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Did Michael Russell (right) fire at officers in a '98 Cabrini shootout, as police contend?
Or, as other participants allege, was he just a bystander shot to death by police?

No gun, plenty of doubts



By Steve Mills
and Todd Lighty
Tribune staff reporters

Five years ago, after Chicago police killed Michael Russell with a single gunshot wound in the back, officials declared the shooting a justified use of deadly force.

The 20-year-old Russell, officials said, had wounded another man in a gang shooting outside a Cabrini-Green high-rise building and then allegedly turned

his gun toward two officers, though he never fired at them.

But the story of Michael Russell's death is far more complicated and marked by contradictions. It pits police officers against prosecutors, with the officers insisting Russell touched off the gunfire while prosecutors allowed another man to plead guilty to being the gunman. It includes an internal investigation that found the officers made false statements, though the finding was later

overruled.

And at the heart of the case is the allegation that Russell was an innocent bystander who was killed in a fusillade of 20 police gunshots and that officers engaged in a cover-up to justify the shooting.

Even the man who was wounded and the man who pleaded guilty to shooting him—members of rival gangs—agreed in interviews that Russell had no involvement in what happened on the night of April

5, 1998.

Prosecutors, though, remain confident of their version of events—that Russell and fellow gang member Craig Winn staged the ambush of Marrio Morgan and that both consequently are responsible under the law—despite some police accounts to the contrary.

“Both of these guys were guilty under the law to what [Winn] pled to. Both men would

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