

IN THE CROWN COURT AT BRISTOL

Mrs Justice May

19 November 2024

R

-v-

ANTONY SNOOK

Sentencing Remarks

Last Friday, the jury convicted you of 2 counts of murder. In returning those verdicts, the jury were sure that you intentionally assisted in the killing of Mason Rist and Max Dixon on 27 January this year.

How the killings happened

The killings occurred against a backdrop of long-standing ill-will and friction between minority elements in the neighbouring districts of Hartcliffe and Knowle in Bristol. At about 10.07 on the evening of Saturday 27 January three youths, hooded and masked, each carrying a large machete or killer zombie type weapon, went into the front garden of an address in Hartcliffe and attacked it, throwing bricks and large stones, appearing to challenge whoever was inside to come out. The attack broke every front window and injured a woman inside. She was in there alone with her young son at the time. The attack was captured on a CCTV camera positioned on the front of the house. The three attackers were believed to have come from Knowle. To-date none of the three have been identified or apprehended.

You were a friend of the family living in that house, and of the woman who had been injured. You were returning from a trip to Swindon when you learnt of the attack and you arrived at the house in Hartcliffe at around 10.45m. Within 5 minutes you left with two armed boys on board, picking up another two shortly afterwards. For reasons which are impossible to fathom, you lent yourself and your Audi Q2 car to a mission into Knowle to exact revenge. It seems unlikely that it was your idea; more probably you were asked and agreed to take a posse of armed teenagers up to Knowle to find those believed to be responsible. The boys you took were aged 14, 15, 16 and 17. The three younger ones had long knives, two of which were recovered and exhibited at trial; the 17-year old had a baseball bat. The recovered knives were truly fearsome – one a machete with a 48cm blade, the other a killer zombie type, black with a 51cm partially notched blade ending in a sharp slender point. It is an offence to sell such knives in this country.

In convicting you of murder the jury plainly rejected your account of taking the four boys to a safe house, of not knowing they had weapons. The jury were sure that you knew what the teenagers in your car were up to, and assisted them in doing it. You all went hunting for victims around the streets of Knowle – sharking as the prosecution put it. You would have experienced the atmosphere in that car, felt the mad, chaotic bloodlust of the four armed teens, yet on you went.

Mason and Max were simply and tragically in the wrong place at the wrong time; they had had nothing whatsoever to do with the earlier attack on the address in Hartcliffe, or with any strife between the neighbouring districts. They happened to be on Ilminster Ave when you drove by. The first time you drove past, seeing Max, you went on up and turned, next time coming down you saw Mason with Max coming out of Mason's front gate, so you turned again, this time stopping beside them to let the four armed teens out. It took those four boys 33secs to chase and stab both Mason and Max. You followed the group along the road in your car and picked them up afterwards, the headlights of your car lighting up Mason, by then fatally injured, as you turned to speed away. All of this was captured by the CCTV camera on the front of Mason's home. It is profoundly distressing viewing.

Mason had two fatal wounds, one 21cm deep to his front, the other to his back; Max received one fatal wound to his back. The wounds to both boys allowed them to carry on running for a short time but in each case the internal damage which had been caused was un-survivable, the blood loss too great. Members of the public, police and paramedics did all they could; the boys were rushed to hospital but could not be saved. They both died shortly afterwards.

Mason and Max

At trial, Mason and Max, the boys they were, their families and how much they meant to them, were present only in the background, though never forgotten. This morning the court has at last been able to learn more about the two boys whose tragic deaths occasioned this trial. Their mothers and families, who have attended with such dignity and grace in the public gallery over the past weeks and months, have told us about their boys and about the terrible shock and pain of losing them.

Mason, 15, and Max 16 had been best friends for a long time. Nikki Knight, Mason's mum, told of what fun Mason was, after his father's death in COVID Mason became her confidante, she could tell him anything. Now she is alone at home; she hasn't been able to go into his room. She can't sleep, is frightened by any noise and is just so lonely without him. Mason's older sister, Chloe, spoke of how special and important Mason was, the joker of the family, a kind sweet boy, her best friend. She is a different mother to her own children now, fearful for them, no longer the fun outgoing mother she was and expected to be.

Leanne Eklund, Max's mum, told us of Max's big character, his happy, joyful approach to life, how kind and caring he was, so popular amongst his friends. She can't go back to work as she is employed at Max's school, she is visited constantly by thoughts of his death and fears that she failed to protect him. Kayleigh, Max's older sister, told us how much she had looked forward to being with him and supporting him through life, all that now taken away.

These were two good boys from loving homes with their whole lives in front of them. Best friends who went out together for a walk on a Saturday night and never came home again. No parent should have to worry about their child going out on a weekend evening. Nor face the burning sense of unfairness of an attack on these two boys when they had no part at all in what was driving the violence.

Nothing can undo the dreadful events of that night last January. Nothing can bring Mason and Max back. No sentence which this court passes can lessen the sense of loss and grief caused to their families.

Random, deadly violence like this hits at the heart of communities, leaving all residents feeling vulnerable. People should be able to feel safe and secure in the place where they live. The shock of such vicious weapons in young hands causing deaths on a residential street affects everyone in the community, even those who did not know Mason, Max or their families.

Your role

You assisted the armed boys by driving them to and around Knowle, stopping to let them out and picking them up afterwards. You knew that they were carrying weapons, and I am sure that you knew there were knives of some kind, even if you had not seen precisely what they were. I do not find that you intended the four children in your car to kill the two children on the pavement, but with knives in their hands and revenge in their minds, a very serious outcome was a certainty and death, or not, a matter of chance.

You were the only adult. There were multiple opportunities for you to have stopped this madness, to have taken the boys back, to have locked the car doors so they could not get out, or to have refused to leave Hartcliffe with them in the first place. There has been no evidence of any mental deficiency or disorder which may have compromised your thinking, no indication of any influence or pressure brought to bear on you. How you came to agree to take those four boys to Knowle remains unexplained. You were certainly no friend to them when you did so. The consequences of your refusal to act like a responsible adult, like the adult who can say "No", has resulted not only in the deaths of two innocent boys, but will be reflected also in the sentences which the court will be obliged to pass on the four teenagers, three of them still children, next month.

The application of Schedule 21 of the Sentencing Act 2020

By law, the only sentence for murder is a life sentence; here two life sentences which will run concurrently, side by side. Schedule 21 to the Sentencing Act 2020 requires me to consider the length of term you must serve before you can be considered for release.

I have considered carefully whether the circumstances as applied to your part in the murders of Mason and Max are so exceptionally serious as to fall within paragraph 2 of Schedule 21, necessitating a whole life term. The evidence at trial, as I have already indicated, did not point to your having masterminded the revenge mission to Knowle. Had I been sure that it was your idea, that you had organised and put together that posse of armed teenagers, then there is no question but that a whole life term would have been merited. As it is, I conclude that you were so weak and cowardly as to lend yourself to the revenge scheme of others, which calls for a very lengthy minimum, but not a whole life, term. Given your age now – 45 – the difference may in practice amount to very little.

The minimum term which I shall pass is the least time which you will serve in prison, before the Parole Board can consider whether you are safe enough to be released. You may be released at the end of the minimum term - that will be for the Parole Board to decide at that future time - but you cannot be released before. If you are released you will be on licence, with set rules you must obey for the rest of your life. If you break any of the rules you can be recalled to prison. It is in this way that a life sentence protects the public.

The killing of two persons engages paragraph 3 of Schedule 21 where there is a starting point for the minimum term of 30 years. It is the starting point, but by no means the end point. In your case the murders are very seriously aggravated by the following:

- (1) the fact that the victims were innocent children. One of them, Mason (aged 15) was killed right outside the front door to his home.
- (2) Mason and Max must have been absolutely terrified at being confronted and chased with such fearsome weapons.
- (3) The fact that the killers were themselves children whose actions you facilitated
- (4) The fact that this was a revenge attack.
- (5) The fact that the attacks took place on a residential street, in the middle of a neighbourhood community where people were at home.

It is suggested that there was significant premeditation and planning. There would have had to have been some planning and preparation, to put together the group of teens and to see that they were armed. As I have already said, the evidence did not point to your being responsible for the preparation which set the revenge mission in train. Nevertheless you were wholly responsible for the preparation and premeditation involved in the 14-minute drive around Knowle leading up to the fateful stop in Ilminster Avenue. I am sure that that is rightly classed as significant, in the circumstances of this case.

There is little mitigation to set against this: whilst not of entirely good character your previous convictions are minimal; for present purposes I treat you as someone with no relevant convictions. As I have already noted, I do not find that you intended Max and Mason to be killed, but that is of little weight given your knowledge that knives of some kind were being carried in the hands of reckless teens, where the risk of death was so high. Finally I note your disability, the serious injury and loss of a leg following a bad road accident in 2012, which is likely to make prison life more difficult, but this too is of little weight when set against the gravity of your actions in facilitating the attacks on two innocent boys.

I am told that you have spent 292 days on remand, I shall take those into account in setting the minimum term. The court will also draw up a victim surcharge in the required amount.

Stand up please

Antony Snook, for your part in the murders of Mason Rist and Max Dixon there will be concurrent life sentences with a minimum term of 38 years less 292 days you have spent on remand, namely 37years 73days.

You may now go.

Commendations

As everyone will appreciate, an investigation like this takes many thousands of hours of police time, gathering and carefully reviewing and organising all the evidence.

The court would like to commend D/Supt Haskins who has led this investigation for the past 10 months. I understand that he plans to retire next year and that this is likely to be his final year after 30 years of police service.

Also to be commended are DS 337 Craig Basil, Deputy Senior Investigating Officer, and DC 1063 Matt Cron, who served as Officer in the Case.

There are many other officers who have contributed hugely to the police investigation, including those who dealt with CCTV, Intelligence, Analysis, Disclosure and Liaison with the families. I understand that the contributions made by the wider police team will be separately marked by recognition from the Chief Constable.

Finally I note the significant contribution made by Stella Waata, who is the CPS lawyer with conduct of the case throughout.