What Field Sobriety Tests Reveal and Why They Matter in a DUI Case

When a driver is pulled over on suspicion of driving under the influence, the officer typically asks them to step out of the vehicle and perform a series of physical and mental exercises. These are known as field sobriety tests, and they serve as the first on-the-spot assessment of impairment. For anyone facing a DUI charge, understanding what these tests actually measure and where they can fall short is an important part of building a defense.

The Standard Battery of Tests

Most police departments use a set of three tests developed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The first is the horizontal gaze nystagmus test, where the officer moves a pen or light in front of the driver's eyes and watches for involuntary jerking of the eyeballs. The second is the walk-and-turn test, which requires the driver to take nine heel-to-toe steps along a straight line, turn, and return. The third is the one-leg stand, where the driver must stand with one foot raised for about thirty seconds.



Each test is designed to check balance, coordination, and the ability to follow simple instructions. An officer looks for specific clues: swaying, using arms for balance, stopping mid-task, or losing count. The presence of a certain number of clues is taken as evidence of impairment.

But these tests were never meant to be perfect. They were validated under controlled conditions with a limited range of blood alcohol concentration levels, and their accuracy depends heavily on the officer's training and the conditions at the scene. A driver who is tired, nervous, or has a physical condition that affects balance can show the same "clues" as someone who has been drinking.

Common Factors That Can Skew Results

A surprising number of everyday conditions can make a sober person appear impaired on a field sobriety test. Uneven pavement, wind, rain, or poor lighting all affect performance. So do inner-ear disorders, injuries to the legs or back, and even simple fatigue. The instruction to stand on one leg while looking at a moving object is difficult for many people even when they are completely sober.

Body weight, footwear, and age also play a role. Someone wearing heels or work boots will struggle with the walk-and-turn test. A person over sixty may not be able to balance as well as a younger person, regardless of alcohol consumption. The standardized tests were developed using mostly healthy subjects in their twenties and thirties.



Anxiety about the traffic stop itself can mimic signs of impairment. The adrenaline from being pulled over can cause shaking, rapid breathing, and difficulty concentrating. An officer who interprets these signs as intoxication may be drawing a false conclusion.

How the Tests Fit Into the Larger Picture

Field sobriety tests are just one piece of evidence in a DUI case. The officer also observes the driver's speech, eyes, and odor of alcohol. These observations are recorded in a police report and used to establish probable cause for an arrest. Once arrested, the driver is usually asked to submit to a breathalyzer or blood draw to measure blood alcohol concentration.

The relationship between field sobriety tests and the later chemical test is worth noting. If the field tests are flawed, the officer may lack probable cause for the arrest, and any evidence gathered after that point could be challenged. This is where a close review of the officer's report and any body camera footage becomes essential.

Body camera recordings are increasingly common and can provide an objective record of how the tests were administered. Did the officer explain the instructions clearly? Was the surface level? Did the driver seem confused by the instructions rather than impaired? A video can reveal problems that the officer's written report may gloss over.

Chain of Custody and Chemical Testing

After the arrest, the focus shifts to the chemical test. A breathalyzer must be properly calibrated and operated. A blood draw must follow strict protocols for sample collection, storage, and analysis. Any break in the chain of custody can make the results unreliable. A Pennsylvania DUI defense lawyer will examine whether the equipment was maintained, whether the operator was certified, and whether the sample was handled correctly from the moment it was taken until it was tested.

The Law Office of Steven F O'Meara regularly reviews these details when representing clients charged with DUI. A single error in the testing process can be enough to suppress the chemical evidence or reduce the charge.

How Field Sobriety Tests Can Be Challenged

A good defense starts with questioning the reliability of the field sobriety tests themselves. The defense attorney may look at whether the officer followed the standardized procedures exactly. If the officer deviated from the training manual, the test results may not be admissible as evidence of impairment.



Other angles include the driver's medical history. A concussion, a leg injury, or a condition like multiple sclerosis can cause balance problems. If the driver disclosed a medical issue at the scene and the officer proceeded anyway, that is a point worth raising.

The same goes for environmental factors. A defense attorney might visit the location of the traffic stop to see if the ground was sloped or cracked. Photos or video of the scene can support the argument that the test was unfair.

Another common challenge involves the officer's training and certification. Not every officer has completed the required training to administer the standardized tests. If the officer cannot show a current certification, the test results may lose their weight in court.

What This Means for Someone Facing a DUI Charge

If you are charged with DUI, the field sobriety tests are not the final word. They are a starting point for the officer's investigation, but they are open to interpretation and can be contested. A skilled defense will look at every factor that could have affected your performance on the tests, as well as the accuracy of any chemical test that followed.

Timing matters. Memories fade, evidence gets lost, and deadlines for challenging a license suspension are short. The sooner you speak with a lawyer, the better the chance of preserving video footage, obtaining the officer's notes, and identifying any errors in the testing process.

The Law Office of Steven F O'Meara handles DUI defense and related traffic matters in Delaware County and across Pennsylvania. Their work includes reviewing field sobriety tests,

challenging faulty breathalyzer or blood test results, and advising clients on ARD eligibility and license suspension issues. The goal is to find the weaknesses in the prosecution's case and use them to protect the driver's rights.



Practical Steps After a DUI Arrest

If you have been arrested, there are a few things you can do right away. First, request a copy of the police report and any body camera footage. These records are time-sensitive and may be erased after a set period. Second, write down everything you remember about the traffic stop and the tests while it is still fresh. Details about the road surface, lighting, and the officer's instructions can all matter later. Third, contact a lawyer who understands the specific rules and standards that apply to field sobriety tests in Pennsylvania.

Do not assume that a failed field test means a lost case. Many cases are resolved or reduced because an attorney was able to show that the tests were administered improperly or that the driver's performance had a non-alcohol explanation. The legal system allows for a thorough examination of the evidence, and that examination often starts with the field sobriety tests.

Understanding what these tests can and cannot prove is the first step in building a realistic defense. They are tools for the officer, not verdicts from a judge. With the right review, they can become tools for the defense as well.