

COURT OF APPEALS OF OHIO
EIGHTH APPELLATE DISTRICT
COUNTY OF CUYAHOGA

STATE OF OHIO,	:	
Plaintiff-Appellee,	:	
v.	:	No. 115957
RONNELL SANDERS,	:	
Defendant-Appellant.	:	

JOURNAL ENTRY AND OPINION

JUDGMENT: AFFIRMED
RELEASED AND JOURNALIZED: September 24, 2026

Criminal Appeal from the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas
Case No. CR-25-700670-A

Appearances:

Michael C. O'Malley, Cuyahoga County Prosecuting Attorney, and Zachary Lafleur, Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, *for appellee*.

James E. Valentine, *for appellant*.

EMANUELLA D. GROVES, J.:

{¶ 1} Defendant-appellant Ronnell Sanders (“Sanders”) appeals his conviction for felonious assault causing serious physical harm, raising the following assignment of error for our review.

Assignment of Error

The verdict is against the manifest weight of the evidence.

{¶ 2} For the reasons that follow, we affirm the conviction.

I. Factual and Procedural History

{¶ 3} In March 2025, a grand jury convened and issued an indictment against Sanders for events alleged to have occurred on February 6, 2025, including felonious assault causing serious physical harm (Count 1); felonious assault by a deadly weapon or dangerous ordnance (Count 2); domestic violence with a prior conviction (Count 3); and possessing criminal tools (Count 4).

{¶ 4} Sanders filed a notice of self-defense pursuant to Crim.R. 12.2. At the beginning of the trial, the parties stipulated to the authenticity of a certified copy of his prior conviction for domestic violence and that Sanders was the defendant named therein. The trial commenced in October 2025. The following testimony is relevant to this appeal.

{¶ 5} S.J., the victim, testified that around the end of 2024 she was living with her mother in Garfield Heights, Ohio. S.J. left her mother's home because she could not afford to pay the increased rent her mother requested and her mother "kicked" her out. S.J. did not have any family or friends that she could turn to and the new home she found was "unlivable."

{¶ 6} S.J. saw Sanders near a public housing complex ("Outhwaite") in Cleveland and asked him if she could stay with him in exchange for \$200 per month in rent. She did not know him well and, at the time, they did not have a romantic,

physical, or intimate relationship. She testified that she moved in with him around June or July 2024.

{¶ 7} S.J. described Sanders's unit as a two-bedroom apartment that Sanders shared with his eight-year-old son, and occasionally, his on- and off-again girlfriend. S.J. moved into Sanders's son's room, and his son moved into Sanders's room.

{¶ 8} S.J. and Sanders's relationship became physical in September 2024. They began drinking and had sex. She admitted that she began drinking a month or two after she moved in with Sanders, breaking her sobriety. S.J. testified that she was battling substance abuse, using "perc 30s" and cocaine, but she was previously sober for two years while working to regain custody of her three children.

{¶ 9} S.J. confided in Sanders that she wanted to regain custody of her children and informed him that she needed to obtain housing. Sanders told her that he could help her get her children back. S.J. believed him because he spoke knowledgeably and suggested he knew a number of professional people. Ultimately, Sanders's "plan" was for S.J. to become a sex worker.

{¶ 10} According to S.J., Sanders arranged "dates" beginning in October 2024, posted pictures of her on various websites, and managed the money clients would pay for their "dates." They conducted the sex work in Sanders's Outhwaite apartment. S.J. proceeded to testify, in detail, about the sex work. At some point, she broke her sobriety further and began to take powder cocaine again. She testified

that the cocaine and alcohol helped her block her emotions and the pain she was feeling, both physically and mentally.

{¶ 11} On the date of the incident in February 2025, S.J. testified that Sanders was in and out of the apartment. S.J. was upstairs in Sanders's room, smoking cigarettes and watching movies. She had a visit scheduled with her children that day, and she received a phone call from a male friend who was supposed to give her a ride. As she was on the phone, Sanders began yelling at her, saying, "[Y]ou a ho, you my ho, you my bitch," and telling her to hang up. S.J. tried to explain to him that she was talking to a friend, but Sanders believed she was arranging a date on her own to "make money without [him] behind [his] back." In response, S.J. went into her room across the hall.

{¶ 12} The next thing that S.J. recalled was Sanders swinging a pole and hitting her in the jaw. He used both hands to swing the pole like a baseball bat. She recalled feeling dazed and falling back. She stumbled out of the room, tried to regain her balance, and walked into the bathroom. A woman named Tiffany grabbed S.J., pulled her down in the tub, and held her. S.J. did not know much about Tiffany, other than that she had been in the apartment once or twice. S.J. asked Tiffany to let her go and eventually, she did. S.J. testified that she went downstairs and told another woman in the home what happened. She then returned upstairs and laid down because she was dizzy and dazed. When she moved her mouth, she was in "excruciating pain." S.J. denied responding with any aggression towards Sanders or Tiffany.

{¶ 13} While she was laying down, police officers approached her in the bedroom. S.J. did not understand why they were there or why they were approaching her. They told her to put her cigarette out and get up. When she asked why, they continued to tell her to get up. When one of the officers asked her what happened to her jaw, she lied and told them that she injured herself when she tripped and fell after wrestling with some children. The police eventually told S.J. that there was a warrant for her arrest for a missed court date and took her to jail. The jail refused to accept her because of her injuries, and instead, she was transported to the hospital. While at the hospital, S.J. was diagnosed with a broken jaw. She also disclosed to a nurse that she had been a victim of human trafficking and admitted that her injuries were the result of Sanders's assault. She ultimately was required to have surgery to repair her injury.

{¶ 14} During cross-examination, the defense addressed discrepancies in her testimony. For instance, she testified that her dates happened in the apartment, but she admitted there was one encounter in a hotel. S.J. acknowledged that Sanders was wearing an ankle bracelet with a Global Positioning System ("GPS") tracker during some of the time she stayed with him. When questioned about discrepancies between the GPS data and her testimony regarding the date of the incident, S.J. explained that she was asleep, the GPS data might be accurate, and that Sanders was home earlier in the day.

{¶ 15} S.J. admitted that she may have told the detective assigned to the case that Sanders assaulted her when he caught her trying to make a date on her own,

contradicting her testimony on direct examination that she was not arranging a date. She also acknowledged that she received payment from a date on one occasion, contradicting her testimony that Sanders collected all of the payments. During further redirect examination, S.J. agreed that this was a very chaotic period in her life and that she was using drugs throughout that time. S.J. further testified that she relapsed three days before trial because of the stress of having to appear in court. However, she claimed that she was sober as of the date of trial.

{¶ 16} Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority Police Sergeant Noelle Roberts (“Sgt. Roberts”) was called to Sanders’s unit in February because someone was refusing to leave the unit. Sanders was not there when Sgt. Roberts originally arrived; however, when he did arrive he told her that S.J. attacked him with a knife and chased him out of the apartment. Sgt. Roberts did not recover a knife during the course of her investigation. From her observations, Sanders seemed “normal” and he did not appear agitated or combative. S.J. also seemed “normal” and did not appear to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. On cross-examination, Sgt. Roberts testified that she assessed her surroundings and did not see a knife but acknowledged that she was not searching for one.

{¶ 17} Shawnese Gordon (“SANE Gordon”) interacted with S.J. at MetroHealth Hospital in her role as a sexual assault nurse for pediatrics, adults, and adolescents. SANE Gordon was able to develop a rapport with S.J. who disclosed the physical assault and that she had been trafficked. Nurse Gordon observed S.J.’s

injuries, including swelling to her face, bruises to her right eye, and swelling, bruising and abrasions to her left chin area.

{¶ 18} Finally, Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Detective Christopher Allen ("Det. Allen"), a member of the Northeast Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force, testified that he learned about this case when he received a page from MetroHealth Hospital about a person disclosing trafficking during treatment. He verified that the victim was safe and secure and learned she was in custody and removed from the trafficking situation. He met with S.J. the following morning. He acknowledged that the human trafficking investigation was still ongoing and they had not charged Sanders for that crime at the time of trial.

{¶ 19} Initially, Det. Allen's investigatory focus was on the felonious assault, and he tabled the human trafficking investigation until approximately a month before trial. He obtained a search warrant for Sanders's residence that was executed a month after his arrest. He was able to secure the pole and several cell phones. Sanders was present when the search warrant was executed. He gave the detective permission to search another cell phone that he carried on his person and provided his password. Det. Allen downloaded the data from that phone and did not find anything on it relevant to the investigation. He also noted that Sanders did not start using the phone until a few days after the incident. Det. Allen did not start processing the other cell phones until he reactivated the human trafficking case and did not have the results at the time of trial.

{¶ 20} The State rested its case subject to the admission of exhibits. Sanders moved for dismissal pursuant to Crim.R. 29, which the trial court denied.

{¶ 21} Sanders elected to testify on his own behalf. Prior to his testimony, the trial court read the following stipulated instructions to the jury regarding the GPS data from Sanders's ankle monitor:

Court: I will further advise you that the parties stipulate and agree that Joint Exhibit 1, which you'll have the chance to review, is the defendant . . . Sanders'[s] GPS, that is Global Positioning System ankle monitor data from February 1st, 2025 through February 7th, 2025, a six-day period.

Court: The parties further stipulate and agree that all addresses identified as ["home"] reflect times that . . . Sanders was either inside or immediately outside his [unit at the Outhwaite apartments] . . . in Cleveland. Thank you.

{¶ 22} Sanders denied that he was ever engaged in human trafficking or that he was a "pimp" for S.J. He agreed that S.J. asked him if she could stay with him and that he agreed because he thought she was "trustworthy." Sanders testified that he had an off and on girlfriend when S.J. moved in and that he started a relationship with S.J. after he and his girlfriend broke up.

{¶ 23} During the course of his relationship with S.J., Sanders alleged that S.J. became jealous one night when she saw him hug his son's aunt. When they returned to the apartment, there was a verbal altercation between them and he called the police. Sanders did not request criminal charges. He indicated that he and his son were placed in a domestic violence men's shelter. The shelter had strict hours and required permission to miss curfew. Sanders testified that he followed

the rules, notified the shelter if he was going to miss curfew, and otherwise abided by the curfew. Sanders also acknowledged that he was wearing an ankle bracelet with GPS monitoring. When the shelter found out he was wearing the ankle bracelet, he was required to leave in order to maintain the confidentiality of the shelter's location. When he left the shelter, Sanders testified that he and his son moved in with his mother on the west side of Cleveland. He acknowledged that he maintained the lease on his Outhwaite apartment during this time; however, he disputed S.J.'s testimony that he was at the apartment most of the time when she was there.

{¶ 24} Sanders maintained that he broke up with S.J. and started seeing an old friend, who eventually became his fiancée. Sanders admitted he maintained several overlapping sexual relationships with at least three women. Three days before the incident, Sanders admitted to S.J. that he was seeing his fiancée. Nevertheless, Sanders maintained that S.J. was not angry with him, though S.J. and the fiancée had “an interaction.” In fact, he claimed that he maintained a sexual relationship with S.J. after the disclosure, his fiancée understood the situation, and they continued to move forward with their plans to wed.

{¶ 25} On the date of the incident, Sanders went to the Outhwaite apartment at 3:05 p.m., according to the GPS data. He testified at first that S.J. arrived 5 to 10 minutes after his arrival, then amended the time to 30 minutes. She played with Sanders's son for a while then went upstairs. She wanted to take a nap before she had a visit with her children. Sanders then went to the store, picked up some food

and cigarettes for her, and brought the groceries back to her. She asked him to make her some noodles with some additional ingredients on it, so he went to a nearby gas station and picked up the ingredients. He prepared the food and took it to her. Afterward, they talked for a few minutes before he left so she could sleep and could do some laundry.

{¶ 26} Sanders testified that Tiffany came to the apartment approximately 30 minutes after S.J. arrived. Tiffany went upstairs, and Sanders could hear Tiffany and S.J. talking. According to Sanders, the conversation became “heated.” He went upstairs to investigate and saw S.J. with a knife. He observed that Tiffany had her arm raised and was egging S.J. on, telling her, “[T]his is where you can stab me at.” Sanders testified that Tiffany was indicating S.J. could stab her under her left arm and rib cage. They continued to argue, and Sanders discovered that S.J. had accused Tiffany of walking into her bedroom while she was sleeping naked the night before.

{¶ 27} Sanders testified that he stepped between the two, to diffuse the situation, but S.J. believed that Sanders was taking Tiffany’s side in the argument. S.J. then began demanding that he reimburse her for money she used to post his bond. Sanders told her that he did not have that money, but S.J. began to reach for his pockets. He moved back, then heard S.J. threaten to “slaughter” him and everybody else in the apartment. Sanders had allowed his god-sister, her children, and Tiffany to stay with him and they were all in the apartment, in addition to his son and S.J.

{¶ 28} Sanders had his back to the door and was backing up while S.J. was coming towards him. They continued to argue, and S.J. accused him of giving her money to his fiancée. At some point, S.J. “came at” him with the knife. During the subsequent altercation, they ended up in the room S.J. was using, Sanders pulled a pole out of the closet, and he used it to push the knife away. He was trying to push her hand so he could close the closet door, but it did not work.

{¶ 29} At some point S.J. withdrew, and thinking she had left, Sanders testified that he opened the closet door. However, S.J. was standing by the bedroom doorway. Sanders claimed that he pleaded with her and told her he loved her, but S.J. was adamant about receiving the money. Sanders testified that when she “came at” him with the knife again, he swung the pole to defend himself. Sanders testified that he only used one hand to swing the pole. After he hit S.J., Tiffany grabbed the hand that held the knife and Sanders dropped the pole and ran to help Tiffany take the knife. After Tiffany retrieved the knife, Sanders went downstairs. As he was walking down the stairs, he testified that S.J. was throwing something at his back. He grabbed his phone from the kitchen table, put his coat “and stuff” on, made his son put his coat on, left the apartment, and called the police. He told them that he was attacked with a knife and that the person who did it was still there.

{¶ 30} Shortly thereafter, Tiffany followed them outside and allowed Sanders and his son to sit in her car while they waited for the police. He went back to the apartment when he received confirmation that the police arrived. Sanders informed Sgt. Roberts that he did not want to pursue charges; he just wanted S.J.

removed from the apartment. Sanders admitted that he did not tell the police that the people in the apartment were living with him because he was in the midst of an eviction and having overnight guests was a violation of his lease terms.

{¶ 31} During cross-examination, Sanders acknowledged that he hit S.J. across the face with a pole. The State then proceeded to question Sanders about discrepancies between his testimony and the GPS data from his ankle monitor.

{¶ 32} The defense rested and renewed its Crim.R. 29 motion, which the trial court denied.

{¶ 33} The jury found Sanders guilty of felonious assault causing serious physical harm, felonious assault with a deadly weapon or dangerous ordnance, and domestic violence with a prior conviction (Counts 1, 2, and 3). The jury found Sanders not guilty of the possession-of-criminal tools charge (Count 4). The parties agreed that the three counts merged with one another, and the State elected to proceed on the charge of felonious assault causing serious physical harm. The trial court imposed a prison term of six years.¹ Sanders appealed.

¹ The trial court did not impose an indefinite sentence pursuant to R.C. 2929.144(B)(1), and the State did not file a cross-appeal challenging the sentence imposed by the trial court. R.C. 2929.144(B)(1):

The court imposing a prison term on an offender under division (A)(1)(a) or (2)(a) of section 2929.14 of the Revised Code for a qualifying felony of the first or second degree shall determine the maximum prison term that is part of the sentence in accordance with the following:

(1) If the offender is being sentenced for one felony and the felony is a qualifying felony of the first or second degree, the maximum prison term shall be equal to the minimum term imposed on the offender under division

II. Law and Analysis

{¶ 34} In his sole assignment of error, Sanders challenges his conviction, arguing that it is against the manifest weight of the evidence. He claims that S.J.’s testimony was completely discredited, unreliable, and untrustworthy and thus the jury must have lost its way when it found him guilty of the charge. Additionally, Sanders alleges that the State’s strategy to present testimony regarding human trafficking contributed to the jury’s error. However, we note that Sanders did not object to the testimony at the trial-court level, nor does he raise a separate assignment of error on appeal claiming that the evidence was improperly admitted.

{¶ 35} A “weight of the evidence [challenge] involves the inclination of the greater amount of credible evidence.” *State v. Harris*, 2021-Ohio-856, ¶ 32 (8th Dist.), quoting *State v. Thompkins*, 78 Ohio St.3d 380, 387 (1997). It relates to “the evidence’s effect of inducing belief.” *Id.*, quoting *State v. Wilson*, 2007-Ohio-2202, ¶ 25, citing *Thompkins* at 386-387. The trier of fact may notice inconsistencies in testimony, resolve them, and choose to believe all, part, or none of a witness’s testimony. *State v. Hunter*, 2024-Ohio-5782, ¶ 36 (10th Dist.), citing *State v. Henderson*, 2011-Ohio-4761, ¶ 22. The court of appeals must consider all the evidence in the record, the reasonable inferences to make from it, and the credibility of the witnesses to determine “whether in resolving conflicts in the evidence, the factfinder clearly lost its way and created such a manifest miscarriage of justice that

(A)(1)(a) or (2)(a) of section 2929.14 of the Revised Code plus fifty per cent of that term.

the conviction must be reversed and a new trial ordered.” *Harris* at ¶ 32, citing *Thompkins* at 387, quoting *State v. Martin*, 20 Ohio App.3d 172 (1st Dist. 1983). “Such a determination is rare, arising only in exceptional cases in which the evidence presented at trial weighs heavily against the jury’s verdict.” *State v. McCollum*, 2026-Ohio-393, ¶ 14 (12th Dist.).

{¶ 36} Although a challenge to the manifest weight of the evidence requires the reviewing court to consider the credibility of the witnesses, we are mindful that “[t]he trier of fact is best able ‘to view the witnesses and observe their demeanor, gestures, and voice inflections, and use these observations in weighing the credibility of the proffered testimony.’” *State v. McCall*, 2017-Ohio-296, ¶ 14 (8th Dist.), quoting *State v. Wilson*, 2007-Ohio-2202, ¶ 24. Furthermore, the Ohio Supreme Court recently held that

[a]n appellate court sits as the thirteenth juror only when evidence contradicts a fact-finder’s findings, or when a witness’s testimony is so inconsistent as to material facts, so impeached, or so fantastical as to make it patently unbelievable.

State v. Reillo, 2026-Ohio-2701, ¶ 3

{¶ 37} In the instant case, Sanders claims that he acted in self-defense. A claim of self-defense “is an admission of all essential elements of the charged crime, but with the legal recognition that the accused’s actions were justified under the circumstances.” *State v. Webb*, 2025-Ohio-456, ¶ 26 (8th Dist.), quoting *State v. Loyed*, 2004-Ohio-3961, ¶ 32 (8th Dist.). When a defendant claims self-defense, the defendant “concedes he had the purpose to commit the act but asserts that he was

justified in his actions.” *State v. Davis*, 2021-Ohio-2311, ¶ 38 (8th Dist.), quoting *State v. Talley*, 2006-Ohio-5322, ¶ 45.

{¶ 38} R.C. 2901.05(B)(1) provides:

A person is allowed to act in self-defense, defense of another, or defense of that person’s residence. If, at the trial of a person who is accused of an offense that involved the person’s use of force against another, there is evidence presented that tends to support that the accused person used the force in self-defense, defense of another, or defense of that person’s residence, the prosecution must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused person did not use the force in self-defense, defense of another, or defense of that person’s residence, as the case may be.

{¶ 39} This means that “when a defendant properly raises self-defense, the burden shifts to the [S]tate.” *State v. Williams*, 2022-Ohio-2674, ¶ 42 (8th Dist.). The State must then prove at least one of the following elements beyond a reasonable doubt to sustain its case:

- (1) [the defendant] was at fault in creating the situation giving rise to the affray; or,
- (2) [the defendant] did not have reasonable grounds to believe or an honest belief that he was in imminent danger of death or great bodily harm; or,
- (3) [the defendant] violated a duty to retreat or avoid danger.

State v. Jones, 2025-Ohio-168, ¶ 16 (8th Dist.), citing *State v. Scales*, 2024-Ohio-2171, ¶ 25 (8th Dist.); *State v. Walker*, 2021-Ohio-2037, ¶ 13 (8th Dist.); *Williams* at *id.*

{¶ 40} A claim of self-defense generally involves issues of witness credibility. *State v. Shartle*, 2025-Ohio-564, ¶ 19 (2d Dist.), citing *State v. Campbell*, 2024-

Ohio-1693, ¶ 32, (8th Dist.). ““Disputes in credibility for the purposes of evaluating self-defense are best resolved by the trier of fact.”” *Campbell* at ¶ 32, quoting *State v. Lawrence*, 2023-Ohio-3419, ¶ 41 (11th Dist.), quoting *State v. Bentley*, 2023-Ohio-1792, ¶ 24 (11th Dist.). “[A] conviction is not against the manifest weight of the evidence because the trier of fact believed the State’s version of events over the defendant’s version.” *Messenger* at ¶ 49, citing *State v. Lindsey*, 2015-Ohio-2169, ¶ 43 (10th Dist.).

{¶ 41} Although Sanders’s argument is focused on discrepancies in S.J.’s testimony surrounding her human trafficking allegations, the one fact that is not in dispute is that Sanders hit S.J. with a pole, breaking her jaw. The sole question on appeal is whether he did so in self-defense. S.J. offered testimony regarding two of the three self-defense elements, i.e., that she was not at fault in creating the situation that led to the assault and that Sanders was not in imminent danger of great bodily harm or death when he hit her. She testified that she was on the phone when Sanders accused her of attempting to arrange a date without him and that Sanders’s attack was unprovoked and that he hit her after she walked away. Thus, she presented evidence that she was not at fault for creating the situation that led to the assault. Then S.J. claimed that she did not show any aggression towards Sanders during the altercation. She, therefore, presented testimony that she was not aggressive, and Sanders did not have a reasonable cause to believe that he was in imminent danger of death or great bodily harm when he hit S.J. If believed, the

State met its burden of countering Sanders's self-defense claim with two elements, when countering one is required.

{¶ 42} Ultimately, the jury, who was in the best position to determine the credibility of both witnesses, simply believed S.J. over Sanders. The jury was not required to believe all of S.J.'s testimony. The fact that the jury believed her testimony regarding the assault and did not believe Sanders's testimony is enough to support the conviction and does not create a viable manifest-weight-of-the-evidence claim. *Messenger* at ¶ 49, citing *State v. Lindsey*, 2015-Ohio-2169, ¶ 43 (10th Dist.). Further, we do not find that S.J.'s testimony was "so inconsistent as to *material* facts, so impeached, or so fantastical as to make it patently unbelievable." (Emphasis added). *State v. Reillo*, 2026-Ohio-2701, ¶ 3.

{¶ 43} Accordingly, we overrule Sanders's sole assignment of error.

{¶ 44} Judgment affirmed.

It is ordered that appellee recover from appellant costs herein taxed.

The court finds there were reasonable grounds for this appeal.

It is ordered that a special mandate issue out of this court directing the common pleas court to carry this judgment into execution. The defendant's conviction having been affirmed, any bail pending is terminated. Case remanded to the trial court for execution of sentence.

A certified copy of this entry shall constitute the mandate pursuant to Rule 27
of the Rules of Appellate Procedure.

EMANUELLA D. GROVES, JUDGE

LISA B. FORBES, P.J., and
EILEEN A. GALLAGHER, J., CONCUR