

The jury favored Pacyga's argument. Mead and his family did not appear to be in the courtroom. Mathews declined to comment, but a statement released by the Hennepin County attorney's office said the office respects the verdict but disagrees with it.

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The acquittal came a month after 24-year-old Alexander Tuomisto pleaded guilty to first-degree assault and was sentenced to five years in prison for a single punch he threw in a fight outside a St. Michael bar in May 2010. The punch, thrown during a brawl, caused Adam Baker to strike his head on the ground. Baker lay in a coma for seven months before he died.

Bielke, who rejected two plea deals that required prison time before he went to trial, said that case was in the back of his mind as he awaited the jury's verdict. It was a battle that was worth it, he said, but one that he wishes never would have had to happen.

"It never was an assault, it was an act of self-defense with one very unlucky punch," he said. "But if I had the chance, I would apologize to him."

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