

Duke found guilty, could get life term

By Paul Gustafson
Staff Writer

The man who narcotics agents and prosecutors brand as Minnesota's biggest drug dealer was convicted of 11 federal crimes Friday and faces the possibility of life in prison without parole.

Ralph (Plukey) Duke, 44, was found guilty by a federal jury in St. Paul of

heading a continuing criminal enterprise, attempting to buy 44 pounds of cocaine from drug agents, and engaging in a conspiracy to distribute cocaine between 1986 and last May.

Two of the 11 counts — heading a drug ring and possessing a pistol with a silencer in connection with drug crimes — by themselves carry a minimum penalty of 50 years in prison without parole, said assistant U.S.

attorney Jon Hopeman.

"His likely sentence will be life without parole," said Hopeman.

In addition, Duke faces two more trials on federal money-laundering and weapons violations.

Duke's attorney, Joseph Friedberg,

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had no comment on the convictions.

Jurors also returned guilty verdicts on all counts brought against five Duke codefendants: Doris (Tina) Admons, 41, mother of Duke's son, Ralph LaMont Nunn; Duke's niece, Serena D. Nunn, 20; Shawn Q. Regan, 22; Kim A. Willis, 19, and Walter L. Hughes, 43. All five face at least 25 years in prison for engaging in cocaine trafficking, Hopeman said.

U.S. District Judge David Doty ordered all six defendants held without bail pending sentencing.

Prosecutors and drug enforcement officials were elated by the jury's decision, particularly the conviction of Duke, their longtime nemesis.

"The law enforcement community has been on this guy (Duke) since 1972 ... but he was smarter than your average criminal," said Hopeman. "We're feeling a little way up, as up as you can go."

Duke admitted in testimony during the 4½-week trial that he hasn't paid taxes since 1972, and had a 7-gram daily cocaine habit prior to his May arrest.

But he claimed the money to support his lavish lifestyle came from illegal gambling and his business of buying, selling and often repossessing luxury cars, not from dealing drugs.

Duke said he and his associates, often relatives, made frequent trips to Los Angeles and Houston to buy and sell cars, not to buy drugs for distribution in Minnesota.

"My whole life consists of selling cars and gambling. That's what I do every day except Sundays," he said in court.

But jurors appear to have been convinced otherwise by tape recordings of telephone conversations involving the defendants, and testimony of five people who said they had participated in large cocaine deals with Duke and other defendants.

Loren Duke, Ralph Duke's nephew who pleaded guilty to drug charges before the trial began, told jurors that he watched his uncle remove \$250,000 from behind a TV set in a limousine he had driven from Minnesota to California for his uncle.

Another time his uncle removed 10 kilos of cocaine from the spare tire of a truck that he drove from California to Minnesota, Loren Duke said.

Convicted Los Angeles drug dealer Marvin McCaleb testified that he



Ralph (Plukey) Duke

and Duke sold 25 kilos, or 55 pounds, of cocaine a week in late 1988.

And Duke's son, Ralph LaMont Nunn, bragged to a federal informant that his father was the biggest cocaine dealer in Minnesota and had distributed up to 75 kilos, or 165 pounds, of cocaine in two to three months.

A months-long investigation of Duke and his associates involving 13 local, state and federal law enforcement agencies hit pay dirt in May when a federal informant lured Duke into attempting to buy 44 pounds of cocaine through his son, Ralph LaMont Nunn.

Duke, Nunn and four others were arrested May 18 after Nunn attempted to complete the drug deal with the federal informant at the Hilton Hotel on Industrial Blvd. in Minneapolis.

Originally a defendant along with his father, Nunn was separated from the trial two weeks ago and ordered to undergo psychiatric testing.

He could still be tried on drug charges.

Duke was not present at the attempted drug buy, but prosecutors contended, and jurors yesterday agreed, that Duke participated in the conspiracy to acquire the cocaine.

Prosecutors are preparing for seven more trials of other defendants charged with federal crimes as a result of the Duke investigation, Hopeman said.