

'Wild Thing' Mitch Williams Secures \$1.5M Verdict in Case Against MLB Network

By Charles Toutant

Former Major League Baseball pitcher Mitch Williams was awarded \$1.5 million by a state court jury in Camden Tuesday in his breach of contract suit against MLB Network.

The network canceled Williams' broadcaster contract after media reports said he hurled profanity and threats at an umpire and players during games of his son's youth baseball team. But Williams maintained that the reports of improper behavior were completely false, and asked the jury to reject the network's claim that he had violated the "morals clause" in his contract.

The jury ordered the network to pay Williams \$1,565,333 after an 11-day trial before Superior Court Judge Michael Kassel. Williams' suit also brought defamation claims against Gawker Media, which operated a sports-themed website called Deadspin. That site is now owned by Univision. Gawker and Williams reached a confidential settlement in 2015 over his claims that Deadspin defamed him with articles accusing



Mitch Williams

him of misconduct at his son's baseball games, according to court documents.

Williams, whose nickname is "Wild Thing," ended his professional baseball career in 1997 after 11 years, in which he played with six different teams. His career included stints with the Texas Rangers, Chicago Cubs, Philadelphia Phillies, Houston Astros, California Angels and Kansas City Royals. In 2009 he was hired by MLB Network as a studio analyst. That job paid \$650,000 in 2015, \$625,000 in 2014 and \$575,000 in 2013, the suit states.

His troubles began May 10, 2014, when he was attending his 10-year-old son's game at a tournament in Maryland. According to the complaint, Williams said he was acting as first base coach when an umpire began arguing with him and then ejected him from the game. But after the game was over, tournament officials determined Williams was not at fault and banned the umpire from the tournament for inciting an altercation, the suit claims.

On the following day, Deadspin published an article headlined

“Mitch Williams Ejected from Child’s Baseball Game for Arguing, Cursing.” The article stated that Williams was ejected after launching a profanity-laced tirade in which he called an umpire a “mother-fucker” in front of the children. The article attributed its account to unnamed persons who were at the game, according to his complaint.

Then, on May 16, 2014, Deadspin published a second article about Williams’ conduct at the same tournament, stating that he called one of the opposing team’s players a “pussy,” called one of its coaches a “squirrelly little teapot,” and made harassing comments about the appearance of the opposing team’s players. The article also said Williams instructed one of his own team’s players to strike one of the other team’s players in the head with a “beanball,” his complaint said. Williams maintains that the website’s allegations about his conduct are completely untrue.

The allegedly defamatory postings have been taken down from the Deadspin website.

On the day the second Deadspin article was posted, a scheduled appearance by Williams on MLB Network was canceled, and he was

questioned by network officials about the allegations. Williams told the network the articles were untrue, but he was placed on a 30-day suspension. The network said in statements to USA Today and the New York Daily News that Williams volunteered to take a leave of absence, which he says was incorrect and cast him in a negative light.

On May 19, Deadspin ran a third article about Williams, which said he was “slurring his words” during appearances on MLB Network. He denied that allegation. Then, on June 13, 2014, MLB Network offered to reinstate Williams if he agreed not to coach or attend any youth sports events for one year. A proposed addendum to his contract also ordered him to abstain from using social media and to attend “therapeutic counseling.” Williams, who has five children, including two with autism, refused, and on June 26, the network terminated his contract, which had an unpaid balance of roughly \$2 million.

Williams’ suit said MLB violated a clear mandate of public policy by interfering in a parent’s right to the care and companionship of his child. Williams’ suit accused MLB of breach of contract, breach of the

covenant of good faith and fair dealing, negligent misrepresentation, defamation, intentional interference with prospective economic advantage, invasion of privacy, violation of the Conscientious Employee Protection Act and violation of the Law Against Discrimination.

“This verdict completely vindicates Mitch Williams, who was viciously defamed by anonymous sources on the internet and then had MLB Network breach its contract with him. Justice was served today,” his attorney, Laura Carlin Mattiacci of Console Mattiacci Law in Moorestown, said in a statement. She represented Williams at trial along with the firm’s Rahul Munshi.

MLB Network was represented by Peter Hughes and Ryan Warden of Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart in Morristown. They did not respond to requests for comment. MLB Network said in a statement, “While we respect the jury’s decision, we disagree with their conclusion and are reviewing all of our legal options. We will have no further comment at this time.” ■

Contact the reporter at ctoutant@alm.com. On Twitter: @ctoutantnjlj.