

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF MONTANA

State v. Strawn

2003 MT 297N (2003) · No. 02-734 · Decided October 29, 2003

SUMMARY

The Montana Supreme Court affirmed Bruce Douglas Strawn’s felony DUI conviction. The court held that his challenge to the use of prior DUI convictions for felony enhancement was controlled by settled Montana law, under which a bare assertion that a defendant was not advised of the dangers and disadvantages of self-representation does not overcome the presumption that the prior convictions were valid.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of the State of Montana
WRITING FOR THE COURT	John Warner; Jim Rice; Patricia Cotter; James C. Nelson; W. William Leaphart
JURISDICTION	Montana
DECIDED	October 29, 2003
DOCKET	02-734
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Strawn appealed from a judgment convicting him of felony driving under the influence after the District Court denied his motion to dismiss the felony charge. He pleaded guilty while reserving his right to appeal the denial of that motion.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The appeal was resolved under Montana Supreme Court Internal Operating Rule § 1.3(d), which permits summary affirmance when the issue is clearly controlled by settled Montana or binding federal law and the appeal is manifestly without merit on the briefs and record.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Nonprecedential; expressly designated noncitable under Montana Supreme Court Internal Operating Rules.
PARTIES	Bruce Douglas Strawn v. State of Montana

TOPICS

- criminal procedure
- right to counsel
- appellate procedure
- constitutional law

PRACTICE AREAS

Criminal law

Criminal procedure

Appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether prior DUI convictions may be used to enhance a current DUI charge to a felony when the defendant asserts that the prior courts failed to advise him of the dangers and disadvantages of self-representation after he waived counsel and pleaded guilty.

HOLDINGS

1. A bare assertion that the defendant was not specifically advised of the dangers and disadvantages of proceeding without counsel is insufficient to overcome the presumption that the prior DUI convictions were valid and therefore could be used in charging the current DUI as a felony.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“In each instance, we held that merely stating that defendant was not advised specifically of the dangers and disadvantages of proceeding without counsel is insufficient to overcome the presumption that a prior conviction was valid.” (¶5)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The State charged Bruce Strawn with felony DUI in January 2002 because he had three prior DUI convictions. Strawn challenged two of those prior convictions, asserting that although he had waived his right to counsel and pleaded guilty, the prior courts had not advised him of the dangers and disadvantages of self-representation. The District Court denied his motion to dismiss the felony charge, after which he pleaded guilty while reserving his appellate challenge.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The State charged Strawn by information with felony DUI based on three prior DUI convictions. Strawn argued that two prior convictions were constitutionally infirm because the convicting courts failed to advise him of the dangers and disadvantages of self-representation after he waived counsel and pleaded guilty. The District Court denied dismissal, Strawn entered a conditional guilty plea, and the Montana Supreme Court affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State v. Markuson, 2003 MT 206, 317 Mont. 43, 75 P.3d 298
- State v. Wolfe, 2003 MT 222, 317 Mont. 173, 75 P.3d 1271
- State v. Joseph, 2003 MT 226, 317 Mont. 186, 75 P.3d 1273
- State v. Sirucek, 2003 MT 269N, 77 P.3d 556

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

No. 02-734 IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF MONTANA 2003 MT 297N
STATE OF MONTANA, Plaintiff and Respondent, v. BRUCE DOUGLAS STRAWN, Defendant
and Appellant. APPEAL FROM: District Court of the Twentieth Judicial District, In and for the
County of Lake, Cause No. DC 02-14, The Honorable Deborah Kim Christopher, Judge presiding.
COUNSEL OF RECORD: For Appellant: Larry J. Nistler, Attorney at Law, Polson, Montana For
Respondent: Hon. Mike McGrath, Attorney General; Jennifer Anders, Assistant Attorney General,
Helena, Montana Robert J. Long, Lake County Attorney, Polson, Montana Submitted on Briefs:
August 7, 2003 Decided: October 30, 2003 Filed:
_____ Clerk Justice John Warner delivered the
Opinion of the Court. ¶1 Pursuant to Section I, Paragraph 3(c), Montana Supreme Court 1996
Internal Operating Rules, the following decision shall not be cited as precedent.

The decision shall be filed as a public document with the Clerk of the Supreme Court and shall be
reported by case title, Supreme Court cause number, and result to the State Reporter Publishing
Company and to West Group in the quarterly table of noncitable cases issued by this Court. ¶2 The
Appellant, Bruce Strawn (Strawn), appeals from a judgment entered in the Twentieth Judicial
District Court, Lake County, convicting him of Driving Under the Influence of Alcohol or Drugs,
pursuant to §§ 61-8-731, 61-8-401(1)(a), MCA. ¶3 In January of 2002, the State of Montana
(State) charged Strawn by information with the offense of DUI.

Because Strawn had been convicted of DUI on three prior occasions, the offense was charged as a
felony. Strawn moved the District Court to dismiss the felony charge arguing that two of his prior
DUI convictions were constitutionally infirm because even though he waived his right to an
attorney and pled guilty, the court that convicted him in each case failed to advise him of the
dangers and disadvantages of self-representation.

Consequently, he argued, these prior convictions could not be used to enhance the current DUI
charge to a felony. The District Court denied his motion. He pled guilty to DUI, reserving his right
to appeal the denial of his motion to dismiss. Judgment was entered and he now appeals. ¶4 On
February 11, 2003, we entered an order amending Section 1.3 of our 1996 Internal Operating
Rules.

The amended Section 1.3(d) provides in relevant part: (i) After all briefs have been filed in any
appeal, the Supreme Court by unanimous action may, sua sponte, enter an order or memorandum
opinion 2 affirming the judgment or order of the trial court for the reason that it is manifest on the
face of the briefs and the record that the appeal is without merit because: (1) the issues are clearly
controlled by settled Montana law or federal law binding upon the states; (2) the issues are factual

and there clearly is sufficient evidence to support the jury verdict or findings of fact below; or (3) the issues are ones of judicial discretion and there clearly was not an abuse of discretion.

We conclude that this is an appropriate case to decide pursuant to our February 11, 2003, order. ¶5 The identical issue presented by Strawn whether his prior DUI convictions were constitutionally infirm because even though he waived his right to an attorney and pled guilty, the convicting courts failed to advise him of the dangers and disadvantages of self- representation, has recently been decided in four other appeals: *State v. Markuson*, 2003 MT 206, 317 Mont.

43, 75 P.3d 298; *State v. Wolfe*, 2003 MT 222, 317 Mont. 173, 75 P.3d 1271; *State v. Joseph*, 2003 MT 226, 317 Mont. 186, 75 P.3d 1273; and *State v. Sirucek*, 2003 MT 269N, ___ Mont. ___, 77 P.3d 556. In each instance, we held that merely stating that defendant was not advised specifically of the dangers and disadvantages of proceeding without counsel is insufficient to overcome the presumption that a prior conviction was valid. ¶6 The issue raised by Strawn being clearly controlled by settled Montana law, we affirm the judgment of the District Court. /S/ JOHN WARNER 3 We Concur: /S/ JIM RICE /S/ PATRICIA COTTER /S/ JAMES C. NELSON /S/ W. WILLIAM LEAPHART 4