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Judge, known as strict but fair, takes control of Jackson case

By Linda Deutsch
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SANTA MARIA, Calif.—Michael Jackson may be the star attraction when he shows up to court, but the judge overseeing the singer's child molestation case has made it clear it is his show inside the courtroom.

During Jackson's first court appearance last week, Superior Court Judge Rodney S. Melville showed Jackson, his lawyers and prosecutors that the rules will be enforced, tardiness will not be tolerated and even bathroom breaks may be frowned on. He has also banned cameras from the courtroom.

Strict observance to courtroom decorum and procedure is a hallmark of Melville, known as a taskmaster who also is fair and compassionate. A recovering alcoholic, Melville helped establish Santa Barbara County's first court for substance abusers.

"He's a model of leadership," said Santa Barbara lawyer James Herman, a past president of the state bar association. "He has a lot of respect and support from the bench." Herman has appeared before the judge many times in a variety of cases, and "win, lose or draw, my clients have gotten as good as it gets in his courtroom."

If the Jackson case goes to trial, it could catapult Melville to instant fame — or infamy. The worldwide press attention the case has generated is unlike anything he has dealt with previously.

Melville has not presided over any big, closely watched cases. His experience includes real estate matters, family law and disputes over strawberry farming, a primary industry in Santa Maria.

The judge asserted his authority last week when Jackson pleaded not guilty to molesting a boy. The 62-year-old judge admonished Jackson for arriving 21 minutes late for an 8:30 a.m. arraignment and told the self-proclaimed King of Pop he should "restrict his liquid intake" before the next hearing so he will not need a bathroom break.

"The judge may be trying to control the uncontrollable," Loyola University Law Professor Laurie Levenson said. "But I think he was trying to send the message that it's not going to be another O.J.

Simpson courtroom. The judge doesn't want to be known as another Judge Ito."

Lance Ito was widely accused of losing control of the courtroom and letting opposing attorneys posture and declaim for the cameras during Simpson's murder trial a decade ago.

Levenson said Melville might have feared allowing a camera in court would give Jackson another stage on which to perform. "He may be going overboard, but his message to the defendant is, 'It's not your show; it's mine,'" she said.

Jackson clearly made it his show outside the courtroom. He greeted fans on his way into the courthouse, despite arriving late, and hopped on the roof of an SUV afterward, did a few dance steps and blew kisses to the crowd. He even had the spectacle videotaped by his cameramen.

Melville is perhaps best known for his efforts to help drug- and alcohol-addicted defendants.

Melville embraced Alcoholics Anonymous in 1978 — he said he attended meetings every day for three years — and has been involved in the group work ever since, serving as a sponsor for others trying to stay sober.

"I recognized that I had a drinking problem and people were smart enough to tell me," Melville said in an interview last June with *The Daily Journal*, a legal newspaper in Los Angeles.

Melville grew up in San Diego, the son of a preacher and a school teacher. He served on a submarine in the Navy and studied at Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco, all the while hiding his drinking problem.

As a young lawyer practicing in Santa Maria, Melville finally sought help after blacking out.

He was appointed to the Municipal Court bench by George Deukmejian in 1987 and elevated to Superior Court in 1990. He became known as a reformer, dedicated to making the courts more progressive in the treatment of addicts.

He was hand-picked for the Jackson case by presiding judge of Superior Court.

"It's a good courtroom to be in as a lawyer," said James Rigali, who has tried many civil cases before Melville, "because you're in the presence of a fair and practical judge."

"He may be going overboard, but his message to the defendant is 'It's not your show; it's mine.'"

— Laurie Levenson
Loyola University law professor

ROGER CREAGER

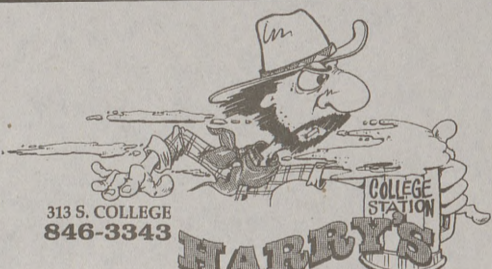
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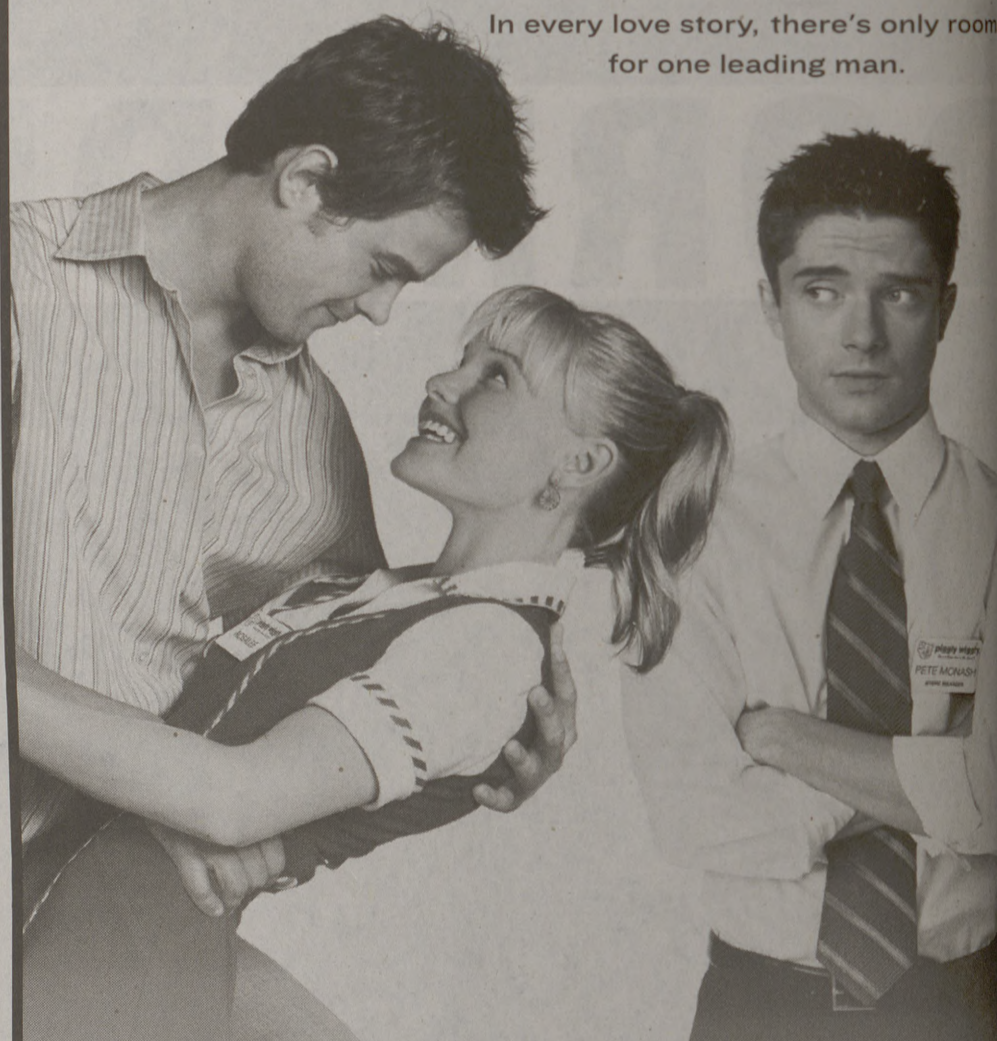
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