

Equitable Distribution

Post-Trial Issues

- I. **Entry of Judgment.** Rule 58 of NC Rules of Civil Procedure
 - a. See generally discussion of entry of ED judgments in Bench Book, Family Law Volume, Equitable Distribution, Chapter 6.
 - b. Judgment is not entered until reduced to writing, signed by judge and filed with the clerk of court.
 - i. A memorandum of judgment is an entered judgment if signed by judge and filed with clerk of court. *See Buckingham v. Buckingham*, 134 NC App 82 (1999).
 - ii. Until judgment is entered, judge can reopen evidence and hear additional testimony or take additional evidence. *See In re B.S.O.*, 225 NC App 541 (2013); *Wade v. Wade*, 72 NC App 372 (1985).
 - iii. *Nunc pro tunc* does not work to backdate a judgment unless judgment actually was fully rendered at end of trial AND court determines no prejudice will result to either party if judgment is backdated. *Whitworth v. Whitworth*, 222 NC App 771 (2012).
 - c. Rule 52(a)(1) of the Rules of Civil Procedure requires that the trial court make findings of fact, conclusions of law and direct entry of an appropriate judgment.
 - i. All conclusions of law must be supported by findings of fact.
 1. See Bench Cars for required findings of fact
 - ii. The following conclusions of law are required in ED judgments:
 1. List of all marital and divisible property
 2. Net value of all marital and divisible property
 3. Whether an equal division is equitable
 4. If distributive award is ordered, conclusion that presumption in favor of in-kind distribution has been rebutted

- d. Delay in entry of judgment can result in retrial of distribution stage of ED trial. *Wall v. Wall*, 140 NC App 303 (2000)(30 to 60 day delay is understandable; 19 month delay requires retrial); *Plomaritis v. Plomaritis*, 222 NC App 94 (18 month delay required retrial). *See Nicks v. Nicks*, 241 NC App 365 (2015)(changes in value of marital or divisible property or changes in the circumstances of the parties between the date of trial and the date of entry of judgment can establish prejudice from an unreasonable delay in the entry of judgment).
- e. Consent Judgments
 - i. Consent judgment is void if consent of the parties does not exist at the time judge signs the consent judgment. *McIntosh v. McIntosh*, 74 NC App 554 (2007); *Chance v. Henderson*, 134 NC App 657 (1999).
 - ii. Agreements reached in family financial mediation.
 - 1. Rules regarding the finalizing of agreements reached during ED and Family Financial Mediations are found in Rules of Court volume of General Statutes.
 - 2. Rule 4(B)(4) of the Rules Implementing Settlement Procedures in Equitable Distribution and Other Family Financial Cases provides that no agreement reached during mediation is enforceable unless it is reduced to writing, signed by the parties and acknowledged as required by GS 50-20(d)[must be acknowledged in same manner as separation and property settlement agreements].
 - 3. Rules do not explicitly provide for entry of judgment based on the written agreement.
 - 4. While an acknowledged, written agreement is enforceable, it is not clear court is authorized to enter a judgment on the agreement if a party objects to entry of judgment. *See Milner v. Littlejohn*, 126 NC App 184 (1997)(judgment entered based on written agreement signed by parties, their attorneys and the judge had to be set aside where wife objected to agreement before judgment was entered).

II. Post-Judgment Motions

- a. Motion to Amend Judgment

- i. Rule 52(b)
 - 1. If a motion is filed within 10 days of entry of judgment, the court may amend its findings of fact or make additional findings and amend the judgment accordingly.
 - 2. The rule also allows amendment of conclusions of law.
- ii. Rule 59
 - 1. If a motion is filed within 10 days of entry of judgment, or on the court's own motion within 10 days of entry of judgment, the court may order a new trial.
 - 2. Since ED is not a jury matter, the court can order a complete new trial or simply reopen the evidence regarding specific issues. Rule 59.
 - 3. *Shropshire v. Shropshire*, 284 NC App 92 (2022)(trial court had discretion to reopen evidence sua sponte and require parties to produce additional evidence).
- iii. Unlike child and spousal support and custody, a trial court has no authority to modify an equitable distribution judgment, other than as allowed by Rules 52 and 59 discussed above. *See Whitworth v. Whitworth*, 222 NC App 771 (2012).
 - 1. Regarding DROs and QDROs, see section V. below.
- iv. Rule 60 motions
 - 1. Rule 60(a) to fix clerical mistakes
 - 1. Used to correct oversights or omissions at any time on court's own motion or on motion of a party.
 - 2. Rule 60(a) cannot be used to affect the substantive rights of the parties or to correct substantive errors in a judgment.
 - 3. Okay to use Rule 60(a) to change QDRO to require wife to pay all fees and penalties associated with the lump sum transfer of sums from husband's retirement account where original order did not address the fees and penalties, but other orders entered at same time showed clearly that failure to include the fee and penalty provision was an oversight and omission. *Lee v. Lee*, 167 NC App 250 (2004).

4. Okay to use Rule 60(a) to change date at which interest began to accrue on a distributive award to the date of the amended ED judgment rather than the original ED judgment. *Ice v. Ice*, 136 NC App 787 (2000).
2. Rule 60(b) to “relieve a party ... from a final judgment, order or proceeding” under circumstances listed in the Rule.
 1. Rule 60(b) cannot be used to correct errors of law. *Roark v. Yandle*, 283 NC App 223 (2022).
3. The appellate courts have stated numerous times that Rule 60(b) cannot be used to modify or amend a judgment, *see e.g., White v. White*, 152 NC App 588 (2002), but the court also has upheld a modification of an ED judgment pursuant to Rule 60(b). *See Harris v. Harris*, 162 NC App 511 (2004)(modification of QDRO).
4. A trial court cannot use Rule 60(b) to nullify or avoid one or more of the legal effects of a judgment while leaving the judgment itself intact. Rule 60(b) requires that the entire judgment be set aside. *See Howell v. Howell*, 321 NC 87 (1987)(trial court erred when it tried to set aside “effects” of divorce judgment without actually setting aside the divorce in order to allow party to assert claim for ED).
5. The decision whether to grant relief pursuant to Rule 60(b)(6) always is a discretionary one for the trial court.
6. Okay to use Rule 60(b)(6) to set aside order where after ED judgment entered, wife learned husband had encumbered a marital asset in violation of the injunction entered in the ED case while it was pending and the encumbered asset was awarded to wife in ED judgment. *Sloan v. Sloan*, 151 NC App 399 (2002).
7. Okay to refuse to set aside ED judgment because of significant decline in value of stock market after distribution. *Lee v. Lee*, 167 NC App 250 (2004). Court states there must be extraordinary, unforeseeable circumstances to justify use of Rule 60(b)(6).
8. Okay to use Rule 60(b) to set aside QDRO providing husband would pay a distributive award from husband’s retirement account “plus gains and losses from the date of separation” where parties’ agreement clearly showed intent for wife to receive only

the amount of the distributive award. *Harris v. Harris*, 162 NC App 511 (2004).

III. Remand from Appellate Court

- a. See generally discussion of remand procedure in ED cases in Bench Book, Family Law Volume, Chapter 6, Equitable Distribution.
- b. Trial court should carefully follow remand instruction from appellate court whenever such instructions are given.
- c. Unless specifically ordered otherwise by the appellate court, trial court generally has discretion to determine whether to rely on existing record or to hear additional arguments from parties and/or take additional evidence. See *Smith v. Smith*, 111 NC App 460 (1994).
- d. At least one case has held that anytime a case is remanded for reconsideration of distribution, the trial court should allow parties to present evidence on any distribution factor that has changed since time of original hearing. See *Fox v. Fox*, 114 NC App 125 (1994). See also *Hill v. Hill*, unpublished, 259 NC App 732 (2018)(where marital estate changed on remand, trial court was required to modify distribution even though original distribution had been affirmed on appeal).

IV. Enforcement of Judgment. See generally discussion of enforcement remedies in ED cases in Bench Book, Family Law Volume, Chapter 6, Equitable Distribution.

- a. One unpublished opinion has held that the ten-year statute of limitations found in G.S. 1-47(1) bars motions for contempt and Rule 70 requests to enforce provisions in an equitable distribution judgment made more than 10 years after the entry of the judgment. *Welsh v. Welsh*, unpublished, 278 N.C. App. 375 (2021). However, in *Welsh v. Welsh*, 288 NC App 627 (2023)(“Welsh II”), the court of appeals held that entry of a QDRO or DRO is not subject to a statute of limitations because the entry of the QDRO or DRO is not an “action on a judgment” but rather it is a completion of the entry of the equitable distribution judgment.
- b. Contempt
 - i. ED judgment is enforceable by contempt. *Conrad v. Conrad*, 82 NC App 758 (1986).
 - ii. Trial court has no authority to order the payment of compensatory damages in a contempt matter. See *Hartsell v. Hartsell*, 99 NC App 380 (1990)(error for trial court to order husband to pay wife damages for

repair and clean-up when he failed to deliver home to wife in good condition).

- iii. However, trial court can award attorney fees in a contempt proceeding even though attorney fees are not available in the underlying ED proceeding. *Hartsell v. Hartsell*, 99 NC App 380 (1990).
- iv. Unlike custody, child support and alimony, ED judgments cannot be enforced by contempt while the ED judgment is on appeal. *Guerrier v. Guerrier*, 155 NC App 154 (2002). However, violations of the judgment may be punished by contempt when appeal is complete. See *Joyner v. Joyner*, 256 NC 588 (1962)(One who violates order while appeal is pending does so at his own peril. If order is upheld on appeal, violation may be punished when jurisdiction is returned to trial court).

c. Execution

- i. In *Romulus v. Romulus*, 216 NC App 28 (2011), the court of appeals held that execution is available for the enforcement of a distributive award.
- ii. Execution is not stayed by appeal unless a bond is posted pursuant to GS 1-289.
- iii. However, appeal does divest trial court of jurisdiction. So if a distributive award is ordered to be paid in periodic payments, the trial court cannot determine the amount presently due and payable and therefore subject to execution, while the appeal is pending. *Romulus*.

d. Rule 70 of Rules of Civil Procedure

- i. "If a judgment directs a party to execute a conveyance of land or to deliver deeds or other documents or to perform any specific act and the party fails to comply within the time specified, the judge may direct the act to be done at the cost of the disobedient party by some other person appointed by the judge and the act when so done has like effect as if done by the party." See *Martin v. Roberts*, 177 NC App 415 (2006).
- ii. For real or personal property located in this state, the judge also may enter a judgment divesting the title of any party and vesting it in others.
- iii. ED judgment actually can transfer or convey title without the need to use Rule 70, but to so, the judgment itself must contain everything required for deeds and other instruments of conveyance. *Martin v. Roberts*.
- iv. A Rule 70 order is not entered until reduced to writing, signed by the judge and filed with the clerk of court. *Dabbondanza v. Hansley*, 249 NC

App 18 (2016)(oral directive from judge to the clerk was not sufficient to give clerk the authority to sign the deed).

V. QDRO Issues

a. Modification or correction of DRO or QDRO after entry

i. G.S. 50-21(i) now provides:

1. If a plan, program, system, or fund deems unacceptable an order providing for a distribution of pension, retirement, or deferred compensation benefits, then the court may upon motion of a party enter a subsequent order clarifying or correcting its prior order, as may be necessary to comply with the specific technical requirements of the plan, program, system, or fund.
2. S.L. 2019-172. Applies to distributions made on or after October 1, 2019.

ii. Rule 60(a) can be used to correct a clerical mistake in a DRO or QDRO.

The key is determining when a mistake is clerical and when it is more substantive.

1. Okay to use Rule 60(a) to change QDRO to require wife to pay all fees and penalties associated with the lump sum transfer of money from husband's retirement account where original order did not address the fees and penalties. *Lee v. Lee*, 167 NC App 250 (2004). Other QDROs entered in the case included the fees and penalties provision, making it obvious the exclusion was a result of an "oversight or omission".
2. *Cf. Morris v. Gray*, 181 NC App 552 (2007) where court of appeals held trial court erred in entering a new QDRO when original employer declared bankruptcy and new entity became administrator of plan. Appellate court said trial court may have considered motion pursuant to Rule 59 or 60(b).

iii. Rule 60(b)

1. The court of appeals has held that a Rule 60(b) motion cannot be used to amend a QDRO because while Rule 60(b) allows a party to seek relief from a judgment, it does not authorize a court to amend a judgment. *White v. White*, 152 NC App 588 (2002). *But*

cf. Harris v. Harris, 162 NC App 511 (2004)(modification of QDRO to reflect agreement originally entered between the parties).

2. Rule 60(b) is the appropriate rule for attacking the validity of a QDRO on the basis of a lack of subject matter jurisdiction. *Hillard v. Hillard*, 733 SE2d 176 (NC App 2012).

iv. Motion in the Cause to Amend QDRO

1. Generally, the trial court has no subject matter jurisdiction to act in a case after final resolution of all pending claims. *See Whitworth*.
2. While postjudgment motions allowed by the Rules of Civil Procedure are available in ED cases as in all other civil cases, there is no authorization of continuing jurisdiction after final resolution of the case, as there usually is in custody and support actions where court has statutory authority to modify judgments based on changed circumstances. *Whitworth*.
3. However, courts always retain jurisdiction to enforce judgments. *Whitworth, citing Wildcat v. Smith*, 69 NC App 1 (1984).
4. In addition, the court in *White v. White*, 152 NC App 588 (2002), held that the trial court had jurisdiction to consider a motion in the cause filed by party seeking to amend a DRO originally entered approximately 11 years earlier to divide a military pension. According to the court in *White*, the federal law regarding division of military pensions (10 USC sec. 1408(d)) expressly contemplates that military pension division orders may be modified. In addition, the original trial court order had expressly stated that the division order “shall remain in effect until further orders of the court.” Because the amendment in the *White* case was based on fact that after entry of the original DRO, husband elected to waive his military retirement in order to receive military disability thereby significantly reducing former wife’s share of his monthly payment, the motion in the cause may be considered a method of enforcing the original ED judgment which ordered that wife receive “one-half of the [former husband’s] pension accumulated during the marriage.” See discussion in section V.b. below.

b. Waiver of Military Pension Pay for Disability Pay

- i. The federal Uniformed Services Former Spouses Protection Act, 10 USCA 1408, authorizes the distribution of a service member's military retirement benefits but does not allow state courts to distribute military disability payments. *Mansell v. Mansell*, 490 US 581 (1989).
- ii. Generally speaking, a retired service member cannot receive both retirement benefits and disability payments. Instead, retirees can receive disability only to the extent they waive receipt of retirement pay. This waiver can occur at any time – before or after a trial court has entered a DRO distributing military retirement – and the election is at the will of the service member, once the service member qualifies for disability. Service members often prefer disability pay over retired pay because disability pay is not taxable income to the service member as is retirement pay. A former spouse's share of retirement pay will diminish as the retirement pay diminishes. *See Mansell; White*.
- iii. Concurrent Pay. Beginning in 2004, federal law allows some retirees to receive both retirement and disability pay. 10 USC sec. 1414. *See* discussion and citations in Mark Sullivan and Gene Brentley Tanner, *Military Pension Division and Disability: The Hillard Case*, Family Forum, Vol. 33, No. 3, March 2013. The 2004 provisions have been phased in over a 10-year period and by 2014, military retirees eligible for concurrent pay will receive their total retirement pay and their total disability pay.
 - 1. Concurrent pay is available only to military retirees with at least a 50% disability rating and who had 20 years of service prior to retirement. All other retirees will remain subject to the dollar-for-dollar waiver rules.
 - 2. Also beginning in 2004, Congress created a new form of disability pay for service members called Combat-Related Special Compensation Benefits. This form of disability pay is not subject to the Concurrent pay provisions and will be subject to the dollar-for-dollar waiver requirements. *See Sullivan, id*. This means that if a service member elects to receive Combat-Related Special Compensation Benefits, payments made to a former spouse pursuant to a DRO will be reduced or eliminated.

- c. Authority of Court in ED case regarding waiver of retirement pay for disability pay.
 - i. In an original ED judgment, trial court cannot distribute military disability pay but can consider military disability pay as a distribution factor. Trial court cannot give dollar-for-dollar credit on an unequal division of remaining retirement funds or other assets to account for or offset the disability conversion. *Halstead v. Halstead*, 164 NC App 543 (2004).
 - ii. In original ED judgment, trial court cannot prohibit military spouse from waiving retirement for disability in the future. *Cunningham v. Cunningham*, 171 NC App 550 (2005)
 - iii. After judgment, court cannot amend ED judgment to increase share of retirement pay received by non-military spouse to make up for amount waived for disability pay. *Howell v. Howell*, 137 S.Ct. 1400 (2017). Note: The US Supreme Court opinion in *Howell* reverses the decision in *White v. White*, 152 NC App 588 (2002), *aff'd per curiam*, 357 NC 153 (2003) and significantly impacts the validity of the reasoning in *Hillard v. Hillard*, 733 SE2d 176 (NC App 2012).
 - iv. See blog post On the Civil Side, January 17, 2018, civil.sog.unc.edu/military-disability-pay-its-not-marital-property-but-it-is-income/
- d. Entry of QDRO when no equitable distribution claim has been filed
 - i. G.S. 50-20.1(j) now provides:
 - 1. Notwithstanding any other provision of this Chapter, a claim may be filed, either as a separate civil action or as a motion in the cause in an action brought pursuant to this Chapter, for an order effectuating the distribution of pension, retirement, or deferred compensation benefits provided for in a valid written agreement, as defined in G.S. 50-20(d), whether or not a claim for equitable distribution has been filed or adjudicated. The court may enter an order effectuating the distribution provided for in the valid written agreement.
 - 2. S.L. 2019-172. Applies to distributions made on or after October 1, 2019.