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## DANCING WITH HOOLIGANS

*For street cops every day's a reality show. And that reality is often unpleasant.*



[Click here to link to video](#)

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Last month a [Seattle cop](#) decided that jaywalking on his beat was getting out of hand. No more breaks! Spotting a flock of young evildoers dashing across a busy highway (they ignored a pedestrian overpass fifteen feet away ) he corralled the group. They were mouthy and uncooperative. One, a 19-year old girl, walked off, and when he tried to stop her she pulled away.

Not a good move. You see, Seattle police [take jaywalking seriously](#). So seriously, in fact, that last year they mounted an anti-jaywalking campaign. That led to a number of nasty physical confrontations, [spurring an auditor to recommend](#) that the department reconsider the whole business (pp. 8-9).

In most cities, including Seattle, cops are deployed singly. Since they're usually outnumbered gaining voluntary compliance is crucial. Without a partner to help discourage or overcome resistance officers working alone must rely on their wits, a good dose of command presence and, most of all, public cooperation. Fortunately, most citizens who are treated respectfully will peaceably submit to authority. Unfortunately, correctly identifying those that won't isn't always easy.

The video begins as the cop struggles to handcuff a good-sized teen. While they dance a jig a burly 17-year old girl breaks from a male youth's grasp and jumps in to rescue her friend. The officer responds by punching her in the face.

The fight is on.

[Use of force continuums](#) were developed to remind officers of their legal obligations and help them choose an appropriate technique should they need to apply force. It all begins with verbal commands. Next in line are use of hands, fists and chemical agents such as pepper spray. If these fail to do the job, and keeping in mind that circumstances can change instantly, officers may deploy batons, the Taser, less-than-lethal projectiles such as bean-bag rounds and, when available, canines. At the top of the pyramid is lethal force, including firearms and other means likely to kill. It's reserved for situations where officers or innocent persons face an imminent risk of great bodily injury or death and less forceful measures are ineffective.

Officers know that even the most "ordinary" encounters can quickly escalate. They also know that trying to overcome resistance while working alone is very dangerous. Every year several cops are shot with their own guns. Four were killed this way [in 2008](#). Yet if anything the Seattle officer limited his use of force to hands (and, at a singular moment, a fist) and kept trying to talk the 19-year old into submitting. [Don Van Balicom](#), a use of force expert and former police chief suggested that the intrusion by the second woman might have justified a more aggressive approach. "He has two people he's engaged with. They are both good sized people. He has a hostile crowd around him. He's by himself...He's not using as much force, quite honestly, as he could have." In retrospect it seems fortunate that the 17-year old's male companion pulled her away, as the cop was running out of options.

Why wasn't the officer more physically assertive? Maybe he didn't want to seriously injure a young woman, as might have happened had he placed more pressure on her arms or taken her to the ground. Maybe he didn't want to inflame bystanders or appear brutal on camera. Maybe it was a combination of things.

He might have felt differently had he known a bit more about these "ladies." The one he punched in the face was arrested last November for doing exactly that to a 15-year old boy whom she and her friends allegedly robbed of cash and a cell phone (charges were dropped because the boy and his 14-year old companion refused to testify.) She had been previously arrested for stealing a minivan, an offense that earned her a deferred disposition. Her 19-year old friend was arrested in 2009 for assaulting a sheriff's deputy. She had reportedly been abusing staff members at a home for troubled girls and pushed the cop to the ground. That too ended with a deferred disposition.

Well, that's par for patrol work, where officers must often act on incomplete information. Occasionally they behave rashly and use excessive force, sometimes with tragic consequences (for a more complete discussion see "[Making Time](#)".) Yet here we have a cop who perhaps used too little force and wound up locked in a dangerous dance with a pair of hooligans.

Still, no use of force is pretty to watch, and that's particularly so when the precipitating incident is as minor as jaywalking. It would be interesting to know more about the initial interaction between the officer and the jaywalkers, before the video. Perhaps the Seattle PD training unit, where the cop has been temporarily reassigned, can help cops learn to defuse things before they turn ugly. Maybe they can reinforce the need to alert dispatch when making an enforcement contact with multiple individuals. What they can't do, of course, is change the hearts and minds of hooligans, so unless police decide to forego certain encounters altogether the underlying dilemma will persist long after this writer and his readers have turned to dust.

In any event, this time things ended well – for the hooligans. At last report they've apologized to the officer and are probably well on their way to earning yet another deferred disposition.

Alas, things turned out less favorably for everyone else. Since the officer is white and his antagonists are black [divisions quickly formed across racial lines](#). Coming less than two months after the videotaped stomping of a Hispanic man by a Seattle cop, the incident is being touted as [another reason](#) why the acting chief shouldn't get the top job.

And as for the officer, well, with the video enshrined on You Tube his two-step will be a topic of discussion at police academies and roll-call training for years to come. What he might think of his new-found fame one can only imagine.