

'Plukey' Duke sentenced to life term

By Paul Gustafson
Staff Writer

Ralph (Plukey) Duke, reputed boss of Minnesota's largest cocaine ring, was sentenced Wednesday to life in prison without parole plus 40 years and was fined \$400,000.

Duke, 44, showed little emotion and

Reputed cocaine boss will get no parole

said nothing before U.S. District Judge David Doty sentenced him to three concurrent life terms, one consecutive 30-year term and two consecutive five-year terms. He also received five 40-year terms that Doty

made concurrent with the other sentences.

In imposing the sentences, Doty noted that Duke had distributed large volumes of drugs, induced young

people with no prior criminal records to become involved in drug dealing and was responsible for supplying drugs to many young people.

Duke's attorney, F. Clayton Tyler,

urged Doty to not impose a life sentence without parole, arguing that even murderers and rapists receive lesser punishment in Minnesota. "Like an alcoholic, a drug dealer is amenable to treatment. Sometimes time heals. He (Duke) can be punished without being thrown away for

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the rest of his life."

But Assistant U.S. Attorney Jon Hopeman argued that the tough sentences were warranted.

"He (Duke) is a gangster. He committed literally hundreds if not thousands of felonies. . . . He flooded his community with cocaine," he said. "It's time for his poisoning of our community to stop. . . . I say to Ralph Duke, today is Judgment Day."

Tyler said the sentences will be appealed. After the sentencing, Duke said he will ask for a new trial.

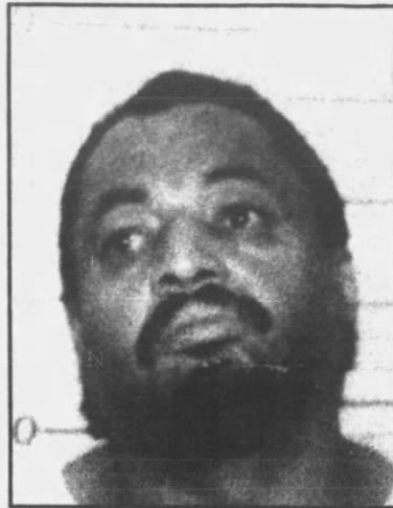
A federal jury in St. Paul convicted Duke in December of heading a drug ring from 1984 to 1989, distributing large amounts of cocaine and using firearms including an Uzi semiautomatic pistol and a .22-caliber pistol with attached silencer in connection with drug crimes.

Several relatives and associates, including convicted Los Angeles drug dealer Marvin McCaleb, testified that they conspired with Duke to distribute hundreds of pounds of cocaine in Minnesota. Much of the cocaine was transported from Houston and Los Angeles in luxury vehicles owned by Duke.

McCaleb testified that he and Duke sold 25 kilos (about 55 pounds) of cocaine a week in late 1988. And Duke's son, Ralph L. Nunn, bragged to a federal informant that his father was the biggest cocaine dealer in Minnesota and had distributed up to 75 kilos of cocaine in a two- to three-month period.

Duke, Nunn and four others were arrested in May 1989 after Nunn tried to buy 44 pounds of cocaine from the informant.

Duke contended that he supported his lavish lifestyle from illegal gambling and from his business of buying, selling and often repossessing luxury vehicles, not from dealing drugs.



Ralph (Plukey) Duke

Tyler suggested that Duke, who is black, was the victim of selective drug law enforcement.

"Maybe this is my indictment of the criminal law system in Minnesota and across the nation," Tyler said. "It's politically easy for the drug enforcement agencies to go to the black community to find the 'crack' houses. But it's not easy for them to find individuals (supplying drugs) . . . who live on yachts in Florida."

Hopeman said, however, that prosecutors and drug agents acted on repeated complaints and information about Duke from members of minority communities in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

"Members of the black community . . . call the St. Paul police and say . . . 'Get these drug dealers out of our neighborhood.' They gave specific information about who they thought was the biggest drug dealer. That's why Ralph Duke was prosecuted," he said.

"He's imparted more misery on the black community than any defendant I've ever prosecuted . . . and he got rich off of all these kids."

Hopeman said it has not been decided whether to prosecute Duke on additional charges of money laundering.