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POLICE CRITICIZED AFTER MOTORCYCLE CHASE LEADS TO TWO DEATHS
SOUTH CAROLINA EXPERT SAYS THAT CHASING A MOTORCYCLE ALMOST NEVER
ENDS WELL, AND SHOULD BE AVOIDED.

Author: The Associated Press

Dateline: SWAINSBORO

Article Text:

Eight weeks after Tracy Allen and LaShunda Freeman died during a motorcycle chase with police, family members and even law enforcement experts are wondering whether police were overzealous in the pursuit.

The chase began June 4, when patrol officer Lanier Griswold clocked the motorcycle Allen was driving at "66 mph in a 35 mph zone." Allen, 27, had borrowed the 1983 Yamaha and told family members he was taking his friend Freeman, 20, on a ride.

Freeman's grandmother, Claudie Tillman, said the pair planned to drive a few blocks past a nearby milling company. As she waited in the house for her granddaughter to return, Tillman said, several children called for her to come outside, shouting that police had gotten behind the motorcycle.

According to an accident report, Allen lost control of the motorcycle while driving about 80 mph and drove into a ditch. The two were not wearing helmets.

Family members want to know why Allen was chased at all.

"I don't care if they're two dogs, you don't chase them until they're dead," Tillman said.

A Swainsboro Police Department internal investigation cleared Griswold of any major wrongdoing, though he was suspended with pay for about three weeks during the internal investigation.

"He was doing his job," Chief F.J. Shuman said.

However, a probe by The Augusta Chronicle in Sunday's editions revealed the officer may have broken the department's rules about high-speed pursuits.

The guidelines say a vehicle should be chased only under special circumstances, such as if the violator presents a clear and immediate threat to the public or the officer, or has committed a "serious felony."

"It clearly appears that circumstances did not justify a high-speed chase," said Mitch Warnock, an attorney for the families.

Chases have long been a source of controversy and a serious problem for the public and for law enforcement. Geoffrey Alpert, a professor at the College of Criminal Justice at the University of South Carolina who has taught pursuit training to police departments for 15 years, said chasing a motorcycle is something that should be avoided.

"Chasing a motorcycle is something we discourage in our training because it's very likely the motorcyclist will either get away or get killed," Alpert said. "Rarely do you see a positive

outcome in a motorcycle chase."

The newspaper also reported that Griswold had totaled his patrol car last year in a chase after he spotted a man who he knew was driving with a suspended or revoked license. Griswold was later given an oral reprimand.

"He was reprimanded for not using enough sense to call it off," Shuman said. "He knew who he was chasing and had him identified and could have gone back and taken warrants for it."

Shuman defended Griswold in the Allen chase, saying Allen should have pulled over once the officer turned on his blue lights and siren.

"It is (Griswold's) duty to try to apprehend traffic violators," Shuman said. "A person going that fast at night is endangering himself and others all over the place. The ideal thing is that you run up behind them, turn on your blue lights and they pull over.

"To work traffic, you tell me if there is another way to do that."

The six-member Swainsboro city council agreed with the chief by accepting the report's findings at its July 16 meeting.

Caption:

Annette M. Drowlette/The Associated Press

(1) Above: Velda Allen straightens some flowers on the grave of her son, Tracy Allen, in Summertown on Tuesday.

(2) Right: Allen visits the crash site in Swainsboro where her son died during a motorcycle chase with police.