

Drivers recount road rage on the Turnpike

They dispute who threw the first punch, but his is linked to her eye damage

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They were two motorists zipping along the New Jersey Turnpike — one the way to work, the other on the way home from work. Both drivers were approaching Interchange 14 toward Jersey City when they encountered construction, which narrowed the highway from two lanes to one.

That's when a routine traffic merge erupted into a road rage incident, which has ended up in criminal court.

Paul Baker, a surgical technician, says Asante Adler cut in front of him, clipped his mirror, then launched into a tirade on the road.

Not so, says Adler, a toll collector from Jersey City who claims Baker erupted in a profanity-laced outburst,

then punched and kicked her, resulting in permanent eye damage.

Whatever the case, both are now in Superior Court in Newark over the Sept. 20, 2003, road rage incident. Baker is charged with assault and making terroristic threats at Adler and faces at least five years in prison if convicted. They have offered different versions of the

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Asante Adler testifies in Essex County Superior Court in Newark.

RAGE

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encounter, leaving the jury to decide who to believe.

Yesterday, Baker, a 38-year-old father of two and Pennsylvania resident, took the witness stand for six hours, calmly recounting the events of that day.

Baker testified he was returning from a trip from Washington, D.C., and was on his way to work at the Jersey City Medical Center at around 10:25 p.m. He said he was in the left lane as he approached Interchange 14 and cars were filing into his lane for the merge. He allowed one vehicle, a van, to go ahead of him and was about to proceed when he heard loud honking from a car in the right lane.

He rolled down the window to his Saturn and there was Adler, he said, hollering, "You're not going to cut in front of me. You're not going to cut in front of me."

Before he had a chance to respond, he said, she moved her

Dodge Neon forward and hit his mirror. The two got out of their cars and that's when bedlam broke loose.

According to Baker, Adler marched up to him, screaming curse words and said, "I know I'm a woman, I know you're a man, bring it on!" Baker said he was calm at first, but admitted losing his temper after she continued to scream at him and kick his car.

Other motorists sitting in traffic, also started to lose patience and urged the two to get back in their cars and move out of the way. When he turned to get back in the car, Baker said Adler attacked him by punching him in the neck. He turned and socked her in the eye with his left fist, knocking her to the ground.

"I just turned around and swung," he said, answering questions from his attorney Timothy R. Smith. "She fell, jumped back up yelling and screaming."

Baker said he tried to leave because Adler was dialing numbers on her phone and he panicked, not

knowing who she was calling. He tried to get in the car a second time, but this time he said Adler stood in front of the car, leaned on the hood and said, "You're not leaving."

Baker denied ever kicking Adler and said he eventually left the scene and went to work. He said he thought it was okay for him to leave since another witness had taken down his license plate number. He testified he contacted police the next day to notify them about the incident.

Adler, 20, who was called back to the witness stand yesterday, said Baker initiated the altercation. A willowy woman with a medium build, Adler said was heading back to Jersey City after her shift at the Interchange 13A toll booth. She said she was in the right lane when she saw a car with tinted windows pull up beside her car.

Next, she said she heard three loud cracks. Realizing her car was hit, she rolled down the window and saw Baker's face leaning out of car with the tinted windows.

"Did you hit my car?" she asked him.

He said he replied yes.

The two got out of the car and Asante said Baker charged at her.

"He came to me and was yelling and acting crazy," she said, speaking in a pitched, excited voice. "He said, 'Who do you think you are? You got to pay for this.'"

"The next thing I knew, my glasses were flying and I woke up to a bloody face and being kicked to the side of the stomach," Asante said, her voice cracking, tears in her eyes.

Adler's iris, cornea and lens suffered permanent damage because of the fight, a doctor testified for the prosecution. Their cars, meanwhile, suffered minimal damage.

Adler has also filed a civil suit against Baker. The attorneys for both sides are scheduled to deliver closing arguments today before handing the case to the jurors.

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