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FDLE investigates crash

Was Morse the driver?

State crime lab technicians are poring over a demolished 1988 Jeep Cherokee this week, hoping to solve a mystery: Who was driving when it fled from police and collided head-on with a pickup truck in a tragic wreck last Thursday night?

Initially, the Florida Highway Patrol reported that the Jeep was driven by Frank J. Morse Jr., a 23-year-old admitted heroin addict.

Morse was suspected of committing a purse-snatching and a burglary of his own parents' house just minutes before leading police on a 115 mph chase that began on Kings Highway in Deep Creek and ended about five miles from Arcadia in DeSoto County.

The Jeep, which Morse had allegedly stolen from his parents July 11, ran over a "Stop Stick" of spikes deployed by a DeSoto deputy. The Jeep traveled another seventh of a mile before it veered into the opposite lane and collided head-on with a pickup truck, killing its driver, Florida Citrus Commission Chairman Walt Brewer, 43.

Brewer's two sons, Cole, 13, and Dylan, 10, survived.

Morse's girlfriend, Jessie April Thwaites, 21, of Bradenton, was ejected from the Jeep and killed.

However, the FHP never was certain that Morse was driving the Jeep, according to FHP spokesman Lt. George Alec. Maybe it was Thwaites at the wheel.

In fact, the patrol has become aware of certain factors that suggest Morse's girlfriend was the driver, including:

* The victim in the purse snatching, 76-year-old Viola King, told the Sun Friday that Morse stole her purse and then jumped into the Jeep -- which was driven by a woman.

* Morse was found in the passenger seat of the overturned Jeep, said [Bob Carpenter](#), [Charlotte County Sheriff's Office](#) spokesman. However, with the high speed the vehicle was going, it's possible that Morse got thrown into the passenger seat, he said.

"With all the concerns about who was driving, we're going to be doing additional testing," Alec said. "Gathering the additional evidence would be FDLE's burden for us. There'd be scientific evidence to support (any) claim."

The FDLE took the wrecked vehicles Saturday to Paige Field Airport in Fort Myers to collect evidence, according to Carpenter.

Crime scene technicians will be taking blood and tissue samples from the Jeep to determine where Morse was sitting at the time of impact, Alec said.

Investigators will also analyze the tires on the Jeep to determine what effect the use of the Stop Stick had in the wreck.

Eight of Charlotte County's 150 patrol cars are equipped with the same type of Stop Stick used by DeSoto deputies.

The sticks have been used to apprehend more than 7,000 suspects nationwide, said Mike Murray, sales representative for StopTech Ltd., an Ohio company that manufactures the sticks. However, several deaths have been attributed to the sticks in Tennessee and Florida.

Meanwhile, sheriff's supervisors are reviewing the high-speed pursuit to see if it complies with sheriff's procedures, said Sheriff William Clement.

The manual allows deputies to pursue fleeing vehicles merely if they "fail to yield." Also, pursuits can be initiated if the officer has reason to believe the suspect has committed, attempted to commit or intends to commit a "serious felony and is

known to pose a danger to the public."

The policy also calls for sergeants to monitor high-speed pursuits and make decisions such as when to terminate a pursuit.

"We're still reviewing this situation as it relates to our pursuit policy," Clement said. "So far, we've seen no violation of policy, including their supervisors' actions. As of today, there's still no final declaration on this matter."

The pursuit is also being scrutinized by Jim Phillips, an advocate for restricting high-speed pursuits. Phillips' daughter, Sarah Phillips, 20, of Winter Haven, was killed Dec. 13, 2001, by a vehicle being chased in a high-speed pursuit in Orlando.

Phillips agreed to settle a lawsuit against the Orange County Sheriff's Office over his daughter's death for \$200,000 -- plus a promise that sheriff's officials would consider his recommendations for changes in that county's pursuit policy.

"It never was about the money," he said.

Phillips cites statistics showing that 40 percent of high-speed pursuits wind up in collisions, 20 percent result in injuries and 1 percent end in fatalities.

"Conclusion: Police pursuit is a high-risk activity with life or death consequences," he said.

Because of that, deputies should not have broad discretion to implement them, argues Phillips.

He recommends agencies forbid high-speed pursuits unless the suspect presents "the use of deadly force or threat of deadly force."

In Charlotte's case, local deputies initiated the pursuit based on information that Morse was armed with two handguns stolen from his father during a burglary just one hour before the chase began, Carpenter noted.

One of the guns was recovered. Morse, who was upside down in the vehicle, was found holding it to his chest, Carpenter said.

Phillips posts information about the dangers of high-speed pursuits on his Web site at www.pursuitwatch.org

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