

Titan Of The Plaintiffs Bar: Panish Shea's Brian Panish

By Y. Peter Kang

Law360 (May 13, 2019, 3:03 PM EDT) -- When Rex Parris first met Brian Panish of Panish Shea & Boyle LLP, the Southern California attorney thought he was the most arrogant man he had ever met.

"There is an aloofness about him, he watches people, watches to see how they act," Parris said. "And he has this huge reputation, so you expect that from him."

That reputation as one of the country's top trial attorneys was earned through decades of record-setting verdicts, including a landmark products liability case against General Motors that ended in a \$4.9 billion verdict in 1999, which was later reduced by the trial judge to \$1.2 billion.

But Parris quickly learned that "there wasn't an arrogant bone in his body" after getting to know Panish while working as co-counsel on a suit accusing commercial trucking company CRST International of causing two brothers' catastrophic injuries in a big rig collision, which ended last year with a jury awarding the brothers **nearly \$53 million**.

Parris observed how the formidable attorney treated those around him with courtesy and civility, regardless of their standing.

"To the lowest-ranked associate, even my paralegals, he treated everybody with a great deal of respect, which I appreciated because it is how I run my office," Parris said.

And Parris found that working with Panish was one of the best experiences he's had as an attorney and he would "do it again in a heartbeat."

"Not once did we ever feel that anybody was ever trying to outdo the other person, it was all very goal-centered to get the best possible result for the client and he kept everybody on that track," he said. "He was quite the general. He kept everybody charging forward."

Panish last year also garnered a \$41.8 million verdict and subsequent **\$46 million settlement** from Southern California Gas Co. in a suit accusing the utility's employee of causing a motorcyclist's catastrophic injuries, earning him a place among **Law360's 2019 Titans of the Plaintiffs Bar**.

In his gruff, deep baritone, Panish told Law360 in a phone interview that he loves working trials, as it's one of the few professions where there is a clear-cut winner.



Brian Panish
Panish Shea & Boyle

How He Got Where He Is:

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every day.”

“Being a trial lawyer is not for everyone, you have to be willing to work and work,” he said. “I equate being in trials as cramming for finals every day. But it’s also an emotional process, and at the end of the day, there will be finality. Most things in life are not like that. Only three things in life: sports, trials, politics; that’s it. Everything else is kind of gray.”

As a former standout football player who earned a college scholarship from Fresno State where he played four years as a hybrid defensive back and linebacker, Panish tends to use a lot of sport analogies and finds a lot of similarities between football and trials.

“In a football game, not every single play will be executed as drawn up,” he said. “It’s the same in a trial, things don’t happen like you think they happen. You need to adjust. It’s like a roller coaster, it goes up and down, and you need to try and stay in the middle.”

If the Southwestern Law School graduate was a baseball player, scouts would probably write up their reports touting him as a “five-tool player,” the complete package. His colleagues say the attorney’s success can be attributed to his intelligence and near-photographic memory, his knowledge of the law, his ability to connect with a jury and explain difficult concepts in plain terms and his trial preparation and strategy skills.



Panish has won more than 100 personal injury verdicts or settlements exceeding \$10 million and six verdicts north of \$50 million.

“Number one, he’s smart. Number two, he does not forget anything that he’s ever learned,” Panish Shea attorney Dan Dunbar said. “His ability to strategize for every situation is uncanny. If he’s going to try a case, he’s going to spend so much time thinking about that case, every waking hour, and he’s probably thinking about it when he’s sleeping. On top of that, juries just love him. He’s a real person, there is no arrogance in him.”

Dunbar added that Panish takes advantage of his imposing, 6-foot-4 height and football player physique to command a courtroom and get on the good side of juries.

“He’s just a big dude,” Dunbar said. “There’s a certain presence when he’s in the courtroom. And his ability to communicate simply, on subjects that can sometimes be difficult, is phenomenal. Medical concepts, how things happen, how the experts perceive the accident, truly everything.”

Parris can personally attest to Panish’s astounding memory. While working on the CRST case last year, he mentioned to Panish that 30 years ago, he once took a meeting with Panish’s then-firm to possibly refer a big injury case, which he ended up giving to someone else. He did not know Panish at the time, but it turns out Panish was present at the meeting.

“Brian knew the client’s name, knew the attorney I had referred the case to, knew the verdict and knew the client’s wife’s name,” Parris said. “He remembered all of that stuff and had a pretty good memory of the facts. How is that possible? It wasn’t even his case!”

Despite his successful track record, the most high-profile case Panish ever handled was one he lost. He represented Michael Jackson’s mother in a 2013 wrongful death trial accusing concert promoter AEG of negligently hiring Dr. Conrad Murray, which allegedly led to the King of Pop’s drug overdose

death in 2009.

"Ah, you had to bring that one up," Panish said. "It was in the international media, it was on TV every day, and we lost. It was tough, the lawyers did a great job but the jury didn't see it our way. We left it all on the field and it wasn't enough. So I had to get back up and get to the next trial."

Panish owns his losses as much as he takes pride in winning multimillion-dollar verdicts, exhibiting a perseverance he learned through sports.

"Being in athletics taught me so much in life," he said. "It taught me about temporary setbacks. My college coach would always be positive, saying you will have turnovers, but you have to go right on to the next play. And when you lose, and it's going to happen, you have to get back up and do the best you can to improve and learn what you can from the loss."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Alyssa Miller.

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly referred to Dan Dunbar's title at Panish Shea & Boyle. The error has been corrected.