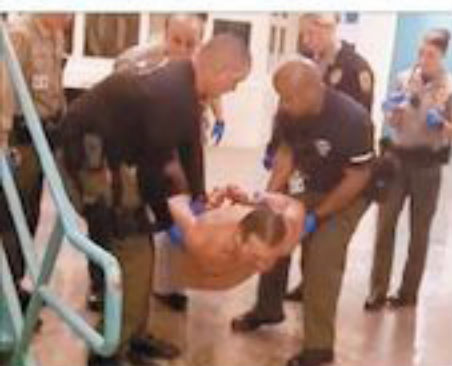


'The only person who committed any crime was Ronald Hewett'

— District Attorney Ben David

No charges in Hewett death



Images taken from video recorded July 12 at the New Hanover County Jail of the altercation between former Brunswick County Sheriff Ron Hewett and jail personnel. The video shows Hewett throwing punches at a guard, being hit twice with a stun gun, and then being found unresponsive in his cell a short while later. View video at StarNewsOnline.com | [Timeline of altercation, 4A](#)

Preliminary autopsy showed heart problems Pathologist: asphyxia, stun gun not cause

By Adam Wagner

Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com

Former Brunswick County sheriff Ron Hewett likely died of a heart condition exacerbated by chronic alcohol use and stress from a fight with New Hanover County jail deputies, officials said Friday.

No charges will be filed against New Hanover County Sheriff's Office personnel in the jailhouse death of Hewett, District Attorney Ben David announced Friday.

"On July 12 of this year, the only person who committed any crime was Ronald Hewett," David said at a news conference announcing the findings of the N.C. State Bureau of Investigation's probe into Hewett's death. That probe determined deputies acted appropriately both in their use of force against Hewett and in their medical care of him.

Friday's news conference echoed the findings of New Hanover County Sheriff Ed McMahon, who announced July 22 that his office

had completed an internal investigation and concluded all personnel followed policies and procedures.

The incident was captured on video camera, which showed Hewett wearing boxers and throwing punches at a jail guard, being hit twice with a stun gun and then being found blue-faced in his cell a short while later.

Superior Court Judge W. Allen Cobb Jr. or-

HEWETT

Continued from 1A

tered Wednesday that all video footage related to Hewett's death should be released, but the portions showing Hewett nude should be edited to blur his genitals and buttocks.

Hewett, who was released from prison in 2010 after being convicted on charges of felony obstruction of justice, was arrested July 9 after a search of his Supply home by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office found multiple firearms. He was charged with being a felon in possession of at least one weapon that had been transported across state lines.

From 1994 to 2008, Hewett was sheriff of Brunswick County. He was suspended from office March 27, 2008, and shortly after indicted on state charges of embezzlement and obstructing justice. Hewett resigned in April 2008.

David said he had shared his decision with Hewett's family and showed them all videos of the incident, as he does in any case where there is an SBI probe.

"They showed a depth of character that I found rare and refreshing," David said.

The altercation

Hewett was to have a supervised visit with his mother and girlfriend at 2 p.m. July 12. When he was released from his cell into an open pod area in preparation for his meeting, Hewett was wearing nothing but boxers, David said.

Deputies asked Hewett to return to his cell, but he refused, instead walking around and looking at other inmates, who were becoming aggressive in their cells, according to a timeline detailed by Assistant District Attorney Tom Old who handles use-of-force investigations for the DA's Office.

When a deputy entered the area, Hewett tried to punch him, Old said. As Hewett remained aggressive, the deputy warned him that he would be shot with a stun gun.

When Hewett didn't let up, the deputy fired the stun gun. Hewett rolled, attempting to remove the probes from his chest and then tried to hit the deputy again, Old said.

More officers arrived in the area, yelling, "Get down, get down" to Hewett, who approached a second deputy aggressively. That deputy hit Hewett with a glancing blow to defend himself, momentarily stunning Hewett, who still remained aggressive.

The deputy who initially stunned Hewett then reloaded the device and fired it again, hitting Hewett in the chest with one probe and in the right hand with the other. That happened 1 minute and 52 seconds into the altercation, Old said.

Hewett was restrained once he struck the floor.

"No punches or blows are seen coming from any deputy" while Hewett was down, according to an account distributed by the district attorney's office.

After the altercation

Deputies then tried to return Hewett to his cell, carrying him because he refused to stand. A nurse arrived to remove Taser probes and treat his wounds, but she could not finish an examination because he continued to be aggressive, Old said.

While deputies and the nurse were working with Hewett in his cell, he continued to be vocal.

"You know it takes a real talent to kill a man with a Taser," he said, according to Old's account. And, "Y'all don't have the balls to step up to a man."

Old said that for the next 15 minutes, Hewett was in his cell and continued to refuse to cooperate with deputies.

Eventually, the nurse placed Hewett on suicide watch. Everything except his bunk mattress was removed from his cell, including his boxer shorts, Old said.

"Hewett showed no signs of difficulty breathing or any other signs of distress while deputies were stabilizing him in his cell," Old said.

Hewett's cell was to be checked every five minutes, which Old said was an accelerated schedule from the typical 15-minute intervals most inmates on suicide watch are checked. Key fob records, which the deputies carry and which record what cell and what time a deputy is near it, show that Hewett's cell was checked five minutes after he was placed in the cell and then two minutes after that.

The second deputy became concerned that Hewett wasn't moving and reported it, leading to another check three minutes later.



How it looked on the page -->>

Three minutes later, on the shift supervisor's orders, deputies re-entered the cell, Old said.

"His face looks blue," the deputy said.

Less than a minute later, a nurse arrived and began CPR. EMS also was called, Old said.

Fourteen minutes after Hewett's cell was re-entered, EMS and New Hanover County Fire arrived, with advanced CPR efforts continuing for a half hour before they were suspended.

Mental health a concern

Jail personnel and inmates were worried about Hewett's mental health in his final days, Old said.

On July 11, Hewett refused to eat, according to Old said, and he refused to see a mental health professional on July 12.

Inmates had seen Hewett standing on his bed staring into space for extended periods of time, causing officials to seek the mental health attention, said Assistant District Attorney Tom Old.

"No psychotic episode or anything like that, it was just described as odd," Old said.

When he was examined, according to the district attorney's office's account, Hewett told jail personnel he was "fine."

On the day he died, Hewett had a scheduled visit with his mother and girlfriend. When it was visiting time, Hewett emerged from his cell wearing nothing but boxer shorts, Old said. When officers told him to return to his cell and put clothes on, he refused. When an officer entered the cell block, the altercation ensued.

The autopsy

Dr. Bill Oliver, the pathologist who conducted an autopsy on Hewett on July 14, outlined some of his findings in a letter to David dated July 25. Oliver added the caveat that his findings

were preliminary and could change "radically" with the completion of a neuropathology consultation, histologic examination, toxicology examination and final review.

Hewett had an enlarged heart, Oliver wrote, with left ventricular dilation. That condition, known as dilated cardiomyopathy, according to Oliver, can be seen in the hearts of heavy drinkers and can be a risk factor for sudden death.

"The risk is magnified, however, in the context of an environment that might cause a strong autonomic reaction such as excitation and stress," Oliver wrote, adding that subduing Hewett could have been a factor in his death by providing stress.

If he had to complete his investigation immediately, without any other information, according to Oliver, Hewett's cause of death would be dilated cardiomyopathy with stress of subdual and chronic alcohol use contributing.

Oliver also dispelled in his letter the ideas that positional asphyxia, the use of a stun gun or excited delirium had contributed to Hewett's death.

Positional asphyxia wasn't a factor, Oliver wrote, because the idea that a body could be positioned to prevent breathing had been retracted by the author who initially put it forward. Furthermore, after reviewing the video, Oliver determined that the "extraordinary amount of weight" necessary to cause such a death had not been placed on Hewett's chest.

The stun gun was not a factor, Oliver wrote, because Hewett would have died instantly if it were a cause, rather than a few minutes later.

Excited delirium was the third possibility, which, Oliver said, was unlikely because there were no signs that Hewett had been delirious.

Staff writer FT. Norton contributed to this story.