

# To Chase or Not to Chase?

**RON MARTINELLI**  
PH.D., BCFT, CFA, CLS

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, observes the suspect to be grabbing 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.

More often than not, officers become emotionally captured in 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*.

Officers should remind themselves that what they often do not know about the people they are chasing and the environment in which the foot pursuit takes place can seriously hurt or kill the officer.

the suspect, they are also reducing the "reactionary gap" between themselves and the suspect. Reactionary gap is the distance between the officer and suspect, compared to the officer's ability to defensively react to something the suspect might do to them. Shorten the distance and the officer shortens his/her reaction time. This is almost always dangerous for the officer.

The public sees so many foot pursuits on live television that they, and unfortunately, the officers themselves, fail to realize just how inherently dangerous



An officer attempts to affect 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 foot bails 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 opposite tragic and deadly consequences. Why does this continue to happen?

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

What officers may not know about the suspect they are chasing include:

- What, if anything, they may be wanted for;
- If they are armed;
- What the suspect's martial arts or fighting skills are;
- If the suspect is in better physical shape than the officer is;
- If the suspect is psychotic;
- If the suspect is under the influence of drugs, such as powerful stimulants or PCP;
- Where the suspect may be taking the officer to, such as an area of ambush;
- If there are other suspects the officer is not aware of who can aid the suspect.

Officers need to remember that at the same time that they are catching up to

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.

In reviewing circumstances similar to the incident involving a Riverside police officer who was murdered following a foot pursuit on the evening of November 7, 2010, 2006 FBI statistics on officers killed in the line of duty indicate that 38% of all officers killed in the U.S. occurred during a crime in progress where the officer was affecting an arrest, and that 60% of all officers killed under such circumstances were acting alone. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of those officers were killed at night. Seventy percent (70%) of officers are killed by handguns from distances



percent (70%) of officers are killed by handguns from distances of 15 feet or less and suspects are able to hit an officer target 68% of the time compared to officers striking the suspect only 14% of the time. Other statistics show that in a physical confrontation with a suspect, the officer ends up on the ground 86% of the time where 25% are seriously injured and 12% are 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.

So what should the officer do when a suspect runs from them? Here are a few officer safety enhancing tips:

- Do not wait! Get on the radio immediately and call for assistance;
- Put out a good description of the suspect and their 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 back-up;
- 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 *them* 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* you will catch them.

Suspects most 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 affect the arrest of a fleeing suspect is a selfless and courageous act, there is rarely a good reason for an officer 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 introduce themselves into dangerous situations on a daily basis. Unfortunately, this risk has become an all too frequent occurrence in our industry. If officers can just remember a few of these important tips, they will make it home safe and alive.

Stay Safe Out There!

### About the Author

*Dr. Ron Martinelli is a former police officer and detective with over 22 years of street experience primarily with the San Jose Police Department. Dr. Martinelli is a former director of a POST police academy, and a multi-certified use of force instructor who also is a CSI forensic criminologist and police practices expert specializing in officer-involved shootings and major uses of force. He is NCCM Board Certified in Forensic Trauma, a Diplomat with the Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, a Certified Force Analyst with the Force Science Center and a recognized member of the American College of Forensic Experts Institute. Dr. Martinelli is nationally recognized for his research on the subject of psychophysiology and stress-induced responses. He can be reached at (951) 719-1450 and at [Code3Law@martinelliandassoc.com](mailto:Code3Law@martinelliandassoc.com). ☆*

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