

COUNTY News

Cause of accident remains a mystery

BY HELEN NEMEC
STAFF WRITER

Six days after a serious limousine accident doused the fervor of Stanley Cup-crazed fans, Birmingham Police still are trying to determine exactly what caused the crash.

Despite widespread speculation about the accident, all that is known for certain at this point is that a stretch limousine traveling approximately 50 mph on southbound Woodward Avenue was traveling in a slow lane, moved over three lanes, hopped the curb and hit a tree.

The impact catapulted Detroit Red Wing Vladimir Konstantinov and team masseur Sergei Mnatsakanov to the same speed forward from their back seat in the limo, suffering serious injuries. Both remain in comas and in critical condition at Beaumont Hospital.

Red Wing Slava Fetisov was sitting in the seat with his back to the limo driver so he felt the impact less and, as a result, suffered only minor injuries. Driver Richard Gnida only had minor injuries and was released from the hospital Monday.

"None of them were wearing seat belts," said Birmingham Deputy Chief Richard Patterson. "We believe Mr. Gnida had only

minor injuries because of the deployment of an air bag."

Police briefly met with Fetisov Tuesday and were scheduled to meet with him again Wednesday afternoon. Rumors were circulating that Fetisov was yelling at the driver to wake up when the car left the roadway. Patterson wants to determine if that was the case.

"We talked with Mr. Gnida briefly on Tuesday. We have a lot of questions left," Patterson said. Those questions include why the driver may have blocked out or fell asleep at 9:13 p.m. that evening.

Gnida told Birmingham Officer Tim Exsley at the scene of the accident that he had blanked out and didn't remember changing lanes or the crash.

Once those questions are answered, Patterson expects to go to the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office to seek charges against Gnida, ranging from careless driving to felonious driving, depending on what the interviews reveal.

Tests revealed that neither drugs nor alcohol were involved in Gnida's accident. However, he was driving even though his license is suspended until January 1998. In a statement, the Gambino Limousine Service said the company was unaware of Gnida's driving record and is

beginning twice-yearly checks of all driving records.

Investigators have been putting the pieces of that night together. "They did everything right," Patterson said of the three Red Wing employees. "They were going to be celebrating and they didn't want to mix that with driving so they had a limo. That's what makes this even more unfortunate."

The three had been golfing at The Orchards outside of Mt. Clemens that day, the final get-together of the team to celebrate their Stanley Cup victory the week before.

Today is the hockey awards program in Toronto and marks the time when players scatter to their respective summer homes or vacation before training camp starts in September.

Konstantinov, 30, Fetisov, 39, and Mnatsakanov, 43, were the first to leave the golf outing and were headed to another impromptu party. Goalie Chris Osgood invited the team to his house in Birmingham for a continuation of the festivities.

The crash occurred only a mile from the players' final destination.

Patterson said the investigation should conclude at the end of the week.

Michigan State Police Sgt. Larry Richardson, a traffic crash



Offering help: Passersby help passengers out of the limousine and offer assistance after the vehicle carrying Red Wings players and a masseur crashed into a tree in the median of Woodward, south of Big Beaver.

reconstruction expert, and Birmingham traffic officer Dave Schultz studied the accident scene Tuesday morning.

The left lane was closed off during morning rush hour as the reconstruction team used survey equipment and other tools to

determine speed and a line of travel to try to answer some questions.

A mechanic already checked the limo as it sat in the Bob Adams storage lot in Birmingham. He determined that the car's brakes, mechanical and

engine parts did not cause the accident. Witnesses confirmed that no other car or other object was blocking the path of the limo, despite initial reports that the limo swerved to avoid a stalled car.

Police monitor crash site

BY HELEN NEMEC
STAFF WRITER

Three car accidents Monday night prompted the Birmingham Police to dismantle the shrine created by concerned Red Wings fans, marking the spot of a limousine accident on June 13 that put two players and one team masseur in the hospital.

The shrine got its start in the Woodward median near Redding shortly after the limousine accident occurred at 9:13 p.m. The focal point was the tree hit by the limo and over the next two days, countless floral bouquets, stuffed animals, signs, candles and roses were placed on and around the tree. The area also drew large crowds and police worried about the pedestrians running across the four lanes of traffic to get to the median.

Police and others shut down the vigil site late Monday night. The items were stored in a city facility and are waiting to be taken down to Joe Louis Arena, the home of the Red Wings.

Afternoon supervisor Sgt. Steven Schettenhelm made the suggestion to shut down the site and that was approved by his superiors because the median was becoming too dangerous. The last straw was a late afternoon accident on Monday, which sent two people to Beaumont Hospital for treatment of their injuries. The accident occurred when the lead car in the fast lane slowed down to scan the memorial area. The car behind ran into it.

"They were minor injuries," Schettenhelm said. "It could have been worse and we didn't want it to get to that point."

A total of seven accidents were reported near the site, including three on the Birmingham side of the divided highway and four on the Bloomfield Township side.

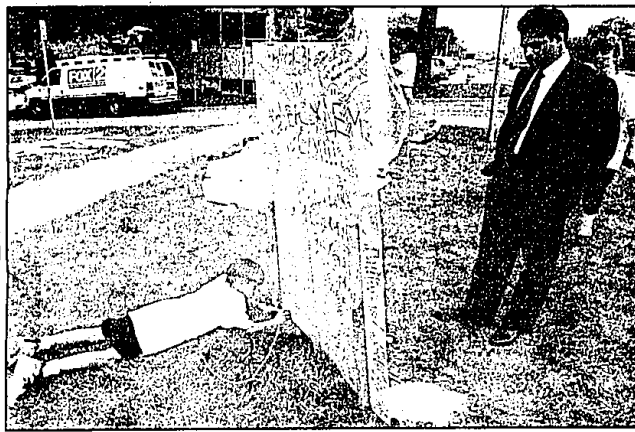
"I had been told to monitor the situation. We were very, very lucky that one of those vehicles didn't leave the roadway and hit the people assembled there," Schettenhelm said of the final accident.

"The overriding concern was public safety," he added. The staffing wasn't a problem, he said, and officers monitored traffic and helped people looking for parking sites since the shrine got going late Friday night.

"We had people standing right on the curb. They were dangerously close to the traffic. There were between 75 and 100 people there most of the time," Schettenhelm said. "Safety was our concern."

Birmingham and Bloomfield Township police patrolled the median. The median is the dividing line between the city and township, though the limo came to rest on the Birmingham half of the strip. Some officers directed traffic to get the gawkers moving and others kept watch on fans charging across four lanes of traffic with cars going at the posted speed limit of 50 mph. To reduce the chance of pedestrians being hit, Patterson said the police asked the crowd to set up their watch site at a triangle at the Woodward-Redding intersection on the west side of that crash site.

"As more things got placed, we were getting complaints from residents and businesses concerned about safety," Patterson said.



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLNERT

All ages: There was no age gap this week when it came to visiting a spontaneous memorial for Red Wings injured in a crash Friday. Justin Clarke, 9, of Waterford signs a giant card as Bill Martines of Troy, who works in Birmingham, reads the other side.

Reaction to accident goes 'beyond Stanley Cup'

BY SALLY TATO
STAFF WRITER

I watched the Wings give the blues to St. Louis.

The long overtimes as the Wings slaughtered the Ducks for dinner.

Saw an Avalanche fall on Colorado.

And the Flyers were brought down to land.

Lord Stanley was finally home.

As Hockeytown was celebrating, tragedy struck.

We all learned how valuable life is.

So I don't care if Stanley comes home again, or

Slava plays another year, or Sergei gets another knot out of a muscle, or

Vlady puts the pads back on. All that matters is that they'll be okay.

Get well soon.

Kerre Author of a poem left at the memorial site

They're wondering now if the Cup was worth it.

They're praying outside the hospital and driving by a slab of land on Woodward Avenue where earlier this week poems, flowers, photographs and prayers climbed the trees, and they're weighing the Cup against the players who won it.

If they had a choice, which would they pick? If actions reflect emotions, they'd shoot for the players.

They came to Birmingham from all over the county, from over the state. They wanted to see where the party stopped. They wanted to know what, when no player in the National Hockey League could, slammed Detroit Red Wings defenseman Vladimir Konstantinov and Slava Fetisov, as well as team masseur Sergei Mnatsakanov.

They want to prove fans are fans, even during the off-season. Bill Martines, a Bloomfield Hills developer, stopped at the make-shift memorial site near Quarten Road Monday on his way to the office. Birmingham police dismantled the memorial that night for safety reasons.

"I think it goes beyond the Stanley Cup, I really do," Martines said about the shrine fans created almost instantly after the Friday evening accident.

"They got to celebrate for four days and then this. Words can't even describe it."

Lisa Smith brought her son Andrew to help support the team and other fans mourning the uncertainty of Konstantinov and Mnatsakanov's futures. Both suffered head injuries after the limousine they were riding in crashed into a tree on the median. Fetisov suffered less serious injuries.

"I just felt like part of me had to be here. The Red Wings are all such heroes because they're all gentlemen and they've brought so much to Detroit. It's



so and that this happened because we need people like Konstantinov, like them, in this world," said Smith, a Troy resident.

The tragic thing is it happens every day to people and this (shrine) doesn't happen for everybody," Smith said, pointing to the bounty of red and white paraphernalia at the memorial and across four lanes of traffic on the tree in the median where the crash occurred. "It could be a memorial for everybody."

Tom, a salesman from Bloom-

field Hills who did not want his last name used, said he purposely routed his travel from Grand Blanc to the Downriver so he could pass the site Monday. He and his wife passed the accident site Friday night on their way home from downtown Birmingham.

"I just saw it and said that doesn't look good. I thought, 'Boy, somebody got it pretty bad' and then I got home and heard it was the Red Wings and it was all downhill from there," Tom said. "It's just a shame something like this happened."

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