

# Judge clears Orange man who shot 2 dogs in cow pasture

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**A** circuit judge Wednesday cleared an Orange County man on trial for shooting two Siberian huskies in a cow pasture nearly three years ago.

The case against Christopher Comins drew widespread attention — and outrage — when video of the shootings on May 19, 2008, appeared on YouTube.

However, after prosecutors finished presenting their case in court, Judge Bob LeBlanc ruled that the testimony had shown Comins was directed to fire on the huskies because they appeared to be attacking and threatening the cows.

LeBlanc said the testimony did not

indicate that Comins had acted cruelly. He said it appeared that Comins was trying to “remove the dogs from the cattle.”

“This was not someone who was torturing an animal,” LeBlanc said in granting the defense team’s request for a judgment of acquittal.

A jury had been listening to the case since Monday. LeBlanc’s decision ended the trial before jurors heard any defense witnesses or had to deliberate on a verdict.

Many of Comins’ supporters and friends in court applauded the decision and wondered aloud why the case had gotten as far as a trial.

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GEORGE SKENE/ORLANDO SENTINEL FILE

Christopher Comins said, “I didn’t go out there to shoot someone’s house pets.”

## DOGS

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Outside the courtroom, Comins gave a brief statement, saying he went to the pasture that night to help “defenseless, baby calves from invading predators that had been there for hours.”

“I didn’t go out there to shoot someone’s house pets. Unfortunately, that’s what happened,” Comins said. “It’s a very regretful situation. I’m glad both dogs are doing fine.”

Comins was charged with two felony counts of animal cruelty with a firearm stemming from the incident, which occurred on private land near Lake Nona off Narcoossee Road.

Comins’ attorneys Chandler Muller and Thomas Sommerville stuck with a central argument and line of questioning throughout the trial — that state law considers the killing of a dog to be a “good defense” in such a case if the dog is in the process of killing livestock.

They maintained that the two dogs who were shot and wounded, Raley and Hoochie, were surrounding the cows and depriving them of water — potentially stressing the cows to death.

Following LeBlanc’s decision, Muller said, “This case has been a horrible, horrible burden on my client, and I’m just very, very relieved. ... I’m just thankful for our system.”

Christopher Butler, the owner of the dogs, lived a few miles from the pasture at the time. He had let Raley and Hoochie off leash that day and the huskies took off, disappearing for hours.

Butler testified that he was not sure what he did after the dogs ran off, but ultimately someone else reached him and told him the dogs were spotted in the cow pasture.

By the time Butler reached the scene, a crowd had gathered and Comins was firing at the dogs. Butler ran out and yelled for Comins to stop. Both dogs survived, but Raley was struck with four bullets and Hoochie was shot three times, losing an eye as a result.

Butler said he was “floored” by LeBlanc’s ruling.

“Why would they go through all the time and trouble and go to all this effort and get so far, and then the judge can just dismiss everything?” he asked.

As for the dogs, he said both are doing well with him back in England. Hoochie remains the more traumatized of the two, sensitive to loud noises and shouting, but Butler called them “strong dogs” that walk around and among cattle — off leash and with no problem.

As for Comins, Butler said, “He knows what he did. He knows they weren’t attacking the cattle. I believe he would have chased those dogs, and he would have shot them to pieces if I hadn’t come onto that field. ... I feel he’s a man that shouldn’t have a firearm.”