

Arguedas Tries to Shred Bonds' Ex

Ginny LaRoe

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SAN FRANCISCO — After the government's star witness in the Barry Bonds trial gave emotional, teary-eyed testimony, Cristina Arguedas began a blistering cross examination that produced what one veteran litigator deemed some of the best courtroom theater he's seen in years.

It was Arguedas' first time center stage since the trial began a week ago. And it marks the first time since 2003 that the Berkeley criminal defense attorney has taken a case to a jury.

During five hours of rapid-fire, aggressive questioning that prompted Bonds' ex-lover Kimberly Bell to transition from the government's vulnerable-seeming witness into an often feisty, even combative, foe, Arguedas lived up to her reputation as a killer at cross. It produced moments that seemed to bear fruit, but also drew testimony that could be of little value, or even be damaging, to the defense.

And it prompted one admonishment from U.S. District Judge Susan Illston, who is presiding over her third BALCO-related trial.

"Your voice is extremely argumentative, so if you could just ratchet down, I'd appreciate that," Illston said a couple hours into the cross examination.

"Good idea," Arguedas said.

Turning her attention to Bell, Arguedas said: "I do apologize if I had a disrespectful tone of voice ... I don't mean to do that."

Bell: "Apology accepted."

With her reading glasses perched on her nose, her collared shirt buttoned to her chin, and her short, suited frame nearly hidden behind the lectern, Arguedas kicked off her cross by suggesting Bell had a "tremendous amount" of practice for her day in court, having given dozens of interviews in the press.

"How many of those radio shows did you cry when describing this information? None, right?" Arguedas said.

"Cris' demeanor in this cross is designed to project to the jury that she thinks Kimberly Bell is a publicity hungry, no good, liar who should not be believed for a second," said former federal prosecutor William Keane, who observed much of the day's events from a viewing room.



Cristina Arguedas
IMAGE: Shelley Eades/The Recorder

But Arguedas' skepticism followed closely on a dramatic moment when Bell described harrowing threats she claimed Bonds made toward the end of their relationship.

"He would cut out my breast implants because he paid for them," Bell, red-eyed and voice choked with emotion had just told Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Nedrow.

Bell also said Bonds threatened to burn down the house he bought her and had berated her for stuttering -- testimony that had Bonds looking down at counsel table, apparently scribbling notes.

If Arguedas was trying to minimize allegations of domestic abuse, one line of questioning seemed to backfire. When Arguedas asked her about her state of mind after their split in 2003, Arguedas pushed for her to admit she was "despondent."

Bell, instead, said: "I thought he would kill me."

In describing the breakup, Bell answered several questions by saying Bonds had told her to "disappear."

"Would you like to say those words 'asked me to disappear' a few more times?" Arguedas asked.

"It's some of the best theater I've seen in years," said Chief Assistant Federal Public Defender Geoffrey Hansen, who along with various other lawyers and judges popped into the courtroom or overflow room to watch the show. "I believe in [using] my velvet gloves. Cris is known for being an aggressive attorney. No question about it.

"I like Cris' style," he said, but wouldn't speculate on what kind of effect it might have on a jury of eight women and four men.

Bell, 41, a petite and pretty brunette who wore a heather gray pantsuit with sharp creases in the legs, manicured nails and smart pumps, gave the impression of a professional woman. She was a graphic designer at Adobe Systems when she met Bonds in the Candlestick Park players parking lot and was immediately attracted to the handsome man, she testified.

He also was rich, Arguedas said, noting the Porsche he drove her around in. And Arguedas established that just eight months before meeting and hooking up with Bonds, Bell had left at the altar another man -- a "soldier" who couldn't afford to buy her a ring.

"When it comes to baggage, this is a hall of fame level of baggage," Keane said of Bell's testimony in general.

Toward the end of Arguedas' cross, she was able to establish at least one instance in which Bell was untruthful.

Bringing up the shrinking testicle testimony -- which prosecutors argue shows side-effects of steroid use -- Arguedas got out a transcript of Bell's grand jury testimony, where she said his testicles had shrunk to "half the size" they were before.

Arguedas: "Was it true?"

Bell: "No."

Near the end of cross, Arguedas accused Bell of engaging in a "vulgar" media campaign to drum up publicity for a never-released tell-all book aimed at getting back at Bonds for marrying another woman.

When Bell said she hadn't intended to do "vulgar" interviews, Arguedas brought up an appearance on the Howard Stern show. But, after making a show of looking through her papers, Arguedas informed the court she wouldn't take that opportunity to get into "the gutter."

In another bit of theatrics, Arguedas arose after redirect to harp on problems with Bell's mortgage application papers. Waving the documents around, she noted that it was federal prosecutors' job to prosecute crimes like mortgage fraud when they weren't pursuing cases like Bonds'. After an objection from the government, she sat down.