

Impaired Driver John Bartlett Fatal Crash Not Fully Explained

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On Friday night, March 4th, 2011, at approximately 11:30 P.M., a Ford Pick-up truck was eastbound on Jerseyville Road, on the outskirts of Hamilton, Ontario. John Bartlett was the driver. Accompanying him was his common-law spouse Paula Dupuy, her 11-year-old daughter Isabel, and a family friend, Sarah Garside.

The Hamilton Spectator newspaper quoted police as saying that the truck left the roadway, rolled into a ditch, and struck a tree where it came to rest on its side. Isabel was pronounced dead at the accident scene. Sarah Garside was reported to be in critical condition. John Bartlett was charged with "two counts of impaired driving causing bodily harm".

While reading the comments of the public about the story I found some of interest, as noted below:

Wait what?: *This guy was released???? Does this make sense to anyone!? Lock him up!*

I don't know what more we need here: *This man drove drunk, had an accident and killed a little girl. Now he is out on a measly \$2000 surety. If that is a sign of things to come for him, I am scared for society.*

power of the media: *it is unfortunate that many pass judgment on others based on only what the media chooses to include in an article or report. Often much of the pertinent information is either missing or excluded to make the story more dramatic.*

Patience: *When the full story comes out you may better understand.*

As typical there are those who believe in the "lynch'em first, ask questions later" theory of life. Others like the third commenter questioned our passing of judgment based on "only what the media chooses to include". And the final one believes the full story will eventually come out.

As usual, I have been on the side of the third commenter, to some extent, in that I have continually expressed my concern that we do not obtain enough information about how motor vehicle accidents happen and this is not helpful to our society. This is another example of that.

I examined the collision site about three days after the accident occurrence and I will show you why things are not exactly what they appear.

First, the weather. It had been mild and raining on Friday but a cold front was approaching and the temperature was dropping. Right around the hours of the accident the area was receiving intermittent periods of freezing rain and plain rain. These conditions were variable.

Next, the road. Let's look at a couple of photos. First, a view looking eastbound on Jerseyville Road, which is the travel direction of the accident-involved Ford Pick-up truck.



You should be able to see that there is a gradual rise in the road. The impact occurred just beyond the rise about couple of hundred metres to the east. I generally take photos from several hundred metres back from the actual impact because, although in many cases there does not appear to be any visible evidence there, it is common for the original problems to occur at this distance.

I drove this road eastbound from the intersection with Highway #52 to the west and anyone who travels that route will note the obvious and very poor surface conditions of the road. It is a road of relatively low traffic volumes. There were numerous depressions that were of obvious need of attention. As I approached the accident site however the quality of the road surface was not the worst. Yet that means very little if the surface was also icy and that is a obvious possibility considering the observed weather conditions in the area. Here is another view, looking east, as we approach the area of impact.



In the view above we have now mounted the high-crest and can see the area of impact with the tree on the right (south) roadside just beyond the driveway on the right side of the road. It is not easy to show vertical differences of a road surface in a photograph but you might be able to appreciate the road condition simply by observing the number of cracks. Now let's get a little closer yet to the area of impact, as shown below.



Now you should be able to see the utility pole in the foreground that somewhat "guards" the approach to the area of impact and you should be able to see the fresh evidence of impact of the first tree in the background. I mention the utility pole because fast-moving vehicles travel in relatively straight lines (you've read this before in my other articles) so when this utility pole shows no evidence of contact it gives of some idea of the trajectory of the vehicle on approach to impact. Now let's look at the tree.



Yes, there is some damage but not to the extent that I have shown you in other articles. Now let us remember what has been reported: The vehicle rolled over in a ditch and then struck the tree.

Well there is not much of a ditch in the area but why would the occupants sustain such major injuries from a collision that appears to be relatively on the moderate side, as highway-loss-of-control collisions go?

Did the vehicle strike the tree with its roof? I can tell you that bad things happen at relatively low speeds when vehicles strike stiff, narrow and immovable objects.

Now go back and re-examine my photos on approach to the site. These photos were taken just a few days after impact. Is there any evidence of pre-crash loss-of-control such as yaw marks or gouges and scrapes? I will tell you none. I will tell you that is it another one of those events where a wet or icy road surface has likely prevented the deposit of tire mark evidence. Why there are no gouges and scrapes from the vehicle's pre-crash fall onto its side or roof is a little mystery but it may have to do with the relatively low speed of the vehicle.

So let me summarize. Yes, there has been an impaired driver. And I do not condone any such thing. Alcohol impairment is a bad thing, common and the cause of many tragedies. But it is not the sole cause of everything that happens in a collision. Not only must we stop drunk drivers but we must also make sure that our roads are in reasonable condition and that, when bad weather approaches, the persons responsible for roadway maintenance do the job they are supposed to do. From the media articles everyone knows we had an impaired driver, but how many of us were aware of the road conditions and whether they contributed to this accident? We need to know these kinds of things if we are to make the proper decisions when our politicians evaluate their budgets and we complain about our taxes. Lack of funds for roadway maintenance and repair have their repercussions.