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Court hears of Qatari's death

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LONDON // The fracas on the seafront in Hastings that led to the death of Mohammed al Majed, 16, last summer began when an English youth threw a punch at one of the student's friends because he was black.

Soon, the Qatari teenager lay dead on the kerb as a group of drunk, racist thugs pummeled him, a court heard yesterday.

George Austin, now 22 and from south London, is alleged to have hit Mohammed so hard in the face that he flew backwards and struck his head on the kerb, sustaining serious brain injuries.

Mohammed, who had been studying English in the south coast resort in the summer of last year and had been due to return to his home in Doha a week later, died three days later in hospital in London.

Camden Pratt QC, prosecuting, told the jury at Lewes Crown Court that Mohammed and his friends, most of whom were from the Gulf, were chatting outside a seafront kebab shop late in the evening in August last year when a group of young, English men and women approached. Mr Pratt said there was an essential difference between the two groups: the students were sober while the English youths had been drinking heavily.

The court heard that trouble started when the white group began taunting the students. Paul Rockett, 21, went up to Peter Henworth, 17, a student from Nigeria, and demanded: "Where are you from?"

He then attempted to punch the Nigerian but missed. As the students fled, one of the English youths called after them: "Come back here, you nigger."

Mr Pratt told the court: "That's what he did and that's what started the incident ... which led to the shameful events that followed.



"They picked on [Mr Henworth] because he was black – because of their presumption of his race and by reason of their prejudice. The group of white men ran after him but simply could not catch him."

Mr Pratt said that when the violence flared, Mohammed took shelter in the kebab shop with Abdullah Alnowais, 16, his cousin, and Moheb Qatani, 14, from Saudi Arabia. After a while they made a run for it, only to encounter Mr Austin outside.

"The Crown says that George Austin ran at Mohammed and punched him right in the face," said Mr Pratt. "It was so hard it knocked Mohammed off his feet and effectively into the air with the force of impact.

"Mohammed went backwards through the air, striking the back of his head on the road. Some witnesses indicated that he immediately may have begun convulsing."

Mr Pratt said Moheb was then hit on the head with a bottle by Alex Quinn, 19. By the time police arrived, Mr Austin and Mr Quinn had fled, while Mr Rockett was arrested for being drunk.

The jury heard that Mohammed initially regained consciousness and was held in a police van before being taken to hospital by ambulance, where he was found to be suffering from a fractured skull and a brain haemorrhage.

The morning after the attack he was transferred from a local hospital to a specialist brain injury unit at King's College Hospital in London. Two days later, he went into cardiac arrest and died.

"That cardiac arrest was a direct result of the head injury that was caused by George Austin's assault," Mr Pratt told the court,



Police outside the USA Fried Chicken and Kebab House in Hastings, where Mohammed al Majed was struck. **Randy Quan** for **The National**

watched by Mohammed's family in the public gallery.

At the time of his death, Mohammed had been in Britain for about five weeks, studying English at the EF International Language School in Hastings.

Mr Rockett and Mr Quinn later claimed that Mohammed and his friends had started the fight and were a gang who were "trying to turn all the kids into Muslims".

Mr Austin flew to Cyprus within days of the incident, claiming that he did not know Mohammed had died. He was arrested at Gatwick Airport when he flew back to Britain in November.

Mr Austin, who has been held in custody since his arrest, accepts that he hit Mohammed but claims that it was in self-defence. He denies a charge of manslaughter.

Mr Rockett, from Etchingam, East Sussex, denies racially aggravated assault while Mr Quinn, from Hastings, denies unlawful wounding.

The trial is expected to last up to a month.

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