

TALKING YOURSELF OUT OF A TICKET

By Devon O'Neil

I SAW THE COP RIGHT WHEN he saw me, which meant I was already screwed. He was parked perpendicular to the interstate behind a concrete barrier, radar gun locked on my bumper as I careened around a corner. Despite smashing the brake pedal, it took me three seconds to get under the 60-mph speed limit.

The cop, a state trooper in his late 40s, pulled me over with a beckon of his finger. He walked up to my truck with a grin under his rectangular mustache, while his buddy moved into pole position on the speed trap.

Noticing my mountain bike, he said, "Seen a lotta bikes around lately. Is there some kind of biking event going on?" *Ignorant small talk*, I thought. *Maybe he'll be open to negotiation.*

He grabbed my papers and walked back to his cruiser before I could say a word.

When he returned, I had rallied my wits. "You were going 82 in a 60," he said. "That's a \$243 ticket and six points on your license." I gulped.

"Can I give you this?" I handed him a get-out-of-jail-free card a friend had given me. He half-smirked.

"I've never seen one of these. Plus," he added, showing me his clipboard, "I've already written the ticket."

I considered offering to demonstrate how to rip up a ticket, but I fished for sympathy instead. Told him I'd just lost my job and didn't have the money to pay the fine, which was about 10 percent true. "That's too bad," he said. I plugged my safe driving record. "I believe you," he said, "but I don't get computer service out here so I can't verify that. Maybe the judge can help you out."

He was now obviously amused. "I tell you what," he said. "I'll write you down for good behavior." I asked what that'd do. "It could help you in court."

"Have a nice morning," he said, and hurried to relieve his buddy, who had just pulled over another pickup.

I was two hours into a 12-hour drive to visit a friend in central Idaho. The next 10 hours unfolded under a cloud of uncertain acceleration and agony at the financial hit to come. I was mad at myself for getting the ticket, yes, but as I analyzed the previous interaction, I became increasingly disappointed in my effort to talk my way out of the punishment. Eventually, I concluded it had been downright pathetic.

Weaseling out of trouble with the law used to be simpler. None of the half-dozen mountain-town lawmen I interviewed would dispute that. Yet there are varying opinions as to why this is. Some believe the officers who hand out tickets nowadays — a generally younger group of cops — enforce the rules in a black-and-white manner and tend to engage their victims in more guarded, artificial interactions. Others say drivers are too rushed and angry to stand a chance.

"I think the culture's changed," said Capt. Ron Prater of the Colorado State Patrol, a Chicago native who has spent most of his 18-year career prowling the Rocky Mountain highways. "Back



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in the day, officers had more of a connection with the places they patrolled. There was more of a mutual understanding between the cops and the citizens, a greater sense of community on the highway."

Prater bemoans the appalling excuses he gets. Over Memorial Day weekend, he clocked a driver doing 86 in a 65. The man's passenger went off like a badger. "I know for a fact this car can't do over 60," he snapped. "The transmission's bad." Prater: "I'm like, guy!"

That same week, another officer pulled over a car for ignoring a stop sign. The driver whipped out his teacher's ID like it was a Purple Heart. "How about some professional courtesy?" he chirped, to no avail.

Over the first four months of 2009, Prater's troop pulled over roughly 6,000 vehicles but issued tickets to only 2,700, or 45 percent. This means rule benders still have a shot, albeit a trickier charge than when cops used to give drunk drivers a courtesy ride home, as veteran officers described the scene in 1970s and '80s Summit County.

Some findings: You're now less likely to get off by putting a \$20 bill behind your license or taping a police buddy's business card to the back of it — tricks that used to work. If you're claiming diarrhea (a decently effective ploy then as now), you have to sell it. This means squirming and grimacing as you hand over your papers, maybe even squeezing out a wounded fart. On the other hand, "my colostomy bag is leaking" has apparently caught on among law enforcement, and knee-jerk comments like telling the officer that your car is worth more than he'll make in 10 years — a deal breaker every time.

I was told that honesty is often still your best shot, though when you take that route you risk ending all hopes of escape. In contrast, Gary Lindstrom, a former New York City cop and ski-town undersheriff who teaches at Colorado Mountain College, said he is amazed by how many girls in his classes brag about getting out of a ticket by crying. So I guess that still works.

Probably the best story I heard came from a veteran of the local sheriff's office. As a young deputy in the early '80s, he pulled over an obviously inebriated, knockout blonde who was weaving like a blind snake on New Year's Eve. Since it was 30 below zero, he opted to do the sobriety tests inside his squad car. Before he could finish writing her name, she'd unbuttoned her dress from top to bottom. Her ripe nipples were a foot away from his married face.

"Does this work?" she said.

"Uh, yeah," he said. "That's enough for me tonight."

Then he sent her back to her car and followed her home.

I asked him whether he thinks that would still fly today.

"It shouldn't," he said.



Freelance writer Devon O'Neil lives in Breckenridge, Colo. **MG**
Got any examples of talking your way out of a ticket, or trying to? Fire them off to mjfayhee@mountaingazette.com.

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