

Former Trojan pleads not guilty

By **TED SULLIVAN**
Bozeman, Mont., Daily Chronicle Staff Writer

One after the other, John Lebrum and Branden Miller pleaded innocent Tuesday to charges that they kidnapped and killed Jason Wright. Miller, from Milwaukee, Wis., played basketball at Colby Community College. He transferred to Montana State after the 2003-2004 season. Miller started 27 of 28 games for the basketball team in 2004-05, his first year at the school. He was the team's third-leading scorer at 10.8 points a game when he became academically ineligible and was dismissed last Dec. 6.

"How do you plea to count one, deliberate homicide?" District Judge Mike Salvagni asked the men during separate court appearances. "Not guilty," they responded. "How do you plea to count two, aggravated kidnapping?" Salvagni asked them.

"Not guilty," they responded. "How do you plea to count three," tampering with evidence, Salvagni asked them.

"Not guilty," they responded. Former Montana State University athletes Lebrum and Miller, both 22, wore suit jackets, ties, collared shirts, slacks and dress shoes during their court appearances.

They had handcuffs and ankle bracelets on underneath their clothing. They sat down next to their two defense attorneys during their hearings.

Lebrum and Miller told the judge they understood the accusations against them. They said they understood their rights. And they said they had no reason not to enter a plea.

The judge also told them they could be sentenced to death. "Do you understand that?" Salvagni asked them.

"Yes, sir," they responded. Officials had extra security in the courtroom.

Everyone who entered had to pass through a metal detector. Sheriff's deputies also searched bags and purses that people carried with them.

Once inside the courtroom, a security camera near the judge's bench recorded the defendants and everyone sitting in the gallery.

About 15 law-enforcement officers also provided security. Two deputies stood behind Lebrum and Miller, another nearby and another at the doorway. Police officers, wearing street clothes, were also there.

Family members of the defendants and of Wright's sat in the courtroom. Many attorneys were also there to watch the proceedings.

Miller, a former basketball player, and Lebrum, a former football player, are accused of killing Wright, a suspected cocaine dealer, on June 23 west of Bozeman.

They are accused of kidnapping Wright, 26, destroying evidence of the homicide and abandoning Wright's Chevrolet Tahoe in Belgrade.

Miller previously told detectives that Lebrum, known as "Freak," had called him early that Friday morning and wanted a ride to Perkins Restaurant on West Main Street, according to court records.

Wright was inside the restaurant. The two men waited outside.

When Wright came outside, Lebrum hit him in the head and loaded him into the back seat of Wright's Tahoe. Lebrum then drove the Tahoe west on Huffine Lane. Miller drove his own car in the other direction.

Ten hours later, Wright was found dead in MSU's agricultural field just west of Bozeman. Three days later, Lebrum and Miller wiped down Wright's Tahoe with

bleach and ditched the Tahoe in Belgrade.

Miller later admitted to having had some of Wright's belongings, which he said he threw in a Dumpster near MSU.

Handguns, one the same caliber as the weapon that killed Wright, were also found in a locker at MSU's Brick Breeden Fieldhouse.

The locker holding the guns was labeled "1 Wilson." Jacques Wilson, a current MSU basketball player, wears jersey No. 1.

Gallatin County sheriff's investigators have so far declined to disclose who shot Wright and what that person's motive might have been. Court records that may have that information have also been temporarily sealed.

Lebrum and Miller were arrested and charged on June 29.

In court Tuesday, Gallatin County Attorney asked the judge to hold both men in Gallatin County's jail on \$1 million bail.

Lebrum's defense attorney, Al Avignone, and Miller's defense attorney, Peter Ohman, didn't object. They said they may ask the judge to reduce bail at a future date.

The judge also asked defense attorneys whether they were qualified to represent their defendants in death penalty cases.

Lebrum's attorneys, Avignone and John Hud, told the judge they were qualified to defend their client. Miller's attorneys, Ohman and Randi Hood, also told the judge they were qualified to work death penalty cases.

After the hearings, Wright's family members were escorted out of the courtroom first, separately from the rest of the public. The remaining people in the packed courtroom then exited.

Ted Sullivan is at tsullivan@dailychronicle.com

Colby Free Press contributed to this story



ANITA POWELL/ Contributed photo

Sweet Thunder pitcher Logan Wark delivered one to the plate with Tara Powell catching during the state tournament last weekend in Topeka. Jordan Krzycki is on third and Lindsay Frahm at shortstop. Sweet Thunder was eliminated from play after two losses.

Sweet Thunder places in top 10

The Colby Sweet Thunder 16 and younger softball team gave great effort in extreme temperatures last weekend at State in Topeka.

They run-ruled Topeka Lady Sixers, 20-0, Friday.

In their second game against the Wellington Twisters, the Thunder kept them scoreless with a two-run

lead until the third and fourth innings, when errors and a hitting streak gave the Twisters an 8-3 lead. Thunder battled back, but lost 8-6 when time ran out.

The Saturday evening game against Valley Center Twisters, Sweet Thunder trailed 1-0 after the first inning but tied it in the sixth.

With the clock already run out, the Twisters were unable to get a run in as Twisters won 2-1.

Thunder finished in the top 10 of 22 teams entered and ends their season with a 22-6 record. Team coaches are Joe Anderson and Susan Wark.

O'Neal becomes oldest player

KANSAS CITY (AP) — John Jordan "Buck" O'Neil never got a free pass in life.

The grandson of a man brought to this continent a slave, O'Neil moved to Kansas City to avoid racial persecution in the Deep South. He played baseball during an era of segregation, and earlier this year was denied entry into the National Baseball Hall of Fame by a special 12-member panel.

It figures that on Tuesday, when the 94-year-old stepped into the batter's box during a minor league all-star game, nobody could quibble over an intentional walk. He surpassed 83-year-old Jim Eriotes, who struck out in a minor league game in South Dakota earlier this month.

Golf benefits wrestling

The Colby Community College wrestling team is sponsoring a four-person golf scramble starting at 11 a.m., Friday at Colby Country Club. All proceeds will go toward helping the wrestling program.

Lady Trojans honored for grades

ATLANTA — Colby Community College's women basketball team was recognized for its efforts off the court.

The Women's Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) announced its 2005-2006 Academic Top 25 Team Honor Roll Junior College/Community College.

The awards recognize teams throughout the nation that have the highest grade point averages (GPA)

for the 2005-2006 season based upon nominations submitted by WBCA-member coaches.

Colby not only appears for the first time on the WBCA Academic Top 25 Team Honor Roll since 2002, but they take the number one seed.

Head coach Tom Stephens takes home the top ranking for the first time and hopes to start a trend with the success. The Lady Trojans won the 2006 Region VI Championship

and finished the season with an overall record of 32-5.

"It was our first year to go to the national tournament and the kids were really focused and had good habits on and off the floor," Stephens said.

"It is my pleasure to recognize each of these distinguished women's basketball programs that have gone above and beyond excellence on the court," said WBCA Chief Executive Officer Beth Bass.

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Please welcome Dr. Vaidya and his family to Hays!

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