

**Shapira v Lifetech Resources** 4/17/18

**Code of Civil Procedure section 581; Voluntary Dismissal  
Prior to Final Submission of Case**

Appellant Achikam Shapira sued his former employer, Lifetech Resources, LLC, for breach of an employment contract on June 26, 2015. He alleged that he and Lifetech entered into a written contract on March 1, 2015, to “retain the services of Shapira as a consultant and its director of international development” for one of Lifetech’s products. Shapira asserted that he was entitled to eight months’ compensation, loss of commissions, and other damages.

The case proceeded to a four-day bench trial on December 15, 16, 19, and 20, 2016. The facts of the case are not relevant to the issues on appeal, and therefore we do not recount them here. On the third day of trial, the court asked the parties whether they wanted to do closing arguments orally or in written briefs; Shapira’s counsel stated that the parties had agreed to submit written briefs. The following day, at the end of the presentation of evidence, the parties and court agreed that Shapira’s closing argument brief would be due January 3, Lifetech’s closing argument brief would be due January 17, and Shapira’s reply would be due January 24, 2017. The court then stated, **“The matter will stand submitted – upon receipt of the reply, the matter will stand submitted.”** Shapira’s counsel

**asked, “As of the reply brief?” The court responded, “As of the reply brief.”** The proceedings concluded shortly thereafter.

Ten days later, on December 30, 2016, the parties filed a stipulation to adjust the briefing schedule due to an emergency in Shapira’s counsel’s family. The parties agreed that Shapira’s brief would be due January 10, Lifetech’s brief would be due January 24, and Shapira’s reply would be due January 31, 2017.

On January 6, **Shapira filed an ex parte application requesting that the case be dismissed with prejudice.** The application stated, “Plaintiff has elected to exercise his right to voluntarily dismiss the action with prejudice pursuant to **California Code of Civil Procedure section 581(e).**”

**Section 581(e) states, “After the actual commencement of trial, the court shall dismiss the complaint, or any causes of action asserted in it, in its entirety or as to any defendants, with prejudice, if the plaintiff requests a dismissal, unless all affected parties to the trial consent to dismissal without prejudice or by order of the court dismissing the same without prejudice on a showing of good cause..”**

Lifetech opposed the ex parte application. It said that Lifetech made numerous attempts to settle the case before trial, but Shapira refused to settle. The case thus proceeded to a full

trial, which was complete except for closing argument briefing. When Shapira's counsel informed Lifetech's counsel that Shapira wanted to dismiss the case, Lifetech asked Shapira to agree that the dismissal was not "voluntary" for purposes of section 1717(b)(2). Shapira refused. **Lifetech argued that the dismissal was "a transparent attempt to avoid the 'prevailing party's' contractual right to attorney's fees."** Lifetech argued that the right to dismiss is extinguished once a case has been "submitted at trial." Lifetech said that section 1717(b)(2) was intended to encourage plaintiffs to dismiss contract litigation that lacks merit, and "here, Shapira had multiple opportunities to dismiss this action, and even accept a settlement prior to trial, yet . . . forced Lifetech to defend its case at trial . . . . Should the Court allow Shapira to 'voluntarily dismiss this case after all four days of trial and after all of the evidence was submitted by the parties, in order to avoid his contractual duties, the entire purpose of this statute would be annihilated."

The trial court denied Shapira's request to dismiss at a hearing on January 6, 2017. The minute order does not include a statement explaining the reasons for the court's decision, and there is no reporter's transcript in the record on appeal.

Shapira filed a document titled "Plaintiff's Notice of Voluntary Dismissal" on January 10, 2017. He acknowledged that the court had denied his previous request, but stated that

he wanted to create a record for appeal and therefore “respectfully submits this notice of renewed voluntary dismissal of the case.” Shapira again relied on section 581(e), and argued that voluntary dismissal is available any time before closing arguments are complete. In a declaration supporting the request, Shapira’s counsel stated that at the time Shapira initially requested dismissal, “the Court had not ruled on the merits of the action and no request for involuntary dismissal had been made or was pending.” Shapira filed his closing argument brief the same day.

Lifetech filed an opposition to Shapira’s renewed request for dismissal, arguing that it was an attempt to circumvent the court’s previous order denying the request. On January 20, the trial court issued a minute order stating that Lifetech’s “objection is sustained. Shapira’s Notice of Voluntary Dismissal filed January 10, 2017 is rejected – the Court previously denied Plaintiff’s ex parte application for dismissal on January 6, 2017.”

Lifetech filed its closing argument brief as scheduled, and Shapira filed his reply. On February 9, 2017, the court issued a tentative statement of decision holding that Shapira failed to perform under the contract and failed to demonstrate that Lifetech breached the contract, and Lifetech was entitled to costs and attorney fees. Lifetech and Shapira each requested a

statement of decision, and Shapira objected to several of the findings in the tentative ruling. The court overruled Shapira's objections, and issued a final statement of decision finding for Lifetech and awarding Lifetech costs and attorney fees. **The court entered judgment on March 17, 2017, awarding Lifetech costs and attorney fees in an amount to be determined.**

Lifetech filed a motion seeking \$167,046.50 in attorney fees and \$15,638 in costs. It argued that the contract provided that in the event of legal action, the prevailing party was to recover all costs and expenses, including attorney fees. **Lifetech asserted that it was the prevailing party under Civil Code section 1717.**

Shapira opposed Lifetech's motion. Again Shapira argued that he had an absolute right to voluntarily dismiss the case before final arguments were complete. He asserted that "the plaintiff has the absolute right to dismiss the case prior to submission." Shapira argued that the case had not been "submitted" to the court because the parties had not yet filed their closing argument briefs, and said, "Given Shapira's absolute right to dismiss, and his timely request for dismissal prior to submission of the matter, the Court should deny Lifetech's motion for attorney's fees pursuant to California Civil Code section 1717(b)(2) which precludes an award of

attorney's fees where the plaintiff has voluntarily dismissed his action prior to an adjudication on the merits having been rendered."

At the hearing on Lifetech's motion, Shapira's counsel cited a **Rutter Group** practice guide entry that said, "'If you go to trial but find things going badly for your client, consider a voluntary dismissal rather than proceeding to judgment. Even though the dismissal will be with prejudice at this point because during trial it may still save your client a lot of money in attorney's fees.'" The parties also presented arguments about whether the requested attorney fees were reasonable.

In ruling on the motion, the court stated, "So, when we talk about trying to voluntarily dismiss something in between the time that the evidence is submitted to the court, and the time that closing briefs arrive, I can't imagine – I can't imagine under any circumstance that you could just voluntarily dismiss – well, it looks like a losing battle here, so I am going to avoid the attorney's fees – that's just sabotage. It is sandbag. It is improper." The court later added, "We had had a full trial, and you want to come in at the last minute recognizing that, perhaps, your client is in peril and avoid the attorney's fees? No." Counsel for Shapria noted that the Rutter Group practice guide said dismissal under the circumstances was allowed, and

the court responded, "I think your interpretation of Rutter under these facts is inapposite. So, in any event, I think the attorney's fees are appropriate. There was a great deal of work that went into this case. I have reduced the attorney's fees in light of the fact that I did find some excess, but I think \$137,000 is reasonable."

**The court therefore granted Lifetech's motion and awarded \$137,000 in attorney fees.** Shapira timely appealed.

The Second District Court of Appeal noted that the appeal presents a single issue: Did Shapira have a right to voluntarily dismiss his case after the parties rested but before closing arguments were complete? If Shapira did have the right to voluntarily dismiss the case at that stage of trial, the court erred by denying the dismissal. If the court erred, then pursuant to the terms of section 1717(b)(2), Lifetech was not the prevailing party and attorney fees should not have been awarded.

**Code of Civil Procedure section 581** sets out the circumstances in which a plaintiff may voluntarily dismiss a case, and when such a dismissal may be deemed without prejudice. Subdivision (d) states that a court "shall" dismiss a complaint with prejudice, "when upon the trial and before the

final submission of the case, the plaintiff abandons it.” And subdivision (e) says, “After the actual commencement of trial, the court shall dismiss the complaint, or any causes of action asserted in it, in its entirety or as to any defendants, with prejudice, if the plaintiff requests a dismissal. . . .” In his ex parte request and later “notice of voluntary dismissal,” Shapira requested that the court dismiss the case pursuant to section 581(e).

Below and on appeal, the parties focus on whether the case had been “submitted” at the time Shapira requested dismissal, reasoning that “submission” of the case marks the end of the time frame in which a plaintiff may voluntarily dismiss a case. This line of reasoning seems to be based on language in section 581, subdivision (d), which states that dismissal is warranted where plaintiff has “abandoned” a case “upon the trial and before the final submission of the case.”

The Justices are not convinced that the language of subdivision (d) controls here. Shapira requested dismissal of the case under section 581(e), not subdivision (d). However, because the parties reasonably assume there is an outer limit within which a plaintiff may dismiss a case under section 581(e), and they assume that “submission” defines that outer limit, they too will assume without deciding that a plaintiff



may dismiss a case under section 581(e) at any time before the case has been submitted.

The question therefore becomes whether the case had been submitted at the time Shapira requested dismissal. It had not. **California Rules of Court, rule 2.900(a)**—which neither party cites—is titled “**Submission of a cause in a trial court.**” It states that a “cause is deemed submitted” in the earlier of two circumstances: when “the . . . court orders the matter submitted,” or on “the date the final paper is required to be filed or the date argument is heard, whichever is later.” The California Supreme Court has stated, “A case is deemed to be under submission when the court, trying the case without a jury, has heard the evidence *and the arguments of counsel* and has taken the case under advisement.” (*Jalof v. Robbins* (1941) 19 Cal.2d 233, 235)

**The record demonstrates that the court had not ordered the matter submitted when Shapira first requested dismissal.** When the parties rested at the end of trial and discussed the schedule for filing their closing argument briefs, the court said, “Upon receipt of the reply, the matter will stand submitted.” Later, at the hearing on Lifetech’s motion for attorney fees, the court said, “I want to be perfectly clear here. Counsel opted to brief the closing as opposed to doing the closing in open court,

which made sense. . . . That, in no way, suggests that the matter was submitted. There is no submission here.” Moreover, when Shapira requested dismissal, closing arguments were not complete and the date to file the “final paper” had not passed. (Cal. Rules of Court, rule 2.900(a).) As a result, the case had not been submitted. Assuming that “submission” of a case marks the latest time that a plaintiff may voluntarily dismiss the case under section 581(e), that deadline had not yet passed.

Lifetech asserts that nevertheless, “the Court has discretion to determine that a request for voluntary dismissal is untimely.” This contention is not supported by the statutory language or the case law Lifetech cites. Section 581(e) states that after commencement of trial, a court “shall dismiss the complaint . . . with prejudice, if the plaintiff requests a dismissal.” The use of “shall” in the statute suggests that dismissal is mandatory. (See, e.g., *Tarrant Bell Property, LLC v. Superior Court* (2011) 51 Cal.4th 538, 542) **Nothing in the statute suggests that a court has discretion to refuse to dismiss the case entirely.**

Case law also does not support Lifetech’s contention that dismissal under section 581(e) is discretionary. For example, Lifetech cites *Bank of America, N.A. v. Mitchell* (2012) 204 Cal.App.4th 1199, in which the plaintiff bank filed a complaint,

the defendant demurred, and the trial court sustained the demurrer without leave to amend. The plaintiff bank then filed a request for dismissal, which apparently was denied. The court granted the defendant's request for attorney fees. On appeal, the bank argued that the trial court should not have awarded attorney fees, because the bank had a right to dismiss the case under section 581, subdivision (b)(1), which addresses the right to dismiss a case before trial. This Division held that "the Bank no longer had the right to voluntarily dismiss under section 581," because "the trial court had already made a determinative adjudication on the legal merits of the Bank's claim." The court further explained that "the trial court had already sustained Mitchell's demurrer without leave to amend, and thus judgment against the Bank had already 'ripened to the point of inevitability.'" As a result, "the Bank no longer had the right to voluntarily dismiss its action, either with or without prejudice." This case is inapposite, because here the court did not rule on the merits of the case before Shapira sought to dismiss it.

Lifetech argues that Shapira's dismissal was void because the trial court "did not determine at the close of trial that it would defer the final submission of the case until after the closing briefs; it issued its order 'deeming' the matter already submitted at the 1/13/17 ex parte application hearing; and it

reiterated its decision at the attorney's fees hearing." The only record citations for these statements are to Lifetech's own notice of ruling and a declaration by Lifetech's counsel. There is no indication from the court itself that this was its holding. Indeed, these assertions directly contradict the court's own statements. At the close of trial, the court said, "Upon receipt of the reply brief, the matter will stand submitted." And to ensure there was no confusion about that issue, the court stated at the attorney fees hearing that the parties' choice to present closing arguments in briefs "in no way, suggests that the matter was submitted. There is no submission here."

It is clear, therefore, that the trial court did not deny Shapira's request to dismiss on the basis that the case had been "submitted" at the time Shapira requested to dismiss. Instead, the court appears to have denied Shapira's dismissal request on fairness grounds based on the anticipated award of attorney fees under section 1717. The court noted that there had been a full trial, and stated, "I can't imagine under any circumstance that you could just voluntarily dismiss – well, it looks like a losing battle here, so I am going to avoid the attorney's fees – that's just sabotage. It is sandbag. It is improper." The court also stated, "I think the attorney's fees are appropriate. There was a great deal of work that went into this case."

**Although the court’s position is understandable from a fairness perspective,** its reliance on Shapira’s rationale in refusing to dismiss the case was erroneous under the law. “The question of whether a plaintiff’s voluntary dismissal is timely under section 581 depends upon—and must remain tethered to—a reasonable construction and application” of the statutory language, and “a plaintiff’s subjective lack of good faith in seeking a dismissal does not, by itself, terminate the statutory right to dismiss.” (*Lewis C. Nelson & Sons, Inc. v. Lynx Iron Corp.* (2009) 174 Cal.App.4th 67, 78.)

The court therefore erred by awarding attorney fees to Lifetech as prevailing party. Because the case should have been dismissed, section 1717(b)(2) barred an award of attorney fees: **“Where an action has been voluntarily dismissed or dismissed pursuant to a settlement of the case, there shall be no prevailing party for purposes of this section.”** A trial court lacks discretion to award fees under section 1717(b)(2) where a case has been voluntarily dismissed. (See, e.g., *Gogri v. Jack In The Box Inc.* (2008) 166 Cal.App.4th 255; *Mesa Shopping Center-East, LLC v. Hill* (2014) 232 Cal.App.4th 890, 903.)

Section 1717(b)(2) helps “encourage parties to dismiss pointless litigation.” (*Ford Motor Credit Co. v. Hunsberger* (2008) 163 Cal.App.4th 1526, 1531.) Had the Legislature intended

section 1717(b)(2) to apply only to *pretrial* dismissals, or to otherwise set a time limitation cutting off the application of section 1717(b)(2), the DCA assumes it would have stated as much. As section 1717(b)(2) exists now, there is no such limitation.

Shapira voluntarily dismissed his case after the commencement of trial, and before the case had been submitted to the court for decision. The court did not state that the case was under submission, and it had not given any indication that it was inclined to rule against Shapira on the merits. Shapira had a right to dismiss the case under section 581(e), and as a result, pursuant to section 1717(b)(2) Lifetech was not a prevailing party entitled to attorney fees. The court erred by refusing to honor Shapira's dismissal, and by awarding Lifetech attorney fees as prevailing party.

The order of the court awarding attorney fees is reversed, and the case is remanded for further proceedings consistent with this opinion. Shapira is entitled to costs on appeal.