

SUPREME COURT OF MISSISSIPPI

Pamela Lynn Lawson v. Honeywell International, Inc. f/k/a Allied Signal, Inc.

Lawson v. Honeywell · No. No. 2010-CA-01924-SCT · Decided November 16, 2010

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Mississippi held that Honeywell, alleged to have designed but not manufactured or sold a seatbelt buckle, was not a manufacturer subject to liability under the Mississippi Products Liability Act. The court further held that the Act does not preclude a common-law negligence claim against a nonmanufacturing and nonselling product designer. The judgment was affirmed in part, reversed in part, and remanded.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Mississippi
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Waller, Chief Justice; Waller, C.J.; Carlson, P.J.; Dickinson, P.J.; Randolph, J.; Lamar, J.; Kitchens, J.; Chandler, J.; Pierce, J.; King, J.
JURISDICTION	Mississippi
DECIDED	November 16, 2010
DOCKET	No. 2010-CA-01924-SCT
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Lawson appealed from the Wayne County Circuit Court's final judgment granting Honeywell summary judgment on her Mississippi Products Liability Act claim and common-law negligence claim arising from an allegedly defective automobile seatbelt buckle.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Summary-judgment rulings are reviewed de novo. Summary judgment is proper when the record shows no genuine issue of material fact and the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law; evidence is viewed in the light most favorable to the nonmoving party.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published opinion
PARTIES	Pamela Lynn Lawson v. Honeywell International, Inc. f/k/a Allied Signal, Inc.

TOPICS

products liability

negligence

statutory interpretation

standard of review

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PRACTICE AREAS

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Honeywell was a manufacturer subject to liability under the Mississippi Products Liability Act for allegedly designing the Gen-3 seatbelt buckle without manufacturing or selling it.
2. Whether the Mississippi Products Liability Act precludes a common-law negligence claim against a nonmanufacturing and nonselling product designer.

HOLDINGS

1. A mere designer that does not bring a product into tangible form for direct sale or resale to the consuming public is not a manufacturer under the MPLA. Because the record characterized Honeywell as, at most, a product designer, the trial court properly granted summary judgment on Lawson's MPLA design-defect claim.
2. The MPLA does not preclude common-law negligence claims against a product designer that is neither a manufacturer nor a seller within the meaning of the statute. The trial court therefore erred by granting Honeywell summary judgment on Lawson's negligence claim.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“We affirm the trial court’s grant of summary judgment as to Lawson’s MPLA claim, as Honeywell is not the “manufacturer” of the buckle for purposes of liability under the MPLA. However, we reverse the trial court’s grant of summary judgment as to Lawson’s negligence claim, and remand for trial, as the MPLA does not preclude common-law claims of negligence against a nonmanufacturing and nonselling designer of a product.” (¶1)

“We hold that the MPLA does not preclude common-law negligence claims against nonmanufacturing designers who do not fall under the purview of the statute.” (¶19)

“AFFIRMED IN PART; REVERSED IN PART AND REMANDED.” (¶22)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

On July 31, 2005, Pamela Lawson's 1999 Jeep Cherokee veered off a Mississippi highway and rolled over several times. Lawson alleged that her properly fastened Gen-3 seatbelt buckle malfunctioned because of a defective design, causing her ejection and severe injuries. She alleged that Honeywell had originally designed the buckle before selling it to Chrysler, but Honeywell denied designing the buckle and asserted that its predecessor had sold the relevant safety-restraint division before Honeywell was formed.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Lawson sued Honeywell for strict liability under the Mississippi Products Liability Act, negligence, and negligence per se. The circuit court held that the MPLA was the exclusive remedy for products-liability claims and that its plain language did not permit a design-defect claim against an entity that neither manufactured nor sold the product. The court denied reconsideration, entered final judgment dismissing Honeywell with prejudice, and Lawson timely appealed. The Supreme Court of Mississippi affirmed the MPLA ruling, reversed the negligence ruling, and remanded.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Remanded for further proceedings consistent with the opinion, including trial proceedings on Lawson's common-law negligence claim against Honeywell.

CASES CITED

- One South, Inc. v. Hollowell, 963 So. 2d 1156, 1160 (Miss. 2007)
- Monsanto Co. v. Hall, 912 So. 2d 134, 136 (Miss. 2005)
- Price v. Purdue Pharma Co., 920 So. 2d 479, 483 (Miss. 2006)
- Russell v. State, 94 So. 2d 916, 917 (Miss. 1957)
- Barbour v. State ex rel. Hood, 974 So. 2d 232, 240 (Miss. 2008)
- Miss. Dep't of Transp. v. Allred, 928 So. 2d 152, 156 (Miss. 2006)
- City of Natchez, Miss. v. Sullivan, 612 So. 2d 1087, 1089 (Miss. 1992)
- Pinkton v. State, 481 So. 2d 306, 309 (Miss. 1985)
- Clark v. State ex rel. Miss. State Med. Ass'n, 381 So. 2d 1046, 1048 (Miss. 1980)
- Gilmer v. State, 955 So. 2d 829, 833 (Miss. 2007)
- Buckel v. Chaney, 47 So. 3d 148, 158 (Miss. 2010)
- State ex rel. Hood v. Madison County ex rel. Madison County Bd. of Supervisors, 873 So. 2d 85, 90 (Miss. 2004)
- Corp. Mgmt., Inc. v. Greene County, 23 So. 3d 454, 465 (Miss. 2009)
- Kerr-McGee Chem. Corp. v. Buelow, 670 So. 2d 12, 17 (Miss. 1995)
- Scordino v. Hopeman Bros., Inc., 662 So. 2d 640, 645 (Miss. 1995)
- Whelan v. Johnston, 6 So. 2d 300, 303 (Miss. 1942)
- Thorp Commercial Corp. v. Miss. Road Supply Co., 348 So. 2d 1016, 1018 (Miss. 1977)
- Manufab, Inc. v. Miss. State Tax Comm'n, 808 So. 2d 947, 949 (Miss. 2002)
- Brady v. John Hancock Mut. Life Ins. Co., 342 So. 2d 295, 298 (Miss. 1977)
- L.W. v. McComb Separate Mun. School Dist., 754 So. 2d 1136, 1140 (Miss. 1990)
- His Way Homes, Inc. v. Miss. Gaming Comm'n, 733 So. 2d 764, 769 (Miss. 1999)
- Jowers v. BOC Group, Inc., 2009 WL 995613, at *4 (S.D. Miss. Apr. 14, 2009)

- Jowers v. Lincoln Elec. Co., 617 F.3d 346 (5th Cir. 2010)
- Buffington v. Miss. State Tax Comm'n, 43 So. 3d 450, 455 (Miss. 2010)
- Pregram v. Bailey, 708 So. 2d 1307, 1314 (Miss. 1997)
- Tower Loan of Miss., Inc. v. Miss. State Tax Comm'n, 662 So. 2d 1077, 1083 (Miss. 1995)

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