



THE FLORIDA SENATE
SPECIAL MASTER ON CLAIM BILLS

Location
402 Senate Office Building

Mailing Address
404 South Monroe Street
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DATE	COMM	ACTION
12/18/14	SM	Favorable
3/24/15	JU	Favorable

December 18, 2014 (Rev. 3/24/15)

The Honorable Andy Gardiner
President, The Florida Senate
Suite 409, The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

Re: **SB 38** – Senator Joyner
Relief of Dennis Darling and Wendy Darling

AMENDED SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT

THIS IS AN UNOPPOSED CLAIM BILL BY DENNIS DARLING AND WENDY DARLING, AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ESTATE OF THEIR SON, DEVAUGHN DARLING, FOR \$1.8 MILLION, BASED ON A FINAL JUDGMENT SUPPORTED BY A SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE DARLINGS AND THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY (FSU) AS COMPENSATION FOR THE DEATH OF DEVAUGHN WHICH OCCURRED DURING PRESEASON FOOTBALL DRILLS IN 2001.

CURRENT STATUS:

On February 16, 2009, an administrative law judge from the Division of Administrative Hearings, serving as a Senate Special Master, held a de novo hearing on a previous version of this bill, SB 32 (2008). After the hearing, the judge issued a report containing findings of fact and conclusions of law and recommended that the bill be reported favorably. The special master report was last updated in 2011 when the bill was filed as SB 14 for the 2012 session. The 2012 report is attached as an addendum to this report.

Due to the passage of time since the hearing, the Senate President reassigned the claim to me, Barbara M. Crosier. My responsibilities were to review the records relating to the claim

bill, be available for questions from members, and determine whether any changes have occurred since the hearing, which if known at the hearing might have significantly alter the findings or recommendations in the previous report.

According to counsel for the parties, no changes have occurred since the hearing which might have altered the findings and recommendations in the report.

Additionally, SB 14 (2012) the prior claim bill on which the special master report is based is effectively identical to the claim bill filed for the 2015 Legislative Session.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara M. Crosier
Senate Special Master

cc: Senator Joyner
Deborah Brown , Secretary of the Senate
Counsel of Record



THE FLORIDA SENATE
SPECIAL MASTER ON CLAIM BILLS

Location

402 Senate Office Building

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404 South Monroe Street
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DATE	COMM	ACTION
12/1/11	SM	Favorable

December 1, 2011

The Honorable Mike Haridopolos
President, The Florida Senate
Suite 409, The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

Re: **SB 14 (2012)** – Senator Arthenia Joyner
Relief of Dennis Darling and Wendy Darling

SPECIAL MASTER’S FINAL REPORT

THIS IS AN UNOPPOSED CLAIM BY DENNIS DARLING AND WENDY DARLING, AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ESTATE OF THEIR SON, DEVAUGHN DARLING, FOR \$1.8 MILLION, BASED ON A COURT-APPROVED SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE DARLINGS AND THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY TO COMPENSATE FOR DEVAUGHN’S DEATH, WHICH OCCURRED DURING PRESEASON FOOTBALL DRILLS.

FINDINGS OF FACT:

On February 26, 2001, while participating in “mat drills” in the Moore Athletic Center at Florida State University (FSU), Devaughn Darling collapsed and died. Two autopsies were performed, but found “no definite morphologic cause of death.” The autopsies, however, did find evidence of distended blood vessels “engorged” with sickled blood cells in several organs of his body.

It was determined months before, during Devaughn’s initial physical examination upon entering FSU as a freshman, that he had sickle cell trait. Sickle cell trait is the inheritance of one gene of sickle hemoglobin and one for normal hemoglobin. In contrast, sickle cell anemia is caused by the inheritance of two sickle cell genes and is a much more serious condition with many adverse health consequences. In both the trait and the

anemia, blood cells can distort (changing from a round shape to a crescent shape) and become less flexible. The cells are then less efficient at transporting oxygen to the muscles and organs of the body. The distortion and inflexibility of the blood cells impairs their ability to pass through the smaller blood vessels.

Sickle cell trait occurs most commonly in persons of African descent and occurs in approximately 8 percent of African-Americans. It occurs in persons of other ancestry as well, but less frequently.

Sickle cell trait is not treatable, but usually does not compromise the health of the individual with the trait. However, the trait has been linked to the deaths of 13 high school and college football players and a larger number of U.S. Army recruits. In all cases, the deaths occurred during extreme exertion during training. The sickling of blood cells during extreme exertion is brought on by four factors: (1) deficiency in the concentration of oxygen in arterial blood, (2) increase in body acids, (3) hyperthermia in muscles, and (4) red cell dehydration. It was established before 2001 that sickle cell trait, when combined with other stress factors such as high temperature and dehydration, can result in "sickle cell collapse" and death during extreme exertion.

The medical issues related to athletes with sickle cell trait caused the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to adopt guidelines in 1998 regarding athletes with sickle cell trait. The guidelines contain a statement that, "There is controversy in the medical literature concerning whether sickle cell trait increases the risk of exercise-associated sudden death," but recommended that all athletes (1) avoid dehydration and acclimatize gradually to heat and humidity, (2) condition gradually for several weeks before engaging in exhaustive exercise regimens, and (3) refrain from extreme exertion during acute illness, especially one involving fever.

Mat drills are the name given to the pre-season conditioning drills for FSU football players conducted in February of each year. They consist of three different physical activities conducted at separate "stations" which the players rotate through. There is a station which mostly involves running sprints, an "agility station" which involves running through ropes and around cones, and a station which involves drills

on a large wrestling mat. The football players are divided into three groups, according to their size. As soon as the players in a group finish the drills at one station, they move together to another station. The stations are run simultaneously, beginning and ending at the same time. The entire exercise takes about 90 minutes to complete.

FSU football coaches are assigned to a single station for the entire 90-minute period. Trainers are also divided between stations. The coaches and trainers watch the players closely at all times. The coaches grade the players' performances in the drills, record the grades, and discuss the grades with the players at a meeting of all of the players after all the drills have been completed.

The mat drills had a reputation for being extremely challenging because of the physical exertion required. Devard Darling, Devaghn's twin brother and also a FSU football player, said the older players teased the freshmen about what was in store for them when February came around and the mat drills started. The players were awakened at 5:30 a.m. and started the mat drills soon after getting up. Trash cans were set out for the specific purpose of providing receptacles for the players to vomit into.

At the mat drill station, the players formed in groups, usually four abreast, at one end of the mat. There would usually be three or four lines with four players in each line. The seniors and starters formed the first lines; freshmen formed the back lines. At the oral commands or hand signals of the coaches, the players would throw themselves onto the mat on their chests and stomachs, spin quickly to the left and right, jump onto their feet, move laterally, sprint forward to the middle of the mat, run in place, sprint to the end of the mat, run in place, and then sprint forward to a matted wall. The number of times the players performed any single maneuver on the mat and the sequence of maneuvers would vary. After completing the drill, the four players would return to the end of the formation to await their turn to go again.

If a player did not perform a drill correctly, or "fell out" during a mat drill, all four players would be sent back to redo the drill. They redid the drill immediately while the other lines of players waited. Because of the inexperience of the freshmen, they

would usually have to do more “go backs” than the older players.

The room where the mat drill took place was relatively small, about 120 feet by 49 feet. Devard Darling said the room was always hot and muggy. In his statement to a police investigator, the head trainer said Devaughn was taken from the mat room to the training room after he collapsed because the mat room was “very hot.”

The parties disputed whether the players were given reasonable access to water. The head trainer said the players were told to drink water before the mat drills began and there were water fountains in the hallways not far from the mat area. The players, however, said it was impossible to get a drink of water during the drills and nearly impossible to get water in the short time when the players moved to a new station. There was no designated “water break” during the 90-minute mat drills. Furthermore, a high-pressure, hurry-up atmosphere was created that discouraged and impeded the players from going for water. The more persuasive evidence established that it was difficult for the players to get water, many players did not get water, and players that managed to get water got less than they wanted.

On February 26, 2001, the mat drill was the last station for Devaughn. Four coaches and seven trainers (including student trainers) were present. The written statements provided by FSU's coaches and non-student trainers were identical in stating that they saw “nothing out of the ordinary” in Devaughn's level of fatigue or behavior leading up to his collapse at the conclusion of the mat drill. The repeated use of the phrase “nothing out of the ordinary” in these statements strongly suggests that there had been some discussion, and perhaps even instructions given, about what should be said. The statements of several players and a couple of the student trainers were quite different. Some players said Devaughn told them he couldn't see, that they saw him clutching his chest, and that he was having trouble getting up off the mat and sometimes could not get up without help from other players. One student trainer said that, instead of diving forward onto the mat like the others, Devaughn would just fall forward “like a board.” Another student trainer said Devaughn would sometimes attempt to stand, but would fall back down.

Devaughn's line of four players was made to go back more than once and was the last to finish the drill. Devaughn was not able to get into position fast enough to go back with his line and finished the drill by himself. He was the last player to finish the last station.

When Devaughn finished the mat drill, he fell to his knees with his head resting against the wall. The head trainer and one of the players carried Devaughn to the edge of the mat. His pulse was irregular and his breathing was shallow and erratic. Devaughn was then carried downstairs to the training room where he was given oxygen and surrounded with ice packs to reduce his body temperature. Soon thereafter, Devaughn stopped breathing and the training staff called 911. Policemen arrived first and brought a defibrillator which was used on Devaughn in an attempt to get his pulse going again. When the ambulance arrived, Devaughn was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Beginning in 2002, FSU changed the way it conducted the mat drills. Now, a water break and short rest are provided to the players when they are between stations and an emergency medical crew and ambulance are standing by to render medical assistance to a player if needed.

LITIGATION HISTORY:

The Claimants sued FSU in the circuit court for Leon County in 2002. The case was successfully mediated and the parties entered into a Stipulated Settlement Agreement which called for payment to Dennis and Wendy Darling, as representatives of the estate of Devaughn Darling, the sovereign immunity limit of \$200,000 and for FSU to support the passage of a claim bill for an additional \$1.8 million. The agreement does not contain an admission or denial of liability by FSU. The circuit court entered a Final Judgment approving the settlement agreement on June 28, 2004.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

The claim bill hearing was a *de novo* proceeding for the purpose of determining, based on the evidence presented to the Special Master, whether FSU is liable in negligence for the death of Devaughn Darling and, if so, whether the amount of the claim is reasonable.

FSU had a duty to conduct its football training activities in a manner that did not unreasonably endanger the health of the players beyond the dangers that are inherent in the game of

football. FSU breached that duty when its employees, both coaches and trainers, created a situation with the mat drills that was unreasonably dangerous for all players, but especially for a player with sickle cell trait. The situation was unreasonably dangerous because it involved extreme physical exertion in high temperature without reasonable access to water and without adequate opportunity to rest. Furthermore, the FSU coaching and training staff did not respond reasonably to signs of extreme physical distress that Devaughn was exhibiting.

I am not persuaded by the statements of the coaches and trainers that Devaughn's fatigue was "not out of the ordinary." No coach or trainer noted that other players were grasping their chests, falling over "like boards," and unable to stand without help. The evidence shows that Devaughn was showing signs of more intense physical exhaustion than other players and was probably suffering from sickle cell collapse during the course of the mat drill. However, only his final collapse at the end of the mat drill was considered by the training staff to be significant enough to warrant their intervention and assistance. It was negligent for the coaches and trainers not to intervene and render assistance to Devaughn earlier than they did. Instead, the coaches worsened his physical distress by making him repeat the drill without rest or water.

Devaughn's death was foreseeable because FSU knew that Devaughn had sickle cell trait, knew that sickle cell trait was linked to the deaths of football players during preseason training, and was aware of the sports medicine literature and NCAA guidelines about extreme exertion, heat, dehydration, and lack of adequate pre-conditioning as factors that contribute to incidents of exercise-associated sudden death.

The sickling of blood cells in a person with sickle cell trait begins quickly with extreme exertion, but is relieved quickly by rest. Providing water or sports drinks and short periods of rest during the mat drills, both of which are provided to players during a football game, is all that was needed to avoid the tragedy of Devaughn Darling's death.

The amount of the claim is fair and reasonable.

SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT – SB 14 (2012)

December 1, 2011

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ATTORNEY'S FEES:

Claimant's attorneys agree to limit their fees to 25 percent of any amount awarded by the Legislature as required by s. 768.28(8), F.S.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY:

A claim bill for these Claimants was first filed in the 2007 Session, and a bill has been filed each session thereafter.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

For the reasons set forth above, I recommend that Senate Bill 14 (2012) be reported FAVORABLY.

Respectfully submitted,

Bram D. E. Canter
Senate Special Master

cc: Senator Arthenia Joyner
Debbie Brown, Interim Secretary of the Senate
Counsel of Record