

Foot Pursuits: The “Do’s and Don’ts”

By Alex Payne and Mark Filburn, Law Enforcement Specialists, Kentucky League of Cities Insurance Services

The reasons police officers chase suspects are numerous, and this article does not intend to sort out when a foot pursuit should be initiated and when it should not. Suffice it to say that foot pursuits are an inevitable part of police work. Therefore, engaging in foot pursuits must be looked at with the same tactical “eye” as vehicle pursuits, building searches, etc. are viewed. First and foremost the safety of the pursuing officer must be maximized through proper tactics thus the “Do’s and Don’ts.”

The Do’s

DO maintain a line of sight on the individual that is being pursued, more specifically, the hands of the suspect. This information is radioed in along with the request for backup. Remember, if help is out there, get it coming your way. If police officers lose sight of an individual during a foot pursuit, the danger factor goes up tremendously.

DO be prepared to hit the ground, flat. If the suspect immediately turns and points, hit the deck. Too many officers have been shot during foot pursuits when suspects suddenly stop, spin and fire. Sliding may also be a good technique, so the feet would lead instead of the head and still accomplish the goal of making you a much smaller target.

DO try to identify areas that may provide cover if suddenly needed.

DO know what you are going to do if you catch up to the suspect. Remember, the closer you get the more dangerous it gets. Have a plan developed ahead of time and include reasonable options for your most common circumstances.

The Don’ts

DON’T continue a foot pursuit once the line of sight has been lost for more than a few seconds. It does not take much imagination to determine what an individual can prepare to do once out of sight for just a few seconds. The smart choice in this situation is to contain until backup arrives as most suspects will go to ground and hide once out of the police officers sight.

DON’T turn corners without thinking while pursuing an individual on foot. Utilize the corner to swing out wide, out of the normal viewing area of where a suspect may be waiting for you to appear. Most people anticipate being followed in the same path they took and therefore AMBUSH that anticipated path. Taking a wide angle will gain you precious seconds to evaluate a situation should you turn a corner and find someone on the other side. Remember, this is only when line of sight has been lost for a split second. Any more time than that, see the first DON’T.

DON'T lose sight of your physical limitations. Only the officer knows how hard he or she can run and for how long before fatigue overcomes their ability to protect themselves. Know your physical condition and be honest with yourself.

DON'T hold your service weapon in your hand while running as hard as you can. I have never personally seen anyone run as fast as they can and be able to shoot accurately at the same time. The holster is the best place for the service weapon during this time. Practice drawing the service weapon while coming to a stop or after hitting the ground, times when the weapon can be successfully controlled, and, if needed, fired accurately.

Remember, always seek the hands of a suspect. What they have in them will usually determine what we do to them next. Use the radio and get help on the way. A lot of situations that start out as individual officer foot pursuits end with multiple officers responding to the area based on good communication from the first pursuing officer and bringing the situation to a successful conclusion. The dangers of foot pursuits are obvious, just as with many other job related tasks of law enforcement officers. The risks involved with policing will never be eliminated but with solid tactics and commitment to training these risks can be minimized.

The Kentucky League of Cities Insurance Services is a member-owned insurance pool serving municipal organizations in Kentucky.