



\$23.6 Million Verdict Reached in Death of Former Fitzgerald Coach at Nursing Home



BY DONNA WILCOX — SEPTEMBER 8, 2026

FITZGERALD, Ga. — Behind a \$23.6 million jury verdict involving a South Georgia nursing home is the story of a man who spent much of his life in classrooms, gymnasiums and on ballfields — teaching and coaching generations of young people: John Owens Jr. was 76 years old when he died in 2021.

According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Owens was a longtime South Georgia educator who taught economics and coached baseball and basketball at Fitzgerald High School. He also coached in Wilcox and Dodge counties and spent time scouting for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Owens grew up near Abbeville and built a career that took him through several South Georgia school systems.

For the people who knew him through school and athletics, Owens was more than the patient at the center of a lawsuit. He was a teacher, a coach, a father and a familiar figure in South Georgia athletics. More than five years after his death, his family's legal battle over the care he received at a Fitzgerald nursing home has resulted in a \$23.6 million jury verdict.

Owens was a resident at PruittHealth-Fitzgerald when the events at the center of the lawsuit occurred. According to the family's lawsuit, Owens had behavioral difficulties associated with a previous brain injury. His sons alleged that during an overnight shift in January 2021, their father was given controlled medications that had not been prescribed to him. Owens was taken to a hospital on Jan. 27, 2021. Testing there reportedly detected morphine, lorazepam and hydrocodone in his system. According to evidence presented in the case, Owens later tested positive for unauthorized controlled medication on another

occasion. The family's attorneys argued that the medications were being used as a form of chemical restraint to control Owens' behavior.

Staffing conditions at the facility were also examined during the trial. The family alleged that two nurses were responsible for 46 residents during the overnight shift involved in the case and argued that Owens was sedated in an effort to make it easier for staff to manage other residents.

PruittHealth disputed those allegations and maintained that the facility was appropriately staffed. Evidence presented during the case also raised questions about surveillance video that was not preserved and the actions of facility administrators following the incident. Attorneys representing Owens' family alleged there were efforts to conceal what had occurred. Those allegations were among the issues presented to jurors during the approximately two-week trial.

Owens died on March 11, 2021, approximately six weeks after the January incident. His family argued that the unauthorized medications contributed to a significant decline in his condition and ultimately his death. PruittHealth disputed that connection. The company maintained that Owens received appropriate care and contended that his death resulted from pneumonia and related medical problems, rather than the administration of unauthorized medication.

Ultimately, the jury sided with the Owens family on the central claims. Following the trial, a Gwinnett County jury found that negligence caused Owens' fatal injuries and also found a violation of rights afforded to residents of Georgia long-term care facilities.

The verdict included approximately:

- \$12.6 million awarded to Owens' estate for pain and suffering.
- \$11 million awarded to his surviving family for the value of his life.

Together, the awards total \$23.6 million, in addition to applicable court costs and interest. The judgment involved PruittHealth-Fitzgerald LLC, PruittHealth Inc. and United Health Services of Georgia Inc.

The verdict may not be the end of the legal case. PruittHealth has publicly said it strongly disagrees with the jury's decision and believes legal and evidentiary issues warrant additional review. The company has indicated it plans to pursue post-trial and appellate options. PruittHealth also expressed sympathy to the Owens family while continuing to dispute allegations of wrongdoing and maintaining its commitment to providing quality care. That means the \$23.6 million verdict could still face additional legal challenges.

For South Georgia, however, there is another side to the story. Long before his name appeared in court filings, John Owens Jr. was known through the schools and athletic programs where he spent his career. His work took him into classrooms and onto fields and courts in communities including Fitzgerald, Wilcox County and Dodge County. His connection to baseball even carried him into professional scouting.

The lawsuit centered on what happened during the final weeks of his life. But for those who knew Coach Owens, those weeks represented only a small part of a life spent teaching, coaching and working with young people across South Georgia. Five years after his death, a jury has now placed a monetary value on the damages resulting from his final care. For his family and the communities where he spent his career, his life amounted to much more than the \$23.6 million figure now attached to the case.