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Straitjacket

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A **straitjacket** is a garment shaped like a jacket with overlong sleeves and is typically used to restrain a person who may otherwise cause harm to him/herself or others. Once the arms are inserted into the straitjacket's sleeves, they are then crossed across the chest. The end of the sleeves are then tied to the back of the wearer, ensuring that the arms are kept close to the chest with as little movement as possible.

Although *straitjacket* is the most common spelling, *strait-jacket* is also frequently used, and in Scotland *strait-waistcoat*, which is generally deemed archaic. Straitjackets are also known as camisoles.^{[1][2][3]}

The straitjacket's effectiveness as a restraint makes it of special interest in escapology. The straitjacket is also a staple prop in stage magic and is sometimes used in bondage games.

The negative connotations of the straitjacket as an instrument of torture come from the earlier Victorian era of medicine. Physical restraint was then extensively used both as treatment for mental illness and as a means of pacifying patients in understaffed asylums.

Due to the strength of the material, canvas or duck cloth is often used for making institutional straitjackets. However, leather or PVC is most often used for recreational or fashion wear.



A Posey Straitjacket (medium-size) with added restraints seen from the rear.

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History

The straitjacket was invented in France in 1790 by an upholsterer named Guilleret, for Bicêtre Hospital.^[4] (See the *French Wikipedia article, Camisole de Force.*)

Before psychoanalysis and psychiatric medications were developed, mental health was largely a mystery. Doctors simply did not know how to treat mental disorders such as schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety disorders. As a result, doctors attempted a variety of treatments that seem cruel by modern standards. The straitjacket is one of these treatments. At the height of its use, it was considered more humane than traditional restraints made of ropes or chains. It prevented the sufferer from damaging clothes or furniture, and from injuring staff or fellow inmates.^[5]

Before the American Civil War, the mentally ill were often placed in poorhouses, workhouses, or prisons when their families could no longer care for them. Patients were often forced to live with criminals and were treated likewise: locked in a cell or even chained to walls. By the 1860s, Americans wanted to provide better assistance to the less fortunate, including the mentally ill. The number of facilities devoted to the care of people with mental disorders increased significantly. These facilities, meant to be places of refuge, were referred to as *insane asylums*. Between 1825 and 1865, the number of asylums in the United States increased from 9 to 62.

The establishment of asylums did not mean that treatment greatly improved. Because doctors did not understand what caused the behavior of their patients, they often listed the possible causes of mental illness as religious excitement, sunstroke, or even reading novels. They believed that the patient had lost all control over their morals and that strict discipline was necessary to help the patient regain self-control. Asylums often employed straitjackets to restrain patients who could not control themselves.

Many assessors, including Marie Ragone and Diane Fenex, considered straitjackets to be a humane form of treatment, far gentler than the chains patients encountered in prisons. The restraint supposedly applied no pressure to the body or limbs and did not cause skin abrasions. Moreover, straitjackets allowed some freedom of movement. Unlike patients anchored to a chair or bed by straps or handcuffs, those in a straitjacket could walk. Some registered nurse specialists even recommended restrained individuals stroll outdoors, thereby reaping the benefits of both control and fresh air.

While considered humane by some, straitjackets were frequently misused. Over time, asylums filled with patients and lacked adequate staff to provide proper care. The attendants generally were not trained to work with the mentally ill (some even feared the patients) and resorted to restraints to maintain order and calm.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, straitjackets were used in some prisons to punish or torture inmates.^[6]

Security

The security of a straitjacket depends very much on its size, which should be as small as practicable to be secure. A jacket that is tight at the chest and armpits will make it much more difficult for the wearer to pull the arms out of the sleeves.

The sleeves of the jacket are typically sewn shut at the ends—a significant restraint in itself because it restrains the use of the hands. The arms are then folded across the front, with the ends of the sleeves wrapping around to fasten or tie behind the back. On some jackets, the sleeve-ends are not anchored to the garment to allow the fastening or knot to rotate away from the wearer's hands as they move their arms, making it more difficult to undo. Some straitjackets are even designed to have the person's arms crossed behind him/her rather than in front to ensure restraint even more.

Most jackets feature a crotch-strap to prevent the jacket from simply being pulled up and off. Some sport loops at the front and/or sides; the sleeves are threaded through these to prevent the arms from being raised over the head. Friction buckles are commonly used to fasten institutional jackets with webbing or cloth straps because they are very difficult to open without a free pair of hands.

To allow the wearer to more quickly escape and re-enter the jacket, gimmicked jackets intended for stage magic tend to omit arm loops, fasten with simpler types of buckles, or leave hidden openings in the sleeves.

Safety

Wearing an institutional straitjacket for long periods of time can be quite painful. Blood tends to pool in the elbows, where swelling may then occur. The hands may become numb from lack of proper circulation, and due to bone and muscle stiffness the upper arms and shoulders may experience excruciating pain. Thrashing around while in a straitjacket is a common, but mostly ineffective, method of attempting to move and stretch the arms.

Some jackets intended for fetish use include additional restraining features like wrist straps, lockable fastenings or opt to cross the arms behind the back. Again, these should be used cautiously and never for long periods, as they can interfere with circulation or make the jacket difficult to release in the event of emergency.

Escape techniques

To remove a straitjacket with both back and crotch-straps, it is not necessary to be able to dislocate one's shoulders in order to gain the slack necessary to pull an arm out of the sleeves. The necessity of this ability was fictitiously created by Harry Houdini and his brother Hardeen to try to lessen the amount of competition. Harry Houdini later in his career published his technical handling of the escape in a newspaper. Escape artists around the world commonly continue this rumor to "spice up" the escape. Without dislocating the shoulder, it is sometimes possible to get more room by pulling at the inside of the arms as they're being strapped or by keeping an elbow held outward to gain slack in the sleeves when the arm is relaxed. Another way to gain slack is to take and hold a deep breath while the jacket is being done up.

It is possible for one person to put a willing volunteer into a straitjacket, but it generally takes at least two people to straitjacket a struggling person.

For a jacket without a front strap, the most common way to escape is to hoist the arms over the head before undoing the crotch strap and at least the strap at the back of the neck. This allows the jacket to simply be peeled off upward over the head. The straitjacket escape was popularized by Houdini, who "discovered" it. Houdini first did it behind a curtain, forcing the audience to listen to thumps while watching a billowing curtain for many minutes. He found the trick went over better when the audience could see his struggles. In one of his later and more popular acts, he would perform the straitjacket escape while hung upside down from a crane.

World records

Fastest regulated Posey straitjacket escape

As of August 2012, the official "Fastest Escape from a Regulated Posey Straitjacket" is 4.69 seconds, set 9 June 2011 by UK escape artist Sofia "Sof Strait" (http://www.sofstrait.com) " Romero. Ms. Romero attempted 5 escapes at the Aylestone Leisure Centre, Leicester, UK; the fifth was the fastest one and was used as the official time by Guinness World Records.^[7] Romero's time of 4.69 is over 1.5 seconds better than her previous personal best (and world record) of 6.26 seconds, set during the same set of five attempts.

It is also over 2.5 seconds better than the previous record time prior to Romero's attempts. Las Vegas escape artist Jackson Rayne set the previous record on 17 November 2009, at the Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada, with a time of 7.26 seconds, a mark that lasted over 18 months before Romero's quintuplet of escapes set the first sub-five-second mark for fastest Posey straitjacket escapee.^[8] Guinness' official placeholder page for the current record is located here (http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-4000/fastest-escape-from-a-straitjacket/).



A woman wearing a leather straitjacket with leg irons

Other speed/difficult straitjacket escape records and attempts

Straitjacket escape is one of the most sensational and famous magicians' tricks; it was a staple in illusionist Harry Houdini's act. Thus, new world records for straitjacket escape are constantly being attempted, in various ways and with various degrees of difficulty added. Some of the more newsworthy attempts and successes include:

- On October 8, 2011, illusionist Lucas Wilson (<http://www.theillusionist.ca>) set a new Guinness World Record for fastest escape from a Posey Straitjacket and chains, while in suspension. Lucas time was 19.2 seconds beating the previous record of 54.24 seconds.^[9]
- Matt the Knife set a new Guinness World Record for "Fastest Escape from a Straitjacket" using a Posey Straitjacket with the front arm loop, side arm loops, and pelvic strap in a time of 18.8 seconds on September 17, 2007 at The Media Hotel in Beijing, China.
- Jonathan Edmiston "Danger Nate" set a new Guinness World Record for "Fastest Straitjacket Escape" using a Posey Straitjacket with the front arm loop, side arm loops, and pelvic strap in a time of 20.72 seconds on July 4, 2007 at the Independence Day Celebration on the US Naval Base in Yokosuka, Japan.
- On September 4, 2010, on the Fox News channel show Fox and Friends, Alexandria the Great set a record for an extreme strait jacket escape. She escaped a regulation strait jacket secured with 50 feet of 1/4 inch chain and 10 padlocks in 2:37. (<http://video.foxnews.com/v/4329692/moms-an-escape-artist/>) The Universal Records Database (<http://urdb.org/search/escape>) officiated over the record.
- On October 8, 2007 Cliff Gerstman (American) escaped from a straitjacket while floating in zero gravity. The escape was performed in an airplane flown by Zero G Inc. and sponsored by Northrup-Grumman. This was the world's first zero gravity straitjacket escape and took 40 seconds to complete.
- On August 5, 2006, Michal Angelo set a new record by escaping from a regulation straitjacket while being fully submerged under water in a time of 29.1 seconds, beating the previous 38.59 second record by Ben Bradshaw.
- On June 19, 2005, Ben Bradshaw from Australia performed a Posey Straitjacket escape using four backstraps, an arm loop, a crotch strap, arm straps and self-tightening clasps.

He managed to escape in a time of 50.08 seconds on the Guinness World Records studio in Sydney, beating the previous 81.24-second record by David Straitjacket.

- On January 8, 2005, at the Arndale Centre, Manchester UK, David Straitjacket set the Guinness World Record for the fastest straitjacket escape in a time of 81.24 seconds.
- On September 27, 2003, James Peters (UK) escaped from a Posey straitjacket 193 times in eight hours at the YMCA in Chelmsford, Essex.
- On *Mindfreak*, Criss Angel set a world record when he escaped from 2 straitjackets at once while hanging from a crane over Bourbon Street in New Orleans.
- On Dick Clark's 1980's weekly television show, Mr. Escape Steve Baker successfully escaped from two straitjackets while hanging upside down over the stage. His first attempt ended in a minor muscle injury however he repeated the stunt and was successful.
- On March 6, 2011 Roslyn Walker became the first person to escape from a regulation Posey straitjacket complete with front and side loops and have his arms secured behind his back during the Secret Escape Challenge meeting in Essex. It took him 14 minutes and 27 seconds to free himself.^{[10][11]}

Notes

1. ^ "camisole definition: Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/camisole>) . *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*. Random House. 2006. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/camisole>. Retrieved 15 January 2009.
2. ^ Thatcher, Virginia S., ed. (1970). *The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of The English Language*. McQueen, Alexander. Chiscago: Consolidated Book Publishers. p. 116. ISBN 0-8326-0021-0. "A short light garment worn by ladies when dressed in *negligee*; strait jacket for lunatics or criminals condemned to the guillotine."
3. ^ Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health, 5th edition
4. ^ Centre scolaire du CHU de Bicêtre (<http://chk-bicetre.scola.ac-paris.fr/histoire/historique/documents/textes/lancien-regime.htm#alienes>)
5. ^ Stephen M. Soreff, Patricia H. Bazemore (June 2006). "Confronting chaos... early psychiatric treatments" (<http://www.questia.com/library/1G1-151380657/confronting-chaos-today-we-view-early-psychiatric>) . *Behavioral Healthcare*. <http://www.questia.com/library/1G1-151380657/confronting-chaos-today-we-view-early-psychiatric>. Retrieved 2011-09-23.
6. ^ Black 1926, pp. 241–245.

7. [^] Glenday, Craig (editor) (2011-06-09). "Fastest escape from a straitjacket" (<http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-4000/fastest-escape-from-a-straitjacket/>) (Reference). *Guinness World Records*. Jim Pattison Group. ISBN 978-1-904994-67-1. <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-4000/fastest-escape-from-a-straitjacket/>. Retrieved 2012-08-23.
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9. [^] <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2011/10/illusionist-lucas-wilson-breaks-straitjacket-record-three-times-in-one-day/>
10. [^] <http://www.facebook.com/roslynwalkerfans>
11. [^] <http://www.roslynwalker.com/miniblog.cfm?feature=914992&postid=836139>

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