

Deadly crash described as game

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It was described as a contest to see how fast their cars could go, where the final match was played out in fewer than 30 seconds and with deadly results.

A former Metro officer was seeking to outdo his friend and show how fast he could drive when his car plunged into the Cumberland River, killing Officer Paul Cleveland.

That was the account given in court yesterday of the deadly wreck that drowned Cleveland, 28, and turned his friend and fellow officer, William Bishop, into a convicted felon.

It was also a scenario of the accident resolutely disputed by the dead officer's family members, who said Cleveland never would have participated in such a game.

Bishop told police that he "got on it or stomped" the accelerator when he drove his 2004 Pontiac Grand Prix down Howse Avenue, heading home after eating out, Metro Police Lt. Bob Lyons said. Inside the car were Cleveland and Officer Cody O'Quinn.

Bishop, 32, was back in court yesterday to ask Davidson County Criminal Court Judge Steve Dozier to allow him to have his criminal record wiped clean after he completes the five years of probation he was sentenced last month to serve.

Bishop pleaded guilty March 2 to reckless vehicular homicide and reckless endangerment for causing the Sept. 6 crash that killed Cleveland.

It was not under a plea agreement, as was originally reported, but rather a guilty plea to all the charges leveled against him.

In court yesterday, two Metro officers testified that after the accident Bishop appeared to show no remorse or concern for Cleveland — who was missing inside a car in the river.

Bishop and O'Quinn escaped through the car's sunroof after the vehicle nose-dived into the water.

Lyons also testified that the other surviving officer told police Bishop had pushed him out of the way to escape from the submerging vehicle.

"They were trying to get out of the car and Mr. O'Quinn stated that Officer Bishop pushed him with his hand back down into the car so he could get out first," Lyons testified. Bishop swam to shore, and O'Quinn was left in the water yelling for help and yelling for Cleveland, Lyons added.

Bishop's attorney, David Raybin, had argued that Bishop's training in the Navy had taught him to get help.

Under cross-examination Raybin got the officers to acknowledge that people go through many types of emotional reactions after accidents, including shock.

Prosecutor Jim Sledge told the court that Bishop was eligible to have his record expunged but didn't deserve it.

Raybin pleaded with the court to allow the charges to be wiped away eventually, arguing that his client will pay for this for the rest of his life — but would be "crippled" with convictions on his record.

He said Bishop wants to attend law school.

Cleveland's family members said they do not want Bishop to go to jail but want to see the charges remain on his record.

"We really do forgive Bill," Cleveland's mother, Jody Trammel, said in an interview outside the courtroom.

However, she said, the family feels that part of the consequences for the crash should be a permanent criminal record for Bishop.

Dozier took the case under advisement to rule later.