

The Winning Edge

RON MARTINELLI PHOTO: HANS HALBERSTADT

TO CHASE OR NOT TO CHASE?

Foot pursuits put both the officer and the suspect in danger, so keep a cool head and don't start one without thinking it through first.

An officer detains an active parolee gang member for questioning and during the detention the suspect suddenly runs. The officer chases the suspect for two blocks and observes the suspect reaching into his shorts pocket. The suspect yells out to the officer that he is armed and will shoot the officer. The officer tackles the suspect. There is a violent struggle for the weapon, and the officer shoots and kills the suspect.

An officer attempts to effect an enforcement stop on a motorist for a hit and run accident. The driver fails to yield and stop at the first available opportunity, drives to a park, and then suddenly runs away on foot into the park. The lone officer chases after the suspect into the park where the officer is subsequently shot and killed.

The situations described above are similar circumstances, each resulting in tragic and deadly consequences. Why does this continue to happen?

WEIGH THE RISKS

Foot pursuits by their very nature are emotionally charged and dangerous events that occur frequently in police work. Law enforcement officers must balance their obligation to enforce laws and arrest perpetrators with their personal safety. Unfortunately, this rarely happens.

More often than not, officers become emotionally captivated by the event and have an instinctive reaction, rather than a studied and planned response to resistance and chase without considering the inevitability of suspect capture. In other words, they chase the suspect until the suspect catches them.

As a police officer, remind yourself that what you often do not know about the people you are chasing and the environment where the foot pursuit takes place can seriously hurt or kill you.

What you may not know about the suspect you are chasing includes:

- ★ What the suspect may be wanted for
- ★ If the suspect is armed
- ★ What the suspect's martial arts or fighting skills are
- ★ If the suspect is in better physical shape than you
- ★ If the suspect is psychotic
- ★ If the suspect is under the influence of drugs—such as



Are your tactics during a foot pursuit putting you in danger? Getting too close puts a suspect in attack range.

powerful stimulants or PCP

- ★ Where the suspect may be taking you to—such as an area of ambush
- ★ If there are other suspects you are not aware of who could aid the suspect

Also remember that at the same time you are catching up to the suspect, you are also reducing the “reactionary gap” between the two of you. This is the distance between you and the suspect compared to your ability to defensively react to something the suspect might do to you. Shorten the distance and you shorten your reaction time. This is almost always dangerous for you, the officer.

DON'T BECOME A STATISTIC

The public sees so many foot pursuits on television that they, and unfortunately many officers themselves, fail to realize just how inherently dangerous these foot pursuits really are. The situation for the officer and suspect can literally and irrevocably change in the blink of an eye and can have fatal consequences for each.

A Riverside (Calif.) Police Department officer was murdered following a foot pursuit on the evening of November 7, 2010. Unfortunately, incidents occurring under similar circumstances are not uncommon. The FBI's 2006 statistics on officers killed in the line of duty indicate that 38 percent of all officers killed in the United States that year occurred during a crime in progress where the officer was effecting an arrest and that 60 percent of all officers killed under such circumstances were acting alone. Of those officers, 68 percent were killed at night.

The same statistics show 70 percent of officers were killed by handguns from distances of 15 feet or less. And suspects were able to hit an officer target 68 percent of the time, compared with officers striking the suspect only 14 percent of the time. Other statistics show that in a physical confrontation with a suspect, the officer ended up on the ground 86 percent of the time, resulting in 25 percent being seriously injured and 12 percent being killed with their own weapons such as handguns and batons when the suspect is somehow able to disarm the officer.

These are certainly not favorable survival statistics for the officer.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Considering these sobering statistics, what should you do when a suspect runs from you? Here are a few officer safety enhancing tips:

- ★ Do not wait to communicate. Get on the radio immediately and call for assistance.
- ★ Put out a good description of the suspect and his or her direction of travel.
- ★ Slow down and carry on a moving surveillance of the fleeing suspect from a distance that allows for a lot of reactionary gap time.
- ★ If you lose sight of the suspect, stop, find cover/concealment, arm yourself, and set up a perimeter while waiting for backup.
- ★ Check in with yourself and get back into forebrain cognitive processing. Get centered; reduce your breathing and heart rate. Work on getting out of tunnel vision and diminished hearing. Make a plan or

review your plan and then engage it.

- ★ Let the suspect tire out from running; let him or her experience the reduced vision and hearing instead of you.
- ★ Call for a K-9 unit and or a helicopter if available to search for the suspect.
- ★ Remember that it is usually not a matter of if you will catch the suspect, just when.

Suspects usually go to ground and hide soon after an officer loses sight of them. Setting up a perimeter and using a K-9 and air support to find the suspect has historically proven to be the most successful method of capture.

While an officer's desire to protect the public and effect the arrest of a fleeing suspect is a selfless and courageous act, it doesn't mean you need to get injured or killed during a foot pursuit. Officers killed in the line of duty during foot pursuits should be a constant reminder to

the public that police officers find themselves in dangerous situations on a daily basis. Unfortunately, such outcomes have become an all too frequent occurrence in our line of work. Limit your risk whenever possible.

If you can remember a few of these important tips, you will be better prepared to make it home safe and alive. ☯

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