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IT'S AMATEUR HOUR IN THE SOUTHLAND

***Goofs by L.A.-area cops generate unwelcome publicity –
and probably, at least one lawsuit***

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. There are likely tens of thousands of police-citizen interactions every day, so one would expect a few goofs. But considering recent events, if they awarded Emmys for amateurish policing, two Southland agencies would be in strong contention. And the FBI wouldn't be far behind.

Friday, August 22nd was a gorgeous day in Beverly Hills. With a predicted low in the mid-70s, it promised to be a perfect evening for a pre-Emmy party. Alas, producer Charles Belk, 51, wouldn't make it. After a couple tough hours running a "gifting suite" at a fancy hotel (don't ask), Mr. Belk was lounging around in a presumably equally fancy restaurant when he became concerned about getting a...parking ticket. That's why, about 5:20 pm, he left to check the meter.

His timing was atrocious. Only moments earlier another "tall, bald black man in a green shirt" held up a nearby Citibank. Spotting the shiny-domed Belk, officers must have thought he was manna from heaven. They gleefully pounced, applied handcuffs and sat him on the curb. Belk tried to explain (read his Facebook post [here](#)). He asked the cops to compare his appearance to the bad guy on the bank video. But no one was listening.

Forty-five minutes later, while Belk, the object of a "reasonable suspicion" detention under *Terry*, sat with his hands cuffed behind his back, a witness "positively" identified him as the robber. Ergo – probable cause!

After booking Belk at the Taj Mahal (that's what they call BHPD's stunning headquarters), detectives and the FBI grilled him. Surprisingly, Belk didn't confess. Instead, he kept badgering them to watch the video. As the ordeal reached the six-hour mark, they finally gave in.

Belk was un-arrested a few minutes later. Sorry! Have a nice evening! (He's now considering a lawsuit.)

Incidentally, one of the real robbers, a female, was also arrested. She's been tied to nearly a dozen heists. But her male partner is still on the lam. So if you spot a tall, bald black guy...

LAPD claims that its officers had plenty of justification for detaining starlet Danielle Watts (“Django Unchained”) and her boyfriend, celebrity-chef Brian Lucas, on November 11. According to gossip website TMZ, workers in a Studio City office building observed Watts and Lucas in a parked car, partially undressed and having vigorous sex, and they apparently kept at it even when someone confronted them to complain.

An aggrieved citizen dialed 9-1-1. But by the time officers arrived (presumably, they weren’t dispatched Code 3) Watts and Lucas were no longer in flagrante delicto. LAPD Sergeant Jim Parker, the senior officer on scene, told the Los Angeles Times that he asked the couple for their ID’s. Lucas complied. Watts didn’t.

In retrospect, her recalcitrance isn’t difficult to understand. What if a gossip website found out?

There followed a verbal jousting match between Watts, who stood on her rights as an American to not show ID, and Sgt. Parker, who insisted that she had to because, among other things, there was “probable cause.” Sgt. Parker recorded the encounter and gave the tape to the Times, which posted it online (take that, TMZ!) If you have the stomach, take a listen. It sounds just like a know-it-all older brother bickering with his obnoxious kid sister.

Except that brothers don’t handcuff their sisters and deposit them in the back of a black-and-white when they try to walk away.

Sgt. Parker soon confirmed Watts’ identity, removed the handcuffs (she said they cut her wrist) and released the couple. Really, he had little choice. The frisky stuff happened well before he got there, and cops can’t arrest for misdemeanors such as indecent exposure not committed in their presence. For that they need a warrant, which requires interviewing witnesses and assembling evidence. LAPD has presumably bigger fish to fry. And one cannot imagine a prosecutor going along.

To be sure, these episodes *are* factually different. Yet both began with *Terry* stops that spiraled out of control. Consider, first, the arrest of Charles Belk. A photograph depicts two BHPD officers casually looking on while he sulks on the curb. Either cop could have pulled out a smartphone and within moments confirmed that Mr. Belk was indeed a producer working on Emmy-related events. Five minutes of “investigation” would have verified that he just left a nearby restaurant and that his car was parked nearby.

So, he impulsively decided to rob a bank while on a stroll?

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True enough, a witness ID'd Mr. Belk as the robber. But experienced cops know how shaky one-on-one identifications (they're called "showups") can be. When someone who resembles a perpetrator is in police custody, witnesses can feel compelled to say "yes, that's him." Add a cross-racial element, as we assume applies in this case, and it's doubly problematic.

Perhaps the street cops were leaving it to detectives and the FBI, which takes the lead in bank robbery cases, to do the basics. But it doesn't look like the "experts" pulled out their smartphones, either. By the time they decided to test their own judgment the actual perpetrator was long gone. And when he is caught, forget about using the witness who ID'd Mr. Belk.

On the other hand it's hard to develop much sympathy for Danielle Watts. Her evident "it's all about me!" attitude grates. But in this blog we're mostly interested in how police behave. After all, they're the ones who get the big bucks for persuading recalcitrant citizens to voluntarily comply.

And here officers fell seriously short. After being on scene for, say, thirty seconds, they must have realized that no citizen had been harmed (offended, perhaps). The call was indeed a "nothing." Sergeant Parker readily conceded that he only persisted to verify Watts' identity for his paperwork. Why he didn't simply ask her companion, then use a smartphone to confirm, we don't know. We do know, because we listened to the tape, that Sergeant Parker got hooked into a protracted debate and wound up sounding just like his irritating, self-righteous antagonist.

In the end, police gained the upper hand over a slight, small woman by applying handcuffs. Had the situation been handled more artfully, say, with verbal persuasion techniques routinely taught in police academies, officers might have still got the job done *and* made it to lunch on time. If nothing else, one hopes that Sergeant Parker and his colleagues learn some Verbal Judo before they run into a recalcitrant, 250-pound weightlifter on their next "nothing" call.