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Frequent Fieger foe wins the quiet way

He says flamboyant attorney's style often plays into his hands

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BY DAWSON BELL

FREE PRESS LANSING BUREAU

John Jacobs is no Geoffrey Fieger. He's not as glib, as handsome or as well dressed. Unlike Fieger, Jacobs is not a celebrity. He won't be profiled in GQ magazine, as Fieger was last fall, or pegged for stardom in a prime-time network TV courtroom series, as Fieger is now.

They both have law offices in Southfield, and you might say that is where the resemblance ends.

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You might even call Jacobs an anti-Fieger.

And, at least in court, you would be right.

Jacobs, a 55-year-old Grosse Pointe and appellate defense lawyer, has made the deconstruction of Fieger trial court victories something of a specialty.

During the last 18 months, his work has resulted in the vaporization of \$40 million Michigan juries said was owed to Fieger and his clients. Jacobs claims to have faced Fieger more than a dozen times in post-trial legal action over the years, and lost just once.

With perhaps a touch of false modesty, he credits that record as much to Fieger's trial performance as to his own talents.

"I've told him several times," Jacobs said. "Why do you act like that? It's unnecessary. It makes my job so easy."

Fieger, not surprisingly, disagrees. Jacobs and the other defense lawyers who have picked Fieger's pocket at the appeals court are the beneficiaries of an increasingly conservative Michigan judicial system that abhors large jury

verdicts, Fieger said.

Nor is Jacobs an especially formidable attorney, according to Fieger.

He's just "the guy hired by the insurance companies," he said. "If Jacobs tried the cases, the verdicts would be bigger."

Jacobs doesn't necessarily argue with that assessment.

He admits to a healthy self-regard and bristles at what he believes is a media infatuation with "the Great Geoffrey." But he considers himself a plodding "book lawyer" and says he's "not smart enough to do trial work."

Another prominent southeast Michigan lawyer who knows both men and asked not to be identified said there's no shortage of ego, or legal skill, on either side of the Fieger-Jacobs rivalry.

And the anti-Fieger has at least a few other characteristics in common with his nemesis.

Jacobs says he's a liberal Democrat who shares with Fieger a disdain for lawsuit-reform-minded Republicans.

But you won't ever mix them up in court.

"He's a lot taller. I come up about to his belt," Jacobs said.

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