

CONSPIRACY TRIAL BEGINS FOR BEST FRIENDS GANG

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Tuesday, October 3, 1995

Author: DAVID MCKAY Free Press Staff Writer

Acknowledging they would partly rely on testimony from a "killing machine" who helped lead Detroit's homicidal **Best Friends gang**, federal prosecutors launched a **conspiracy** case Monday against eight alleged **gang** members.

The **trial** of seven men and one woman before U.S. District Judge Avern Cohn is expected to use almost 100 witnesses and last two months. The 25-count indictment includes charges of intentional killings, drug trafficking, firearms violations and **conspiracy**.

The case started in 1992 with indictments that described a trafficking operation that started small in the mid-1980s and grew to become a large-scale, multistate cocaine ring that prosecutors say killed to remove competitors and to keep its members in line.

In an opening statement Monday, Assistant U.S. Attorney F. William Soisson described two-man hit teams of men who switched roles between driver and shooter -- trusting and bonding in their crimes.

He admitted that one of his witnesses was a "killing machine" who just last week withdrew from the **trial** by pleading guilty and avoiding a possible death penalty.

Stacey Culbert, said to have killed at least nine people, agreed to cooperate with the prosecution in exchange **for** imprisonment of no more than 50 years to life.

Defendant Edward Dale is alleged to have driven Culbert, the trigger man on May 9, 1992, when three men and a 3-year-old girl were shot on an east-side Detroit porch. Among the victims was Alfred Austin, a **Best Friends** member who the ringleaders feared was about to cooperate with law enforcement authorities.

But some of those witnesses are too corrupt to be believed, defense attorneys said in opening statements.

David Steingold, Dale's attorney, told the jury that federal prosecutors had made "unconscionable deals" with former defendants willing to finger others to avoid execution. Attorney Steven Fishman, representing Thomas (K.O.) Carr, promised jurors there won't be enough evidence to convict.

Carla Johnson, Curtis Withers' attorney, said, "Those witnesses are lying" about her client's involvement with cocaine. Attorneys **for** Patrice Ann Boddie, Gene Polk and John Gordon also attacked the prosecution's case.

Other defendants are Ernest Brown and Donald Jackson, whose attorneys deferred making opening statements.

Others who were indicted are dead or have pleaded guilty and will testify in exchange **for** prison instead of a possible death penalty.

The **trial** is to resume today.

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 3B

Index Terms: TRIAL; BEST FRIENDS

Record Number: 9501310108

Copyright (c) 1995 Detroit Free Press