

SUPREME COURT OF DELAWARE

Runyon v. State

968 A.2d 492 (Del. 2009) · No. No. 369, 2008 · Decided March 4, 2009

SUMMARY

The Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the Superior Court’s denial of James Runyon’s first motion for postconviction relief. The Court rejected his claims concerning ineffective assistance of counsel, an alleged conflict of interest, involuntariness of his guilty plea, habitual-offender sentencing, breach of a plea agreement, and denial of a motion to stay proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Delaware
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jack B. Jacobs; Berger; Jacobs; Ridgely
JURISDICTION	Delaware
DECIDED	March 4, 2009
DOCKET	No. 369, 2008
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from the Superior Court of Delaware's denial of Runyon's first motion for postconviction relief following his guilty pleas and sentencing.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The denial of postconviction relief is reviewed for abuse of discretion. Claims of ineffective assistance in connection with a guilty plea require proof of objectively unreasonable representation and a reasonable probability that, absent counsel's errors, the defendant would have rejected the plea and proceeded to trial. Unpreserved claims are reviewed only for plain error.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Delaware Supreme Court opinion
PARTIES	James Runyon v. State of Delaware

TOPICS

- state post-conviction relief
- ineffective assistance
- plea bargaining
- appellate procedure
- sentencing

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Runyon's guilty plea was involuntary because his counsel had an actual conflict of interest arising from counsel's marriage to Runyon's former attorney.
2. Whether counsel was ineffective for failing to investigate, prepare a defense, communicate with Runyon, or advise him about the State's evidence.
3. Whether Runyon could raise for the first time on appeal claims concerning his habitual-offender status, an alleged breach of an earlier plea agreement, and the constitutionality of his habitual-offender sentence.
4. Whether the Superior Court abused its discretion by denying Runyon's motion to stay the postconviction proceedings.

HOLDINGS

1. A defendant seeking to overturn a conviction based on a conflict of interest must establish both an actual conflict and that the conflict adversely affected counsel's representation. Runyon failed to make that showing, and counsel's marriage to Runyon's former attorney did not create a per se bar to representation.
2. A defendant challenging a guilty plea based on counsel's alleged failures must identify attorney error and establish actual prejudice, including a reasonable probability that the defendant would have rejected the plea and gone to trial. Runyon's generalized allegations and failure to show prejudice were insufficient.
3. Claims not presented to the Superior Court will not be reviewed for the first time on appeal absent plain error. Runyon's unpreserved claims did not constitute plain error.
4. The Superior Court did not abuse its discretion by denying a motion to stay postconviction proceedings where the movant did not identify the additional claims he wished to raise or show prejudice from denial of additional time.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“To prevail on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel in entering a guilty plea, a defendant must establish that (a) his trial counsel's representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness; and (b) but for counsel's unprofessional errors, he would not have pled guilty but would have insisted on going to trial.” (¶ 5)

“To overturn his conviction based on a conflict of interest, Runyon was required to prove not only that counsel had an actual conflict, but also that the conflict actually affected his counsel's representation.” (¶ 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Runyon was charged with attempted first-degree robbery, possession of a deadly weapon during the commission of a felony, second-degree assault, and wearing a disguise during the commission of a felony. He pleaded guilty to second-degree assault and attempted first-degree robbery in exchange for dismissal of the remaining charges and a recommended eleven-year sentence, and acknowledged in the plea agreement that he was eligible for

habitual-offender sentencing. The Superior Court imposed the challenged sentences, after which Runyon filed a first postconviction motion asserting involuntary plea, ineffective-assistance, competency, habitual-offender, and related claims.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Runyon pleaded guilty to second-degree assault and attempted first-degree robbery. The Superior Court sentenced him, including as an habitual offender on the assault charge. He did not take a direct appeal, but filed a first motion for postconviction relief in March 2008. The Superior Court rejected his claims on the merits and denied his motion to stay the postconviction proceedings; the Supreme Court of Delaware affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Murphy v. State, 632 A.2d 1150, 1152 (Del. 1993)
- Dawson v. State, 673 A.2d 1186, 1190 (Del. 1996)
- Albury v. State, 551 A.2d 53, 58-59 (Del. 1988)
- Hill v. Lockhart, 474 U.S. 52 (1985)
- Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668, 687-89, 694 (1984)
- Younger v. State, 580 A.2d 552, 556 (Del. 1990)
- Cuyler v. Sullivan, 446 U.S. 335, 348 (1980)
- Somerville v. State, 703 A.2d 629, 631 (Del. 1997)
- Guinn v. State, 882 A.2d 178, 181 (Del. 2005)

OPINION

Runyon v. State 968 A.2d 492

PER CURIAM.

JAMES RUNYON, Defendant Below-Appellant, v. STATE OF DELAWARE, Plaintiff Below-Appellee. No. 369, 2008 Supreme Court of Delaware. Submitted: December 12, 2008. Decided: March 4, 2009. Before BERGER, JACOBS, and RIDGELY, Justices.

ORDER

JACK B. JACOBS, Justice. This 4th day of March 2009, upon consideration of the parties' briefs and the record below, it appears to the Court that:

(1) The appellant, James Runyon, filed this appeal from the Superior Court's denial of his first motion for postconviction relief. We find no merit to Runyon's appeal. Accordingly, we affirm the Superior Court's judgment.

(2) The record reflects that Runyon was charged in April 2006 with first degree attempted robbery, possession of a deadly weapon during the commission of a felony, second degree assault, and

wearing a disguise during the commission of a felony. He pled guilty to one count of second degree assault and one count of attempted first degree robbery. In exchange for his guilty plea, the State dismissed the remaining charges and agreed to recommend a sentence of eleven years in prison. As part of his plea agreement, Runyon acknowledged that he was eligible for sentencing as an habitual offender. On November 17, 2006, the Superior Court sentenced Runyon on the attempted robbery charge to nine years and six months at Level V incarceration, to be suspended after serving a three year mandatory minimum prison term for two years and six months at decreasing levels of supervision. On the assault charge, the Superior Court sentenced Runyon as an habitual offender to eight years at Level V incarceration.[1] Runyon did not appeal. Instead, in March 2008, Runyon filed a motion for postconviction relief.

(3) Runyon raised six postconviction claims in the motion he filed in the Superior Court. He argued that: (i) his plea was involuntary because his counsel had a conflict of interest; (ii) his plea was involuntary because he was under the influence of medication; (iii) his counsel was ineffective for failing to inform him of the evidence the State had against him; (iv) his counsel was ineffective for failing to investigate his case; (v) the Superior Court committed plain error in allowing Runyon to plead guilty when he was not competent to enter a plea; and (vi) his counsel was ineffective for failing to file a direct appeal. The Superior Court rejected all of these claims on the merits. This appeal followed.

(4) In his opening brief on appeal, Runyon contends that the Superior Court abused its discretion in denying postconviction relief because: (i) his guilty plea was involuntary due to his counsel's conflict of interest; his counsel's ineffectiveness in failing to investigate his case and prepare a defense; and for failing to advise him of, and challenge, his status as an habitual offender; (ii) the State breached its plea agreement; and (iii) his habitual offender sentence is unconstitutional. Runyon also argues that the Superior Court abused its discretion by denying his motion to stay the postconviction proceedings.[2]

(5) This Court reviews the Superior Court's denial of postconviction relief for abuse of discretion. [3] To prevail on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel in entering a guilty plea, a defendant must establish that (a) his trial counsel's representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness; and (b) but for counsel's unprofessional errors, he would not have pled guilty but would have insisted on going to trial.[4] The defendant must set forth and substantiate concrete allegations of actual prejudice.[5] Moreover, there is a "strong presumption" that counsel's representation was professionally reasonable.[6]

(6) In this case, the Superior Court concluded that Runyon's claim that his counsel was ineffective due to a conflict of interest was wholly unsubstantiated. Runyon's claim of a disqualifying conflict rested solely on the assertion that counsel was married to Runyon's former attorney in an unrelated criminal matter. To overturn his conviction based on a conflict of interest, Runyon was required to prove not only that counsel had an actual conflict, but also that the conflict actually affected his counsel's representation.[7] The Superior Court concluded that there was no per se, ethical bar to

counsel representing Runyon based on counsel's marriage to Runyon's former counsel.[8] Absent an actual conflict of interest, we find no error in the Superior Court's rejection of Runyon's claim.

(7) Runyon next argues that his guilty plea was involuntary because his counsel failed to investigate his case, failed to prepare a defense, and failed to communicate with him about his case. Runyon points to no specific errors beyond his general complaints about his counsel's ineffectiveness, and we find no attorney error.[9] Moreover, even were we to assume that Runyon's counsel had somehow erred, Runyon has not substantiated, nor even argued, that there was any prejudice to him.[10] As the Superior Court noted, the State's evidence against Runyon included corroborated eyewitness testimony. Given the foregoing, Runyon could not establish a reasonable probability that the outcome of the proceedings would have been different.[11]

(8) Runyon's next three arguments contend that his counsel was ineffective with respect to (a) his being sentenced as an habitual offender, (b) the State breaching its plea agreement with him in an earlier case by seeking his sentencing as an habitual offender in this case, and (c) his habitual offender sentence is unconstitutional. None of these arguments was made to the Superior Court in the first instance. Absent plain error we will not review these claims for the first time on appeal. [12] We find no plain error. Runyon's plea agreement specifically contained Runyon's acknowledgment that he was an habitual offender. It also set forth the specific prior offenses establishing his habitual offender status. Runyon's belated attempt to argue defects in the habitual offender proceedings and his sentence are contradicted by the record and his knowing and voluntary guilty plea.

(9) Runyon's final argument is that the Superior Court abused its discretion by denying his motion to stay the postconviction proceedings. Runyon asserts that he sought the stay because he wanted to amend his postconviction petition. He does not contend what further arguments he would have raised had he been permitted additional time. In the absence of any claim of prejudice, we find no abuse of discretion in the Superior Court's denial of the motion to stay.[13]

NOW, THEREFORE, IT IS ORDERED that the judgment of the Superior Court is AFFIRMED.

NOTES

[1] In addition to the attempted robbery and assault charges, the Superior Court's November 17, 2007 sentencing order also sentenced Runyon on unrelated charges of aggravated harassment and criminal mischief, filed in Cr. ID XXXXXXXXXXXX, to which Runyon had pled guilty on February 22, 2006. Except to the extent that Runyon contends that the marital relationship between his attorney in the aggravated harassment case and his attorney in the present case created a conflict of interest, the charges in Cr. ID XXXXXXXXXXXX were not the subject of Runyon's first postconviction motion.

[2] To the extent that Runyon's postconviction motion raised additional issues that were not included in his opening brief on appeal, those claims are deemed waived. *Murphy v. State*, 632 A.2d 1150, 1152 (Del. 1993). We do not address them here.

[3] *Dawson v. State*, 673 A.2d 1186, 1190 (Del. 1996).

- [4] *Albury v. State*, 551 A.2d 53, 58-59 (Del. 1988) (citing *Hill v. Lockhart*, 474 U.S. 52 (1985)). See also *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 687-88 (1984).
- [5] *Younger v. State*, 580 A.2d 552, 556 (Del. 1990).
- [6] *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. at 689.
- [7] *Cuyler v. Sullivan*, 446 U.S. 335, 348 (1980).
- [8] See Del. L.R. Prof. Cond. R. 1.7(a)(2) (providing that a conflict of interest exists if "there is a significant risk that the representation....will be materially limited by the lawyer's responsibilities to....a third person or by a personal interest of the lawyer.").
- [9] We further note that, in response to the trial court's inquiry, Runyon expressed his satisfaction with his counsel's representation. He acknowledged that he was pleading guilty to the charged offenses because, in fact, he was guilty. Runyon now is bound by the answers he provided under oath at the guilty plea hearing. *Somerville v. State*, 703 A.2d 629, 631 (Del. 1997).
- [10] See *Younger v. State*, 580 A.2d at 556.
- [11] *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. at 688, 694.
- [12] Del. Supr. Ct. R. 8.
- [13] See *Guinn v. State*, 882 A.2d 178, 181 (Del. 2008) (noting that the Superior Court has discretion in determining how to proceed with a postconviction motion).