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POLICE STOPPED CHASE, THEN CYCLIST WAS KILLED

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Article Text:

Madison police on Monday were reviewing the details of a police chase this weekend that ended minutes before a man on a motorcycle was killed and a woman driving a minivan was seriously injured.

Police spokesman Mike Hanson noted it was "standard procedure" to do an administrative review of every police chase. In this weekend's incident, Richard T. Washington, 25, of Madison, was killed when his motorcycle collided with the minivan in the 2200 block of Atwood Avenue at about 9:40 p.m. Saturday, shortly after the chase was called off.

The motorcycle fit the description of one Madison police had been pursuing earlier for reckless driving on East Washington Avenue, Hanson said. A supervisor called off the pursuit about a mile away from the scene of the crash.

"With a motorcycle that can quickly reach a high rate of speed, we really scrutinize what the chase is for and the (chances) of it ending in a positive manner," Hanson said.

Michael Scott, a former lawman and now a policing expert at the University of Wisconsin Law School, said ending the chase in such a case is a good -- but not foolproof -- way to resolve a dangerous situation.

"All the police can do is hope that their discontinuing the pursuit will be noticed by the person and (that person) will then bring their driving under control," Scott said.

That's a problem, Scott noted, because the person being chased may not know or believe that the pursuit is over right away, extending the period of imminent risk.

The minivan driver, a 45-year-old Madison woman, was scheduled to undergo surgery Monday for injuries that were not considered life-threatening, Hanson said. Her name was expected to be released today.

Other pursuits

Other area fatalities related to police pursuits include a motorcycle crash in Fitchburg in July 2005, when James Hammer, 49, a passenger on a motorcycle driven by Daniel Banks, 37, was killed while Banks was fleeing town of Madison police.

In October 2004, Jason Schmitt and Dayna Johnson Schmitt were injured when their pickup truck was hit by a car driven by Michael J. Thiel, 21, who was being chased by Middleton police.

Thiel was killed in the crash, which occurred on University Avenue at Capital Avenue in Madison.

In 2002, Matthew Hottmann, 22, rolled his car in a field while trying to elude Deerfield police, killing himself and two passengers, Jeremy Budahn, 20, and Kyle Smith, 19.

In all four cases -- as in the vast majority of police chases statewide -- the pursuit began with a traffic violation before turning deadly. According to available records from the State Patrol, less than 20 percent of police chases are prompted by alleged felonies.

But to an officer on the scene of a fleeing car or a speeding motorcycle, the situation can be tricky, Scott said.

"I think these are examples of police doing the right thing with an almost inevitable bad outcome," Scott said.

At the same time, though, it goes against the grain of many officers to simply watch a fleeing vehicle speed away.

"It's been a very difficult adjustment for police in the past 20 years or so to switch from their instinctive reaction, which is to chase and try to apprehend anyone fleeing the police," Scott said, "to this relatively new approach, which is much more cautious and in which police will discontinue pursuit if conditions call for it."

One pulled over

In Saturday's incident, Hanson said, an officer spotted a group of motorcycles driving too fast on East Washington before the chase began. The officer was able to pull over one of the motorcycles, but the others didn't stop, Hanson said, causing another officer to follow those vehicles -- just how far or for how long has not yet been made public -- until the supervisor ended the chase.

Word of the crash came shortly afterward, over the police radio, Hanson said, as officers attempted to retrieve information about the fleeing motorcycles' descriptions and license plates from an in-car video system. State law allows police to ticket people through the mail based on such information, as an alternative to a physical pursuit.

Officers on Monday were trying to establish some basic facts about the crash, such as whether any children were in the minivan. Hanson said he also couldn't confirm whether the driver of the motorcycle crashed through the van's front windshield, as some witnesses have said.

"The best thing to say is that Washington did crash into the minivan and did cause injury to the driver of the minivan, severe injuries," Hanson said.

Like the policies of many other area police agencies, Madison's rules on police pursuits say officers shall chase alleged felons suspected of criminal offenses, but may pursue chases for traffic violations if doing so wouldn't endanger the public.

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