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Florida State Player Fled Crash But Got Only Traffic Tickets

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IN the early morning hours of Oct. 5, as this college town was celebrating another big football victory by Florida State University, a starting cornerback on the team drove his car into the path of an oncoming vehicle driven by a teenager returning home from a job at the Olive Garden.

Both cars were totaled. But rather than remain at the scene as the law requires, the football player, P. J. Williams, left his wrecked vehicle in the street and fled into the darkness along with his two passengers, including Ronald Darby, the team's other starting cornerback.

The Tallahassee police responded to the off-campus accident, eventually reaching out to the Florida State University police and the university's athletic department.

By the next day, it was as if the hit and run had never happened.

The New York Times looked into how the police handled the case, reviewing law enforcement records and interviewing witnesses, lawyers, the police and a university representative. The examination found that Mr. Williams, driving with a suspended license, had been given a break by the Tallahassee police, who initially labeled the accident a hit and run, a criminal act, but later decided to issue Mr. Williams only two traffic tickets. Afterward, the case did not show up in the city's public online database of police calls — a technical error, the police said.

Mr. Williams eventually returned to the scene. But Tallahassee officers did not test him for alcohol. Nor did their report indicate whether they asked if he had been drinking or why he had fled — logical questions, since the accident

occurred at 2:37 a.m. The report also minimized the impact of the crash on the driver of the other car, Ian Keith, by failing to indicate that his airbag had deployed — an important detail, because Mr. Keith said in an interview that the airbag had cut and bruised his hands.

The university police, who lacked jurisdiction, nevertheless sent two ranking officers — including the shift commander — to the scene. Yet they wrote no report about their actions that night. Florida State dismissed the role of its officers in the episode as too minor to require a report or to be entered into their own online police log, comparing it to an instance when campus officers responded to a baby opossum falling from a tree.

The car accident, previously unreported by the news media, comes amid heightened national scrutiny of preferential treatment given to athletes, including articles by The Times examining how the authorities have sometimes gone easy on Florida State football players accused of wrongdoing. The Tallahassee police conducted virtually no investigation of a 2012 rape accusation against quarterback Jameis Winston, the 2013 Heisman Trophy winner. Mr. Winston is scheduled for a student disciplinary hearing Dec. 1, nearly two years after the accusation was first made. He has denied sexually assaulting anyone.

Elijah Stiers, a lawyer from Miami who helped write a state law enacted this year that toughened penalties for hit-and-run drivers, said the basic facts of the Oct. 5 crash had warranted criminal charges and a sobriety test.

“Two-thirty in the morning, people fleeing on foot — at the very least you’ve got to charge them with hit and run,” he said, adding, “You



LEFT, CAL SPORT MEDIA, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS; JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES



P. J. Williams, top left, and Ronald Darby, top right, left after the crash. Above and right, in photos from the salvage auction website Vehbidz, the Honda that hit Mr. Williams's car. The Honda was a total loss, and the driver's airbag deployed.

don't get out of it just because you come back to the scene."

The Times also showed its findings to the Tallahassee police chief, Michael DeLeo, who said in an interview that the department would "conduct an investigation to determine what happened and whether the officers acted appropriately." He added, "No one should be shown any favoritism."

Florida State declined to make anyone available for an interview. In a series of written responses to questions, the university gave shifting answers, at one point saying, incorrectly, that Mr. Williams had driven his car home and that the Tallahassee police were required

to call the campus police under a "mutual aid agreement." A Tallahassee police spokesman said there was no policy requiring its officers to contact the university when its students committed traffic violations.

Neither Mr. Williams, named the most valuable defensive player in last season's national championship game, nor Mr. Darby responded to a request for comment.

In their report on the crash, the Tallahassee officers justified not charging Mr. Williams because he returned "approximately" 20 minutes later without being contacted by the police. That stands in sharp contrast to how the police treated another driver who left the scene and drove

INCIDENT	2. Type of Crime or Incident HIT AND RUN	3. Date, Day, and Time Impounded/Towed 10/5/2014 2:34AM	4. Date Notice Posted:	5. Date decal sent to officer	6. Decal
	7. Address where vehicle or property was impounded (Give exact location where vehicle or property was recovered) LAKE JACKSON TOWING				8. WinACE Number
38. NCIC Check <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		39. Hold Requested/Requesting Person/Purpose <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No NO HOLD		40. Processing Required <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No NO PROCESSING	
42. Signature of person received from (if present):		43. Signature of Tow Truck Driver and Wrecker Company name: D Keith Jr Hines			

A police report listed the crash as a hit and run, and after initially requesting that Mr. Williams's car be held as evidence, an officer changed the report and wrote, "No hold no processing."

home after a minor, low-speed accident in the same area late last month. That driver and his mother contacted the police about a half-hour later to report the accident.

At five miles per hour, the collision inflicted far less damage than that caused by Mr. Williams's car — and caused no injuries. Even so, the police charged the driver, who was not a Florida State football player, with hit and run.

The Oct. 5 crash occurred shortly after 2:30 a.m., as Mr. Keith, 18, was driving home on West Tharpe Street from his job at the restaurant. A Buick Century heading the other way darted in front of him, attempting a left turn onto High Road. Mr. Keith hit the brakes, but it was too late: His Honda CR-V collided with the Buick, spinning it around. The Honda lurched to a halt a short distance down Tharpe, its front end crumpled, debris scattered around and fluid leaking onto the street.

Shaken, Mr. Keith got out and waited for the Tallahassee police, who arrived within minutes. An officer approached him with an unexpected question: Where were the occupants of the other car?

"That's when I first realized they were gone," Mr. Keith said.

More officers arrived, and tow trucks were called to remove the two disabled cars. An officer at the scene, Derek Hawthorne, filled out a form for the abandoned Buick, labeling the accident a "hit and run," and asked that the car be held for processing as evidence. Officers ran a check on the license plate and found that it was registered to Mr. Williams's grandmother in Ocala, Fla.

About a half-hour after the accident, the investigation took an odd turn. Another officer at the scene, Joseph Smith, discovered that the glass front door of a closed Exxon station at the

corner of Tharpe and High was shattered, apparently from a break-in, according to his report. The gas station manager was called, and she replayed security camera video for the police showing a man breaking in and walking out with an armload of merchandise.

The video, obtained by The Times, also captured a poor-quality image of the accident. In it, the Buick containing the Florida State football players could be seen attempting the left turn onto High Road, in the direction of the Exxon station, just as the burglar was about to leave and walk toward High Road.

"They happened within seconds of each other," said Karen Southern, the Exxon manager, adding that the police had mentioned the accident to her but had not said whether they believed there was any connection to the burglary. No evidence has surfaced to link the two, and the break-in remains unsolved.

Mr. Keith said one of the officers had asked him about the Exxon's broken front door, and he replied that he had not noticed it. He said he believed that when the break-in was discovered — at 3:06 a.m., according to the police report — the football players had not yet returned, indicating that they could have been gone for at least half an hour.

A university spokesman said that when the Tallahassee police called Florida State asking for help, about an hour after the accident, the players had already returned. Other football players who had heard of the accident also showed up, though how many is not known.

At one point, Mr. Keith said, a football player — he did not know which one — apologized to him for fleeing and explained that they "had a lot on the line." The player was "sort of rambling" until a female friend told him to stop talking, Mr. Keith said.

“She said to him, ‘Be quiet, you sound like you’ve been drinking,’” Mr. Keith said. “I remember that very clearly, because it surprised me that she would say it. But the way he was speaking, I definitely had suspicions about drinking.”

In the crash report, Officer Hawthorne indicated there was no suspected alcohol or drug use, and he issued Mr. Williams traffic tickets for an improper left turn and for “unknowingly” driving with a suspended license. On the form for the impounded Buick, the officer used a pen to cross out earlier notations indicating the car would be held as evidence, writing: “No hold no processing.”

Around 3:30 a.m., Mr. Williams, 21, called Mario Edwards Sr., director of player development for the football team, for a ride home, according to the university. The crash report said that both cars were disabled with damage that exceeded their estimated value. Mr. Keith got a lift home with a tow truck.

The Tallahassee police said officers had discretion in deciding when to press charges and issue citations. They provided The Times with seven other cases in which someone had hit a car and left the scene but had not been charged with hit and run.

A review of those cases, however, found that none were comparable in severity or circumstance to the Oct. 5 crash. Four of the accidents involved cars bumping into each other in parking lots, one other caused no damage, and the other two were very minor. In no case did a driver abandon a wrecked vehicle in the middle of the night and flee the scene after totaling someone else’s car. Notably, most of the seven crash reports contained far more narrative detail about what had happened than the report on the Oct. 5 accident did.

The role of the campus police in responding to the accident is especially unclear. That agency’s call logs indicated that the Tallahassee police had called at 3:38 a.m. seeking help in an “investigation.” Yet, a university spokesman said all the city police had wanted was an after-hours phone number for a football coach so they could tell him that two of his athletes had been in an accident; the campus police could not locate a phone number.

The two campus officers — Sgt. Roy Wiley, the shift commander, and Cpl. Greg Washington — decided on their own to drive to the crash scene to see whether they could help, but they were not needed, the university said.

University policy specifies that police reports “must be completed and submitted regarding actions taken by officers” in response to an “outside request for assistance.” Asked why the two officers had not filed a report, the university said they “were not involved in the investigation, didn’t make an arrest and their assist didn’t result in an arrest, citation or summons.”

The campus police chief, David L. Perry, said in a statement that he had reviewed the actions of his officers and had found that they behaved appropriately. “This was a routine matter of our agency responding to a simple request from T.P.D. and it was all together proper for our officers to go the scene,” he said in the statement.

As for Mr. Williams, court records showed that two days after the accident, he paid \$296 in overdue fines, related to an earlier speeding ticket, in order to have his license reinstated. But the \$392 in fines related to the Oct. 5 crash remained unpaid, and overdue, as of this week. As a result, his license was suspended again. ■