

Sexual-abuse victims get \$60-million judgment against former taekwondo instructor

By **Leila Miller**

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Three women who sued their former taekwondo instructor for sexually abusing them while they were minors each have been awarded \$20 million in damages by a California court.

The \$60-million default judgment against Marc Scott Gitelman was awarded last week by a Los Angeles Superior Court judge after Gitelman failed to respond to an amended complaint stemming from a 2015 civil lawsuit filed by the plaintiffs.

The lawsuit alleged that Gitelman molested the women from 2007 until his arrest on sexual assault charges in August 2014. According to the lawsuit, on multiple occasions Gitelman invited the young athletes to his hotel room to watch videos of their previous taekwondo matches before he sexually abused them.

Gitelman was sentenced in October 2015 to more than four years in state prison after a [Pomona jury convicted him of multiple felony counts](#), including oral copulation of a minor, unlawful sexual intercourse and lewd acts upon a child.

He was also ordered to register as a lifetime sex offender, according to the sentence handed down by Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Bruce Marrs. Gitelman is appealing the conviction.

“The numbers are in line with what the values of these cases are,” said Stephen Estey, an attorney for one of the plaintiffs, referring to the damage award. “The judge in this case recognized the long-term consequences of being sexually abused as a child.”

The civil suit also named several athletic organizations involved in the girls’ competitions for failing to protect them. The Olympic-caliber athletes competed in tournaments associated with the [U.S. Olympic Committee](#) and USA Taekwondo. The women have appealed a Superior Court decision to dismiss claims against the USOC and USA Taekwondo, according to Estey.

“They should have had policies and procedures in place to prevent this from happening,” said Estey. The attorney said his client stayed on the same floor as her coach at a training facility’s dorms. “They did not have any chaperone policies in place and Gitelman would take these girls to these tournaments.... It was a free for all.”

An attorney representing the USOC declined to comment.

Gitelman instructed students at community centers in the Las Vegas area as well as at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and traveled to various locales across California and Nevada for taekwondo tournaments, according to the Los Angeles County district attorney's office. Doris Leroy, an attorney representing Gitelman in the criminal lawsuit, said there were evidentiary errors in the criminal trial but declined to comment further.

The 2015 lawsuit alleges that Gitelman forced one of the athletes to perform oral sex while driving her to a competition at the International Taekwondo Festival in California in May 2008. When they arrived at their hotel, Gitelman invited the athlete to his room to watch videos of her previous taekwondo fights. He then gave her alcohol and molested her, the lawsuit alleges.

In 2009, that athlete was molested again at the Olympic Training Center dorms in Colorado Springs, Colo., the lawsuit states.

It also describes an event in March 2010 sponsored by the Olympic Committee, among other organizations, when Gitelman invited two of the plaintiffs to his hotel room where they played a drinking game. While one of the plaintiffs laid on his bed intoxicated, the other plaintiff saw him inappropriately touch her.

After helping the intoxicated athlete find her way back to her hotel room, the other plaintiff returned to Gitelman's room where he served her more alcohol. The lawsuit alleges that he then forced her to lie on his bed, where he sexually abused her.

Two of the girls lodged a formal complaint in early 2014 with USA Taekwondo, the governing body overseeing the sport in the U.S. Shortly after, those girls and a third victim came forward and informed police of the abuse.

Kendra Gatt, 23, one of the plaintiffs, said the judgment marks a step forward for her.

"I feel like I lost my time and energy, and my mental health was directed in a different way throughout the years at the trial, criminal [case] and moving into civil," Gatt said in an interview.

She began taekwondo at age 11 and aspired to try out for the Olympic team. She didn't tell her parents about being abused for two years and did so only after seeing a Facebook post from another plaintiff who described being in an "odd predicament" with her taekwondo coach.

"When I discovered that I wasn't the only one that it happened to I put some pieces together and realized I wasn't going to be the last either," she said. "I decided to voice what happened to me because I never wanted it to happen to any other girl or athlete in general."

The lawsuit said that Gitelman “did not attempt to hide his relationships with the various plaintiffs” and the defendants “were aware that female taekwondo athletes, and Olympic level athletes in general were frequently victims of sexual molestation by their coaches yet did nothing to protect these athletes from such abuse.”

Although one of the plaintiffs operates a taekwondo studio in Las Vegas, two of them, Estey said, no longer practice taekwondo.

Gatt is currently a biology student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She said that after she stopped training with Gitelman at age 16, she didn’t want to continue practicing martial arts.

“I couldn’t as a 16-year-old come to terms with my feeling of what was happening,” she said. “I tried again with a different instructor months later and I just didn’t feel the same. I kind of lost a little passion in it.”

Times staff writer Matt Hamilton contributed to this report

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UPDATES:

9:45 p.m.: This article was updated with additional comments from Gitelman’s attorney.

This article was originally published at 7:45 p.m.

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