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Convicted murderer who denied guilt is freed after 27 years

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A former Glendora High School football star who spent 27 years behind bars for a murder he insists he did not commit was released from prison Saturday.

Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Suzette Clover last month ruled that Frank O'Connell should be granted a new trial in the 1984 fatal shooting of a maintenance man in South Pasadena. The judge found that during the first trial, L.A. County Sheriff's Department detectives failed to disclose records pointing to another possible suspect, and may have improperly influenced witnesses.

Clover made the ruling after the prosecution's key witness recanted, telling the judge at a hearing last year that he never got a good look at the killer and felt pressured to make a

positive identification after tentatively identifying O'Connell as the gunman during a photo lineup.

O'Connell, whose conviction was based largely on eyewitness testimony, has always maintained that he had nothing to do with the killing.

Detectives began looking at O'Connell as a possible suspect while following up on the victim's dying words. As he lay wounded, Jay French said that his ex-wife, whom he was fighting in court over custody of their son, had something to do with the shooting, they said.

They learned O'Connell had recently had a romantic relationship with the victim's ex-wife, who was never charged in the case. O'Connell also matched a description from witnesses of a tall, slender, blond gunman.

Members of French's family attended Friday's hearing with photos of the victim and his young son pinned to their chests. Several said after the hearing that they believe O'Connell is guilty and that they hope prosecutors will retry him.

The district attorney's office is expected to announce at a hearing on May 18 whether it has enough evidence to retry the case.

O'Connell was released on \$75,000 bail.

Photo: Frank O'Connell is shown with his defense attorney, Verna Wefald. Credit: Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times

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