NON-PRECEDENTIAL DECISION - SEE SUPERIOR COURT O.P. 65.37

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA	:	IN THE SUPERIOR COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA
v.	:	
CHAMPION OTEAN HOUGH	:	
Appellant	:	No. 603 EDA 2025

Appeal from the Judgment of Sentence Entered February 12, 2025
In the Court of Common Pleas of Delaware County Criminal Division at
No(s): CP-23-CR-0002028-2022

BEFORE: OLSON, J., STABILE, J., and KUNSELMAN, J.

MEMORANDUM BY KUNSELMAN, J.: **FILED NOVEMBER 9, 2026**

Champion Hough appeals *pro se* from the judgment of sentence entered after he was convicted of murder of the first degree and other crimes.[1] Hough presents six issues in his appellate brief. The trial court found Hough's *pro se* statement of 107 errors complained of on appeal to be so long, redundant, and frivolous that Hough forfeited his right to review. The Commonwealth argues that Hough's noncompliant brief hinders review and that Hough's issues are meritless. We reach the merits only of Hough's first issue: whether the trial court erred when it denied Hough's motion to represent himself at trial. Finding no abuse of discretion or other error, we affirm.

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[1] 18 Pa.C.S. §§ 2502(a) (murder of the first degree), 3921(a) (theft by unlawful taking), 3925(a) (receiving stolen property), 6106(a)(1) (firearms not to be carried without a license), and 907(a) (possessing an instrument of crime).

On January 10, 2022, police charged Hough with criminal homicide and other crimes based on the death of Naimah Ishmail, whose body was found in Chester, Pennsylvania on October 7, 2020. The case proceeded to court.

Hough filed numerous documents not signed by his attorney and moved to represent himself. Defense counsel adopted Hough's *pro se* motion for a ***Franks*** hearing (***see Franks v. Delaware***, 438 U.S. 154 (1978)), and the trial court held the hearing with counsel representing Hough. The court directed briefing, and counsel requested an extension after receiving the transcript. The court heard the extension request, and counsel advised that Hough wanted to waive counsel. The trial court discussed this with Hough, who explained why he wanted to represent himself at trial.

> [Defense counsel]: . . . I do want to bring it to the Court's attention that Mr. Hough has indicated to me once again that he wishes to proceed *pro se*, that he does not want me to do anything on his behalf. So that raises another issue for the Court.
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> THE COURT: Mr. Hough, let me hear from you.
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> MR. HOUGH: Your Honor. . . . So we had the ***Franks*** hearing, which I appreciate you for having the ***Franks*** hearing for me. He requested some extra -- I want to file some other motions. Like, after this time I go *pro se*, I don't intend to use a counsel representation. I just need somebody to stand by, like, you know, to come talk to me, guide me through things, like certain instructions. Like, when should I assert these? That's all I'm asking for, Your Honor.
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> THE COURT: Well, you don't get hybrid representation. You don't get somebody to do all the work when you want to proceed *pro se*.
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> MR. HOUGH: Correct.
>
> THE COURT: So --

[Defense counsel]: I think what he's asking for, Your Honor, is standby counsel to the extent that he would do all the work, and that standby counsel would assist him as requested, I guess. I know, for example, he just asked me if I could come and meet with him and talk to him about what a trial is like and what he would need to expect if he were to represent himself at trial. And I'm willing to do that, but, again, it's one of these -- These are difficult situations for the Court and for counsel and for the defendant to work through. I'm happy to do whatever the Court thinks is best.

MR. HOUGH: Your Honor, I want to refrain from that, because I don't think it would be anything difficult about it. With a case like mine, I really don't think it would be anything difficult about it, Your Honor. I put requests out there for discovery material time after time, and . . . these counsels that have been given to me has been neglecting to get this material. It's like –

It's --

THE COURT: You're being charged with murder in the first degree.

MR. HOUGH: I understand, Your Honor. I understand that.

THE COURT: That sounds pretty serious to me, and it sounds pretty difficult.

MR. HOUGH: Yes, Your Honor.

THE COURT: And, you know, for someone to try and represent themselves when they're facing life in prison --

MR. HOUGH: Correct, Your Honor.

THE COURT: -- is not a wise decision.

MR. HOUGH: Your Honor, God told me to go through with this, and He told me my name Champion, and he said --

THE COURT: Who said?

MR. HOUGH: I got God, and He said the other inmates is waiting on you to do this immediately, so I got to do it.

THE COURT: The other inmates?

MR. HOUGH: Everybody is waiting on me to do this. The other inmates in the prison.

THE COURT: So you know why they're inmates?

MR. HOUGH: Correct, Your Honor.

THE COURT: They're inmates because they didn't . . . know what they should do.

MR. HOUGH: Correct.

THE COURT: So when you're listening to the jailhouse people, they don't serve the time. I'll give you an example. There's a case I'm very familiar with. Guy was a young man, about 18 years old, maybe 19 by the time of trial. His mother said, "Take the plea offer. Take the plea offer." Murder in the first degree. "No, Mom. All the people in the jail tell me, that I can beat this. I can beat this." Well, he's serving life in prison.

MR. HOUGH: Your Honor, I understand that.

THE COURT: And, you know, it's --

MR. HOUGH: If it was a -

THE COURT: -- it's your life. You want to serve, you want to spend the rest of your life in prison without the opportunity for parole.

MR. HOUGH: Well, Your Honor.

THE COURT: That's your prerogative.

MR. HOUGH: Your Honor, I highly understand that. I'm down here from upstate right now on writ. If I lose this trial, and he's telling me he won't argue certain arguments for me, I would never go home. They use fake evidence to arrest me. They lie in affidavits. All that has to be addressed at these court levels because at this level, it ain't going to be no more. A judge would look at me right now and read my case, and 30 years from now have pity on me? No. We need to address this situation right now, Your Honor. That's all I'm asking for. I'm not trying to make it a pest on the Court. Only reason I let him go forth, Your Honor, because you said he would help me. Well, you've seen at the hearing that what I told him to say, he didn't say it. You're saying he adopted my motion, and he went against my motion. These are a bunch of -- these are not just -- these are all civil issues, Your Honor.

THE COURT: Well, you --

> MR. HOUGH: He don't want to argue that. I want to argue it, and I think I had a right to argue it.

N.T., 9/30/24, at 3–8. The trial court then questioned Hough about each of the matters required by the relevant rule of criminal procedure. Hough said that he was taking a medication to prevent him from hearing voices, which the trial court observed Hough had said was the reason he wanted to proceed *pro se*. ***Id.*** at 8–12. Ultimately, the trial court denied Hough's motion to waive his right to counsel. ***Id.*** at 16.

The case proceeded to trial, and a jury convicted Hough of the above crimes. On February 12, 2025, the trial court sentenced Hough to life imprisonment without parole, 72 to 144 months of consecutive confinement, and 48 months of probation. Hough filed a *pro se* notice of appeal on February 21, 2025. The trial court directed Hough to file a concise statement of matters complained of on appeal. Defense counsel complied, and the trial court entered an opinion addressing the issues presented.

On June 16, 2025, Hough moved to proceed *pro se* for this appeal. After a hearing, the trial court directed that Hough be allowed to proceed as a self-represented litigant.[2] Hough moved for "the opp[o]rtunity to file his own 1925(b)" statement, as he wanted "to present a complete defense on this appeal." Motion, 9/8/25. The trial court granted the motion. Hough filed a *pro se* concise statement of matters complained of on appeal, enumerating

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[2] A different trial court judge heard and granted this motion. According to the Commonwealth, Hough did not say that he was hearing voices and answered the court's questions coherently.

107 issues. The trial court entered an addendum to its prior opinion and reasoned that Hough forfeited his right to review of the duplicative and frivolous issues that "can only be meant to overwhelm and punish the judicial system." Addendum, 12/15/25, at 4.

Hough's appellate brief begins with a request to liberally construe it. Hough did not include a statement of jurisdiction, the order in question, a statement of the scope and standard of review, a separate statement of the questions involved, a statement of the case, a separate summary of his argument, or copies of his statement of errors complained of on appeal or of the trial court's opinion. Hough divides his argument into six issues:

> Was defendant incorrectly denied his right to self representation under the 6th amendment when the request was made months before trial?
>
> Was counsel ineffective for not advising the court before trial he could not read ping maps?
>
> Should retrial be barred if this case is overturned since prosecutors gave the car away without recovering [exculpatory] evidence inside it?
>
> Was defendant denied a fair trial as to bar retrial when prosecutors knowingly and intentionally introduced false testimony and fabricated geo tracking maps[?]
>
> Did the courts error [sic] in granting [the] prosecutors' motion *in limine* to use photo & videos of the defendant rapping and posing with replica guns not said to be connected to the crime?
>
> Was the evidence used insufficient to prove beyond a reasonable doubt the defendant committed theft by unlawful taking of the victim's vehicle?

See Hough's Brief at 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9. Hough does not address the trial court's finding that he waived his issues.

The Commonwealth argues that Hough's failure to comply with the Rules of Appellate Procedure precludes meaningful review, so this Court should quash his appeal. The Commonwealth also argues that Hough's issues lack merit.

We begin our analysis with the threshold matter of issue preservation. We are willing to liberally construe materials filed by a *pro se* litigant; however, there is "no special benefit" to *pro se* status. ***Commonwealth v. Tchirkow***, 160 A.3d 798, 804 (Pa. Super. 2017). All litigants, including those who represent themselves, must follow the applicable rules of procedure. ***Id.*** (citing ***Commonwealth v. Lyons***, 833 A.2d 245, 251–52 (Pa. Super. 2003)).

When an appellant files a concise statement of errors complained of on appeal, Pennsylvania Rule of Appellate Procedure 1925(b) requires a statement that is "sufficiently 'concise' and 'coherent' such that the trial court judge may be able to identify the issues to be raised on appeal, and the circumstances must not suggest the existence of bad faith." ***Commonwealth v. Vurimindi***, 200 A.3d 1031, 1038 (Pa. Super. 2018). An appellant who files an overwhelmingly long statement of errors to effectively preclude review risks his appeal being quashed. ***Id.*** at 1038–40 (providing examples).

When an appellant files a brief on appeal, that brief must "conform in all material respects" with the rules, and substantial defects in the brief are grounds for the Court to quash the appeal. Pa.R.A.P. 2101; ***see Tchirkow***, 160 A.3d at 804 (citing ***Commonwealth v. Adams***, 882 A.2d 496, 497–98 (Pa. Super. 2005)). Rule 2111 requires specific matters to be included in an

appellant's brief, including a statement of jurisdiction, the order in question, the statement of the scope and standard of review, a summary of the case, a summary of the argument, and the opinion from the trial court. ***See id.***

Here, Hough provides no rebuttal to the trial court's opinion that Hough's 107-issue Rule 1925(b) statement was filed in bad faith. Hough's brief does not contain at least six of the sections required in an appellant's brief. However, because the trial court previously addressed the denial of Hough's motion to waive counsel and the parties provide cohesive argument, we reach the merits of Hough's first issue. We deem Hough's remaining issues waived.

In his first issue, Hough argues the trial court incorrectly denied his Sixth Amendment right to represent himself. He protests the trial court's "focus" on "how counsel could help" and desire for "a spee[c]h" about why he wanted to waive his right to counsel.

A criminal defendant has a Sixth Amendment right to counsel as well as a "concomitant right to waive counsel's assistance and proceed to represent oneself at criminal proceedings." ***Commonwealth v. Green***, 149 A.3d 43, 56 (Pa. Super. 2016) (quoting ***Commonwealth v. Smith***, 69 A.3d 259, 266 (Pa. Super. 2013)). Before granting a defendant's motion to waive counsel, the trial court must engage in a "probing colloquy" to ensure that the waiver is valid. ***Commonwealth v. Clyburn***, 42 A.3d 296, 299 (Pa. Super. 2012) (quoting ***Commonwealth v. Starr***, 664 A.2d 1326, 1335 (Pa. 1995)).

Importantly, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania has recognized "that where a court has concerns that a defendant seeking to represent himself may

be mentally incompetent to do so, even though the defendant is competent to stand trial, the court may, in its sound discretion, deny a request to waive the right to counsel and proceed *pro se* on the ground that to do otherwise would compromise the defendant's right to a fair trial." ***Commonwealth v. Blakeney***, 108 A.3d 739, 759 (Pa. 2014).

Here, the trial court cited ***Blakeney*** to support its determination that Hough was not mentally competent to represent himself.

> [The trial court] had the opportunity to listen to [Hough] and to observe his behavior and demeanor at the several hearings held prior to trial. It was readily apparent, and the transcripts confirm, that [Hough] was hearing voices from "God" and was guided by these. Further, his guidance by "jailhouse counsel" only exacerbated his lack of appreciation for the rules of law and the rules of evidence. Given the gravity of the charges, coupled with [Hough's] state of mind, [the trial] court made the reasoned decision to deny his request to proceed *pro se* and to appoint counsel.
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> The record also reflects [Hough's] disjointed and unfounded belief as to possible issues to be raised [at trial]. His refusal to accept counsel's lack of consent to file motions that were devoid of legal basis resulted in outbursts against counsel and even threats to harm counsel.
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> Notwithstanding [Hough's] displeasure and utter disgust for his counsel, [Hough] exhibited much of the same to opposing counsel and the court. Arguments made by the [prosecutors] or rulings of the court with which [Hough] disagreed elicited denigrating outbursts.
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> While [the trial] court [was] acutely cognizant of [Hough's] Sixth Amendment right to be self-represented, the court [was] also very mindful of its duties to ensure that the defendant receives a fair trial, part of which is to maintain decorum in the courtroom. Although the court does not have a duty to protect the rational defendant from self-inflicted harm, it does have a duty to protect against self-inflicted harm from one who is acting on "voices in his mind."

Trial Court Opinion, 1/9/25, at 20–21.

We discern no abuse of discretion. As to Hough's concern that the trial court addressed impermissible matters when gauging the validity of Hough's waiver of counsel, this appears to have been part of the "probing colloquy" required. ***Starr***, 664 A.2d at 1335. Furthermore, the transcript shows that it was Hough, not the trial court, who delved into Hough's rationale for following the voices of God and of the other inmates. Hough's first issue fails.

Hough's remaining issues in this appeal are waived. We therefore do not reach the merits of those issues.

Judgment of sentence affirmed.

Judgment Entered.

Benjamin D. Kohler

Benjamin D. Kohler, Esq.
Prothonotary

Date: 11/9/2026