

Former US baseball pitcher alleges police brutality ended his career

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Brandon Backe, former pitcher for the Houston Astros baseball team, gave emotional testimony in court on Tuesday as part of a lawsuit brought against the city of Galveston, Texas stemming from a police attack on a wedding party that he had attended in October of 2008.

Backe alleges that a shoulder injury he sustained during an attack by Galveston police officers effectively ended his career as a professional athlete. He is seeking between \$12 million and \$15 million in lost wages.

Pausing several times to regain his composure, Backe told the court how police, after beating the brother of the bride so severely that he had to be airlifted to a nearby hospital, picked him from the front of the nearby crowd after he had told them to “chill,” beat and kicked him before arresting him for “resisting arrest.”

As he fell to the ground beneath the blows of at least three officers, Backe hit his throwing shoulder on the curb, fracturing it, he said. Backe soon began experiencing debilitating pain, eventually requiring two surgeries to remove eight separate bone fragments. His pitching performances for the Astros suffered as his condition continued to deteriorate.

After being released by the team in the middle of the 2009 season, Backe announced his retirement. He “was sick of the pain, sick of taking medication,” he told the court. His condition is now so severe that he cannot even fasten a seat belt with his right arm.

Backe emerged as a fan favorite during the 2004 season, when he replaced star pitcher Roger Clemens in the starting lineup in the last game of the season and helped win a game that the Astros needed to clinch a spot in the playoffs. Originally from Galveston, Backe was a staple of the Astros’ pitching staff during some of the franchise’s most successful seasons.

The charges brought by Backe and 11 others beaten in the incident come alongside several recent cases of police brutality, including the killing of a mentally unstable man during a police stand-off in Kenwood, California, the murder of a homeless man in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the beating death of an unarmed man in front of his family outside of a movie theater in Oklahoma.

The details that have emerged from the Backe case thus far reveal a barbaric orgy of violence unleashed upon an unresisting crowd. Police arrived at the wedding party at an outdoor bar after responding to concerns that Daniel “Cole” O’Balle, the 19-year-old brother of the bride, had been drinking underage. They began to mercilessly beat the young man with fists and batons, severely wounding him in the head, before tasing him and continuing to beat him as he collapsed to the ground.

Friends and relatives who tried to intervene were tackled, beaten with fists, batons and flashlights, tasered or sprayed in the face with pepper spray.

When Chris Cornwell asked that they stop pushing his pregnant wife, police forced him to the ground and threw handcuffs on him without reading him his Miranda rights or even informing him that he was under arrest. Cole’s father, Gill O’Balle, was jumped on, tasered twice, pepper sprayed, and kicked after asking police, “Where are y’all taking him? What’s going on? Who can I talk to?”

Each of the seven people pepper-sprayed by police that night had already been subdued, most of them lying on the ground with one or more officers on top of them. At least one person was pepper-sprayed after being taken to the police station. None, with the exception of Cole, who had been drinking underage, had committed any crime.

Newly-installed police Chief Charles Wiley, billed as a “reformer,” had briefly been on the scene during the mayhem. He said nothing except to stress that police on the scene fill out accurate reports the next day. When the reports that came in the next morning had no use of force forms attached, Wiley initiated an internal review that led to the reprimanding of eleven officers—for filing late and inaccurate reports.



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