

Former Ohio State Defensive End Will Smith's Killer Sentenced To 25 Years In Prison



Cardell Hayes, the man who shot and killed former Ohio State defensive end Will Smith after a traffic crash in 2016, received a 25-year prison sentence on Thursday in a New Orleans courtroom.

Hayes, 36, receives his sentence nearly three months after being found guilty of manslaughter for a second time at a Jan. 26 retrial held in New Orleans, where it was determined after four hours of deliberation that he would face up to 40 years of prison for shooting and killing Smith — and wounding Smith's widow, Raquel Smith — on April 9, 2016 during a road confrontation in New Orleans. He was taken into custody on Jan. 27 as he awaited his sentence.

Hayes was originally convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison for the same crime in December 2016, but the ruling — which was determined by a 10-2 jury vote — was reversed after the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed nonunanimous verdicts in 2020. Hayes was then released on bond on March 18, 2021, after serving more than four years of his original 25-year sentence, and remained free for nearly three years as the retrial was delayed multiple times due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Smith was shot eight times during the 2016 traffic confrontation with Hayes, which stemmed from Hayes rear-ending the former Buckeye and New Orleans Saint. Hayes' defense team argued throughout both the trial and retrial that he was acting in self-defense from a reportedly intoxicated Smith, but there was no evidence that showed Smith had wielded or fired a weapon.

Several of Smith's family members spoke in the New Orleans courtroom following the sentencing, including Smith's daughter, Lisa — now a high school senior — who said Hayes caused irreparable damage to her childhood and development as a young adult by taking away her father.

"My dad will never watch me walk across the stage or walk me down the aisle," she said. "He will never see any of my achievements, ever."

"Mr. Hayes, you ruined my life," she added. "You took my father away from me."

While Raquel Smith declined to speak, Hayes' mother, Dawn Mumphrey spoke directly to the Smith family, apologizing for the grief her son caused them and asking for forgiveness.

"I pray for y'all's strength and your success," she told the family. "I ask that y'all pray for us too."

Will Smith, who was 34 at the time of his death, had a decorated career at Ohio State.

He played in Columbus from 2000-03 and was an integral part of the Buckeyes' 2002 national championship team. The defensive end also won the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Year award in 2003 along with a first-team All-American selection.

Smith was then selected with the 18th overall pick in the 2004 NFL draft by the New Orleans Saints, where he played all his nine professional seasons, earning a Pro Bowl nod in 2006 and a Super Bowl in 2010. Smith, who totaled 463 tackles and 67½ sacks in his NFL career, was inducted into the Saints' Ring of Honor in 2019.

Smith's son, Will Smith Jr., is a defensive end for Ohio State and is gearing up for his redshirt freshman season with the Buckeyes.