

COURT OF APPEALS OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Haymon v. Pettit

9 N.Y.3d 324, 880 N.E.2d 416, 849 N.Y.S.2d 872 (2007) · Decided November 20, 2007

SUMMARY

The New York Court of Appeals held that a baseball stadium operator owed no duty to warn or protect a nonpatron who was injured after chasing a foul ball into a public street. The court concluded that the operator lacked control over the street and third parties, and that the foul-ball ticket promotion did not create or contribute to a dangerous condition warranting imposition of a duty.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Court of Appeals of the State of New York
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jones, J.; Chief Judge Kaye; Judge Ciparick; Judge Graffeo; Judge Read; Judge Smith; Judge Pigott
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	November 20, 2007
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The Ball Club moved for summary judgment dismissing the negligence complaint on the ground that it owed no duty to plaintiff's son. Supreme Court denied the motion, the Appellate Division reversed and dismissed the complaint as to the Ball Club, and plaintiff appealed to the Court of Appeals.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Summary judgment is appropriate when the moving party establishes entitlement to judgment as a matter of law and the nonmoving party fails to raise a material issue of fact; the evidence is viewed in the light most favorable to the nonmoving party.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential opinion of the New York Court of Appeals
PARTIES	Joan Haymon, individually and as mother and natural guardian of L.H., an infant v. Auburn Community Non-Profit Baseball Association, Inc.

TOPICS

- duty of care
- premises liability
- negligence
- personal injury
- torts

PRACTICE AREAS

torts

negligence

premises liability

personal injury

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a baseball stadium operator owes a duty to warn or protect nonpatron spectators outside the stadium who are injured while chasing foul balls into an adjoining public street.
2. Whether the Ball Club's foul-ball-for-tickets promotion created or contributed to a dangerous condition sufficient to impose such a duty.

HOLDINGS

1. The Ball Club owed no duty to warn or protect L.H. under the circumstances because it neither owned nor controlled the adjoining public street, and the risks of crossing the street and conduct by third persons existed independently of the Ball Club's promotion.
2. The promotion did not create or contribute to a dangerous condition under the circumstances, and even assuming that encouragement to retrieve foul balls could constitute such contribution, no duty to warn or protect would be appropriate.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"An owner or occupier of land generally owes no duty to warn or protect others from a dangerous condition on adjacent property unless the owner created or contributed to such a condition" (9 N.Y.3d at 328)

"This argument, however, is one of foreseeability presupposing that a duty exists" (9 N.Y.3d at 328)

"we do not view the Ball Club's promotion as contributing to a dangerous condition, for it only rewarded the retrieval of foul balls." (9 N.Y.3d at 329)

"Thus, we are constrained from imposing a requirement that the stadium exercise control over nonpatron, third persons outside its premises over whom it has no actual authority to do so." (9 N.Y.3d at 330)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

L.H., then 14 years old, was outside Falcon Park, a baseball stadium owned by the City of Auburn and operated by Auburn Community Non-Profit Baseball Association, Inc. He chased a foul ball across an adjoining public street while wearing headphones and failing to look both ways, and was struck by a vehicle driven by Donald Pettit, who had a blood alcohol level of .11 percent. The Ball Club offered free tickets to nonpatrons who retrieved foul balls and returned them to the ticket window, although the record was unclear whether L.H. was pursuing a ball for that incentive.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

L.H. was injured after chasing a foul ball into a public street and being struck by a vehicle. His mother sued the Ball Club, the driver, the City of Auburn, and others. Supreme Court found that the Ball Club owed a duty to protect or warn persons outside the stadium and denied summary judgment. The Appellate Division reversed and dismissed the complaint against the Ball Club, and the Court of Appeals affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Galindo v. Town of Clarkstown, 2 N.Y.3d 633, 636 (2004)
- Hamilton v. Beretta U.S.A. Corp., 96 N.Y.2d 222, 232 (2001)
- Darby v. Compagnie Natl. Air France, 96 N.Y.2d 343, 347, 349-350 (2001)
- Akins v. Glens Falls City School Dist., 53 N.Y.2d 325, 329-331 (1981)
- Davidoff v. Metropolitan Baseball Club, 61 N.Y.2d 996, 997-998 (1984)
- Darby v. Compagnie Natl. Air France, 96 N.Y.2d 343, 349 (2001)
- Griffin v. 19-20 Indus. City Assoc., LLC, 37 A.D.3d 412 (2d Dep't 2007)
- Starke v. Town of Smithtown, 155 A.D.2d 526, 527 (2d Dep't 1989)
- Clark v. Goshen Sunday Morning Softball League, 122 A.D.2d 769, 770 (2d Dep't 1986)
- Pulka v. Edelman, 40 N.Y.2d 781, 785-786 (1976)
- Fundamental Portfolio Advisors, Inc. v. Tocqueville Asset Mgt., L.P., 7 N.Y.3d 96 (2006)
- Haymon v. Pettit, 37 A.D.3d 1194, 1195 (4th Dep't 2007)

OPINION

JONES, J.

9 N.Y.3d 324 (2007) 880 N.E.2d 416 849 N.Y.S.2d 872 JOAN HAYMON, Individually and as Mother and Natural Guardian of L.H., an Infant, Appellant, v. DONALD J. PETTIT et al., Defendants, and AUBURN COMMUNITY NON-PROFIT BASEBALL ASSOCIATION, INC., Respondent. Court of Appeals of the State of New York. Argued October 18, 2007. Decided November 20, 2007. *325 Damon & Morey LLP, Buffalo (Michael J. Willett and Steven M. Zweig of counsel), for appellant. *326 Roemer Wallens & Mineaux, LLP, Albany (Matthew J. Kelly and Amanda Davis Twinam of counsel), for respondent.

Chief Judge KAYE and Judges CIPARICK, GRAFFEO, READ, SMITH and PIGOTT concur. OPINION OF THE COURT JONES, J. In this appeal we are asked to decide whether a baseball park operator owes a duty to warn or protect nonpatron spectators who are injured while chasing foul balls that are hit out of the stadium.

Under the circumstances presented, we conclude that no duty exists. Plaintiff's then 14-year-old son, L.H., was injured when he was struck by an automobile driven by defendant, Donald Pettit. Specifically, L.H. chased a foul ball into traffic.

The record indicates that he was wearing headphones while chasing the ball and failed to look both ways before crossing the street. L.H. apparently neither saw nor heard the oncoming vehicle.

Pettit was operating his vehicle with a blood alcohol level of .11%. At the time, L.H. had congregated with friends outside of Falcon Park, a baseball stadium owned by the City of Auburn and operated by defendant Auburn Community Non-Profit Baseball Association, Inc. (Ball Club).

Adjoining the stadium on the third base side is a two-way public street across from which is a parking *327 lot owned by the City of Auburn and utilized by fans during games. At the time of the incident, the Ball Club offered free baseball tickets to nonpatrons outside of the park who retrieved foul balls and returned them to the ticket window. Further, the record indicates that L.H. visited the stadium regularly to retrieve and collect foul balls hit out of the stadium.[*] L.H.'s mother commenced this negligence action individually and on L.H.'s behalf against defendants Ball Club, Donald Pettit and the City of Auburn, among others.

The Ball Club moved for summary judgment dismissing the complaint on the ground that it owed no duty to plaintiff's son. Supreme Court denied the motion, finding that the Ball Club owed a duty to its fans outside the stadium "to prevent them from chasing foul balls into the nearby public street, a foreseeably dangerous condition it took part in creating."

The Appellate Division reversed and dismissed the complaint as to the Ball Club. The court determined that the Ball Club, "as an adjoining landowner [of a public street], owed no legal duty to plaintiff's son under the circumstances" despite the foreseeability that someone might run into the street to chase a foul ball (*Haymon v Pettit*, 37 AD3d 1194, 1195 [4th Dept 2007]).

Two Justices dissented and voted to affirm on the ground that a duty existed due to the Ball Club's foul ball promotion, which "played a significant role in creating the danger" (*id.*). Plaintiff argues that the Ball Club's foul ball promotion gave rise to a duty to warn or protect its participants. Specifically, plaintiff posits that a duty arose under these circumstances because the Ball Club provided an incentive to fans outside of the stadium to retrieve errant foul balls—namely, the prospect of free tickets.

In short, plaintiff argues that the foreseeability of children chasing balls into the street, coupled with defendant's incentive for them to do so, required the Ball Club to provide some measure of protection or warning.

We disagree. *328 An owner or occupier of land generally owes no duty to warn or protect others from a dangerous condition on adjacent property unless the owner created or contributed to such a condition (see *Galindo v Town of Clarkstown*, 2 NY3d 633, 636 [2004]). "The reason for such a rule is obvious: a person who lacks ownership or control of property cannot fairly be held accountable for injuries resulting from a hazard" on neighboring property (*id.*).

Thus, in fixing the duty point, our analysis is tempered by considerations such as "the reasonable expectations of parties and society generally, the proliferation of claims, the likelihood of

unlimited or insurer-like liability, disproportionate risk and reparation allocation" (Hamilton v Beretta U.S.A. Corp., 96 NY2d 222, 232 [2001]; see also Darby v Compagnie Natl.

Air France, 96 NY2d 343, 347 [2001] [duty must "comport with what is socially, culturally and economically acceptable"]). In Akins v Glens Falls City School Dist. (53 NY2d 325 [1981]) we limited the duty of a baseball field owner/operator to provide screening for errant baseballs around "the most dangerous section of the fieldthe area behind home plateand the screening that is provided must be sufficient for those spectators who may be reasonably anticipated to desire protected seats on an ordinary occasion" (id. at 330; see also Davidoff v Metropolitan Baseball Club, 61 NY2d 996, 997-998 [1984]).

Although in Akins the injury occurred inside the baseball park, it is instructive nonetheless. Akins is premised on "the practical realities" (id. at 331) of the gamenamely, that errant balls of any sort are an inherent part of the sport and that a baseball stadium owner/ operator "is not an insurer of the safety of its spectators" and can only be held to exercise reasonable care under the circumstances (id. at 329).

Even inside the park, screening of the area behind home plate offers the most protection spectators could reasonably expect. The nature of the gameand the spectators' involvement in itis such that absolute protection around the entire stadium would be impractical. Any other formulation would defy a reasonable point at which duty can be fixed (see Darby, 96 NY2d at 349-350; Pulka v Edelman, 40 NY2d 781, 786 [1976]).

The same considerations govern this case. Here, plaintiff's theory rests upon defendant's "foul ball return for tickets" promotion. Plaintiff insists that this incentive foreseeably exposed fansmostly childrento the hazard of chasing foul balls into the street. This argument, however, is one of foreseeability presupposing that a duty exists (see Hamilton, 96 NY2d at 232). *329 The dangers of crossing the streetand individuals electing to cross it in pursuit of foul ballsexist independent of the Ball Club's promotion.

This, coupled with the fact that the Ball Club could control neither the public street nor third persons who use it, strongly militates against a finding of duty. Darby is also instructive. In that case, an individual drowned while swimming on a public beach in Brazil. He was a guest at a hotel which was separated from the beach by a four-lane public highway.

The hotel actively encouraged guests to use the beach, and even provided them with umbrellas, towels and a security escort service. The hotel did not, however, warn beachgoers about dangerous surf conditions. Plaintiff sued the hotel on behalf of decedent alleging that it was negligent in failing to warn beachgoers of dangerous surf conditions. Concluding that no duty existed, we were unpersuaded by the fact that the hotel encouraged and facilitated use of the beach by providing certain related services, and we held that merely "[p]roviding these services... does not make the

hotel the insurer of its guests' safety at a locale over which it ha[d] no control" (Darby, 96 NY2d at 349).

Here, the Ball Club's promotion did no more to contribute to an inherent risk than did the Meridien Copacabana Hotel in Darby. The Court is mindful that, in this case unlike Darby the Ball Club rewarded participants of its promotion with tickets. Important to our resolution, however, is that under the circumstances of this case, like Darby, there are inherent risks associated with crossing the street.

Those risks are multiplied when doing so indiscriminately. Moreover, we do not view the Ball Club's promotion as contributing to a dangerous condition, for it only rewarded the retrieval of foul balls. We must assume that adults, and children of L.H.'s age, will act prudently in doing so. Even assuming that mere encouragement of retrieving foul balls suffices, under the circumstances, to create or contribute to a dangerous condition (cf.

Griffin v 19-20 Indus. City Assoc., LLC, 37 AD3d 412 [2d Dept 2007]), a finding of duty would still be inappropriate. As in Akins, "the practical realities" of the game are not lost on the fact that players hit balls outside of the park. Foul balls can land on virtually any square foot of property surrounding a stadium, and imposition of a duty to warn or protect under such circumstances is neither fair nor practical (see Akins, 53 NY2d at 330; see also Starke v Town of Smithtown, 155 AD2d 526, 527 [2d Dept 1989]; Clark v Goshen Sunday Morning Softball League, 122 AD2d 769, 770 [2d Dept *330 1986]).

Injury may befall someone as in this case as a result of conduct of a third person on a public road, or a group of fans in a struggle for the ball. The possibilities for injury and consequently, for liability are limitless, and the expectation that the stadium control the conduct of third persons is unrealistic (see Pulka, 40 NY2d at 785 [unreasonable to impose duty to protect from the negligent conduct of another "where the realities of every day experience show us that, regardless of the measures taken, there is little expectation that the one made responsible could prevent the negligent conduct"])).

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine what steps the stadium operator could have taken that would have sufficed to meet a duty. Thus, we are constrained from imposing a requirement that the stadium exercise control over nonpatron, third persons outside its premises over whom it has no actual authority to do so.

Accordingly, the order of the Appellate Division should be affirmed, with costs. Order affirmed, with costs. NOTES [*] There is scant evidence in the record on this motion for summary judgment indicating whether or not L.H. even engaged in this activity for the purpose of receiving free tickets pursuant to the Ball Club's promotion. L.H.'s sister testified that he left the house to go to

the stadium, that he had money but "didn't want to spend it," and that he did not have a ticket but that "he had his glove with him" to try "to catch [a foul] ball."

The sister added that L.H. "saved baseballs." Even viewing the evidence in a light most favorable to the nonmoving party and giving the nonmoving party the benefit of all reasonable inferences which can be drawn from the evidence (see *Fundamental Portfolio Advisors, Inc. v Tocqueville Asset Mgt., L.P.*, 7 NY3d 96 [2006]), it is unclear whether plaintiff has succeeded in raising an issue of fact.

Nevertheless, this becomes academic in light of our holding.