



ON THE ROAD AGAIN

SAFETY MEASURES FOR DRIVING WITH YOUR DOG

By Sally Silverman

It's probably true. There is nothing like feeling the wind in your fur when you're traveling down the highway. And while none of us is immune to the look of pure joy on the face of a dog with his head out of the car window, it's a picture that could easily turn deadly both for the dog and the people in the car. Most of us wouldn't consider getting in a car without buckling up. Or taking the kids along without the proper restraints. So why doesn't your agility teammate get the same consideration?

WHY RESTRAIN YOUR DOG

Accidents happen, and dogs are not invulnerable. According to the 2012 Statistical Abstract compiled by the US Census Bureau, there were 10,800,000 motor vehicle accidents reported in 2009, with the most common type of collision being a rear end collision. "A dog is just as vulnerable to injury in a collision as we are," says Dr. Debbie Mandell of Penn Vet's Ryan Hospital and a Pet Expert for the American Red Cross. One of the worst cases she's seen involved a Collie that was thrown forward from the backseat and sustained a broken back. "I always advocate some sort of restraint for a dog travelling in a car," she says. And just like a small child, a dog riding in the front seat can be injured, even fatally, by an airbag deployed in a crash.

If an injured—or worse—dog isn't enough of an incentive to restrain a dog, consider this: a 60-pound dog traveling at 35 miles an hour can turn into a 2,700-pound projectile in an accident. Imagine that hitting the back of your head.

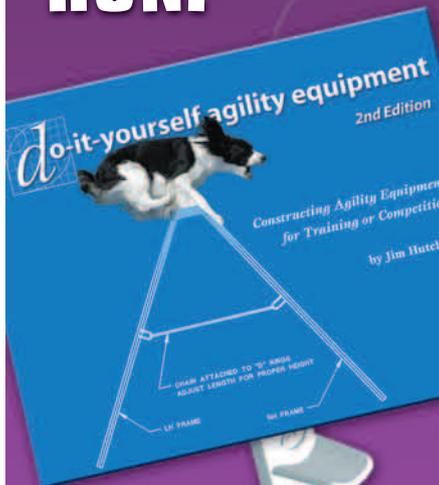
A loose dog can also be a distraction to the driver. One friend tells of her German Shepherd that playfully put his paw on the steering wheel causing the woman to drive into a tree. A recent news story related the details of a fatal crash in which the driver of one car said he was distracted when his Terrier mix jumped into his lap.

There are countless stories of dogs, frightened by the trauma of a crash, jumping out of the car and running away, or, tragically, being hit by another car on the road. Even if the dog doesn't leave the vehicle, a frightened dog can be a hindrance to rescuers arriving on the scene.

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS

If you want to keep your dog safe in the car, you have some choices. For those of us that play agility, crates are the most common method of transporting dogs. There are also barriers that confine the dog to the rear portion of the vehicle, seatbelt harnesses, and travel seats. There are pros and cons to all of them, and the option you choose should be

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one that both you and your dog are comfortable with. As if the abundance of choices wasn't frustrating enough, the decision is made more difficult because of the lack of significant and consistent data on the safety of these options. The US Department of Transportation, the Insurance Institute of Highway Safety, Consumer Reports, American Kennel Club, ASPCA or the Red Cross, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration all have no real data on keeping your dog safe while traveling in the car.

The Automobile Club of Germany (ADAC), where drivers are required by law to secure any objects or pets carried in their vehicles, is one of the few organizations that have tested crates, seatbelts and barriers. In a report issued in early 2008, they conclude that the safest way to transport a pet is in a pet carrier (their test uses a small, plastic crate) on the floor behind the driver's or front passenger's seat or, for a large crate, in the back of the SUV or van. They also state that a stable harness apparatus, connecting to the seatbelt buckles, is a good option.

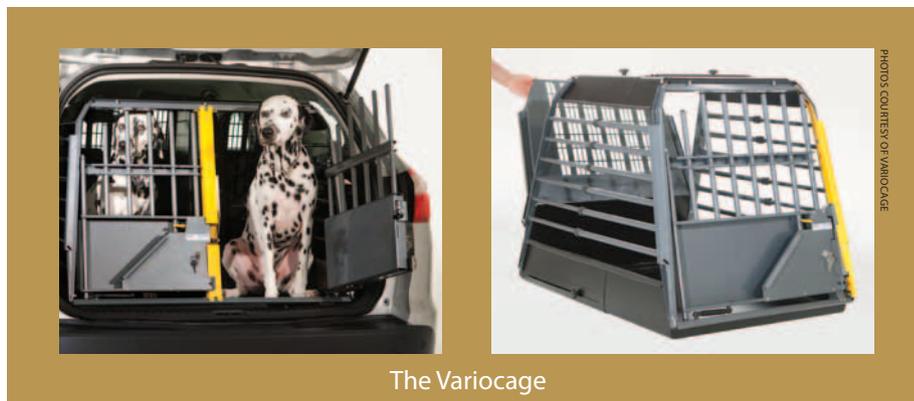
THE CRATE GAME

Not all crates are created equally. Trying to compare them, however, can be problematic. Do an Internet search for safely traveling with dogs and you will find lots of amateur videos showing the relative safety of a variety of crating systems, but painfully little data to support claims.

Common sense says that a soft crate will keep a dog from distracting a driver, putting his head out of the window, and might prevent injury to other occupants in a crash *if* the crate is properly secured, and the impact is minimal. Ditto a plastic kennel. An ADAC video shows a standard sled crash test with a small plastic crate fastened to the back seat via a single strap and, alternatively, placed on the floor between the front passenger seat and the back seat. In the first test, the crate pulls apart and the dummy dog is ejected. In the second, the crate is intact, the dummy dog secure within the crate. They do a similar test with a larger plastic crate placed behind the back seats of a small SUV. This crate also came through the crash unharmed.

For use with a crate on a seat, PetBuckle® markets a crash-tested kennel restraint system. The crate sits lengthwise on the seat, is secured by two straps, distributing the force in the event of a collision.

With wire crates, no information can be found on any kind of testing. Contact with one of the largest manufacturers revealed that they have no information on the crash-worthiness of their crates. One concern with wire crates is the danger of sharp elements should the crate break apart on impact. The manufacturer of a popular plastic crate was also unable to supply information on the crash-worthiness of their products.



The Variocage

There is only evidence of one brand of crate that has been truly tested. Made by Mim Construction AB, based in Sweden, the Variocage crate is constructed of steel and equipped with an escape door. As a bonus, the crates are also fitted with rubber mats. The crate endured a frontal impact, rear impact, and drop test, with two dummy dogs, about 70 pounds each. A human dummy, fitted with head and neck

accelerometers to measure the impact, was included in the rear impact test. In each case the gates remained closed, no sharp edges occurred, and it was possible to open the crate and evacuate the dummy dogs after the test. Another important fact: no permanent deformations of the seat back were found in the rear impact test and the crash test dummy was reasonably unharmed.

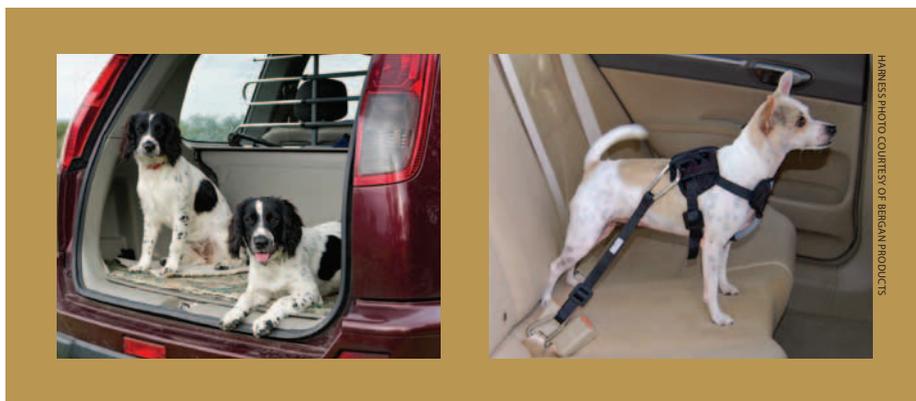
Note: Crash tests have just been completed on the newest version of this crate, the Variocage III, which will soon be available in the US from www.cleanrun.com.

Any crate should always be secured, and bungee straps, though popular, are susceptible to stretching and breaking. A ratcheting system coupled with high-strength straps is the most reliable.

Custom crates are frequently seen in the rear areas of open vehicles at agility trials. Considerations should include durability of materials, ease of access from more than one side, and ability of the crate to be safely secured.

PUTTING UP BARRIERS

A popular option, particularly with SUVs and station wagons, is a barrier placed between the cargo area and the back seat. This gives the dog a bit of room to move around. The driver must accept, however, that that same space gives him more opportunity to be tossed about in an accident. While the metal barriers may keep driver and passengers from being hit by the dog, mesh barriers will unlikely have the strength to keep the dog contained. And if the vehicles rear windows are broken in the crash, the dog, separated only from the front of the vehicle, has an easy access to escape. Another caution: barriers must be correctly and securely installed to be safe and effective.



BELTING THEM IN

When it comes to securing your dog in the car, perhaps the greatest offering and variation comes in the form of harnesses. Made of a variety of synthetic fabrics, the harnesses clip to seatbelts or provide a loop through which the seatbelt can pass before being fastened. Some can be attached to the vehicle using Isofix, the anchor points under the seat used to secure child safety seats.

There are several reviews of harnesses available on the Internet, though almost none are backed up by actual crash testing. On her website AgilePooch, Holly Newman provides a fairly comprehensive analysis of a number of harnesses including design, function, and material elements (www.agilepooch.com). Fit, she says, is a number one consideration because if the harness doesn't fit, it won't work. Look for a model that allows the dog to move around a bit, for his comfort, and those that attach to the buckle part of the seat belt apparatus, rather than the belt itself are preferable. Within the harness, buckles must be durable enough to stand up to the force of a dog speeding forward in a crash. Never leave your dog unattended in the car, strapped in. A feisty pup can chew through the material, escaping it at worst or

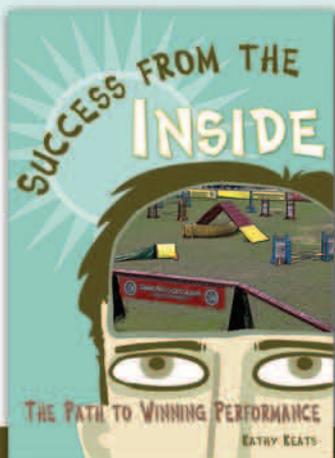
MENTION AUTO SAFETY AND CARS, AND EVERY ONE HAS A STORY. HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THOSE THAT I READ OR WAS TOLD PREPARING FOR THIS ARTICLE:

- ▶ A dog sitting on the front passenger seat was thrown into the dashboard, sustaining a fatal head injury.
- ▶ A Collie riding in the back seat was thrown over the front seat when the car was involved in a collision, breaking the dog's back.
- ▶ A woman drove into a tree after her German Shepherd, traveling loose, put his paw on the steering wheel.
- ▶ Three dogs and their owner were uninjured in a collision on a highway, and the dogs were able to exit the auto. The owner took off after them. Sadly, two of the dogs, as well as the woman, were then hit by other vehicles and killed.
- ▶ A Lab laying on the back seat was thrown forward when the car he was in rear-ended another. Damage was negligible; insurance information wasn't even exchanged. The dog's injuries, however, were fatal.
- ▶ Recently, dog that escaped from the car in which one of the people and the other dog were killed. The dog was found 53 days later in the Nevada desert where the crash occurred.

WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK?

Learn specific techniques, thought processes, and strategies to achieve peak performance in agility or any other endeavor. Improve the effectiveness of your training, increase your confidence, and decrease the effect of performance pressure.

"No matter what philosophy of dog training you use, or which handling system you follow, *Success from the Inside* will improve your performance where it counts. Both practical and inspiring, the book is elegant in its capacity to translate the great ideas of sports psychology into a language that everyone can use and understand. There isn't an agility competitor in the world that wouldn't benefit from the concepts and strategies presented in this volume. This book stands out among my collection as a reference that I go back to constantly for inspiration and guidance." —Gay Harley



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damaging it so it is no longer strong enough to protect him at best. There is also the potential of the dog injuring himself by getting tangled in the seatbelt.

ADAC's testing of harnesses concluded that plastic clamps and carabineers were not strong enough to restrain a dog in a crash; that a system that restrains the dog by just one connection can be highly injurious because it puts the force of the impact in one place on the dog; and that a short, stable attachment system, one that utilizes a three-point contact system is best. For any models available that do require a connector be used, the only kind of carabineer that would be acceptable is a qualified climbing carabineer—be sure to check the minimum breaking strength.

In addition to their Variocage, Mim Construction AB manufactures a harness that has been crash tested by the Swedish National Testing and Research Institute and by the Swedish District Veterinary Department. This model has a wide chest harness, a pair of straps across the back and industrial-strength buckles.

ONCE YOU'VE DECIDED ON YOUR METHOD OF RESTRAINT, LOOK FOR THE PRODUCT THAT BEST FITS YOUR NEEDS. DURABILITY OF MATERIALS IS A MUST, ALONG WITH A METHOD FOR GENUINE SECURITY THAT WILL NOT GIVE WAY WHEN THE FORCE OF A COLLISION OCCURS.

BOOSTERS FOR SMALL DOGS

Though it gives the teacup pup a great view of the scenery, a small dog booster or car seat, when used alone, does almost nothing to make your ride with Fido safer. It may prevent the dog from wandering around the car, but not much more. When used in conjunction with the harness that is included with some seats, it may prevent the dog from being hurled forward in a collision, if secured properly. The same guidelines that apply to harnesses for larger dogs will apply to those for small dog booster seats. And no matter which one you choose, the danger of the airbag is still in play if you put that cute pooch in the seat next to you.

THE LAST WORD

Even armed with information from a variety of sources, the choice for making car travel with your dog a safe trip is not an easy one. Common sense should go a long way in the decision making process. First and foremost, recognize that restraining your dog when traveling will make your ride, your passengers' rides, the dog's ride, and even the rides of the other people on the road safer. Decide if you are willing to put on a seatbelt every single time your dog gets into the car, or if a crate is easier both while on the road and when you've arrived at your destination.

Once you've decided on your method of restraint, look for the product that best fits your needs. Durability of materials is a must, along with a method for genuine security that will not give way when the force of a collision occurs. These are the minimum requirements. Contact the manufacturer of a product you are considering to ask if they have done any crash testing and, if so, ask where you can read about it. Dogs are such an important part of all of our lives. By all means, bring them along, but make sure they are safe on the way. 🐾

Sally Silverman is a freelance writer whose life has gone to the dogs. She and her husband share their hearts and their home with three Australian Shepherds. An avid agility competitor, Sally is working on MACH3 with Bounce, who also has a PDCH. He and his older sister, Tinker, have many canine freestyle and herding titles, too. Baby sister Java is now in AKC Excellent. Sally is an active member of Y2K9s Dog Sports Club outside of Philadelphia, where she trains and teaches.



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