

How to Escape from a Straitjacket



Even though straitjackets are designed to restrain someone who's in danger of harming themselves or others, they also make a good challenge for any *escapologist*. In fact, one of Harry Houdini's most famous tricks was to escape from a straitjacket while hanging upside down from a crane!^[1] Contrary to popular belief, you *don't* have to dislocate your shoulder in order to perform this feat, but you do have to practice the following steps.

Edit Steps

While you're being buckled up, use one of your hands to inconspicuously pinch the front, giving you about three inches of slack. Take a deep breath and tighten your muscles in order to make your upper body as big as you possibly can. As your sleeves are pulled behind you, try to make sure your stronger arm is over your weaker arm.

Loosen up. Once the straitjacket is secured, relax your upper body and breathe out. Make your upper body as small as possible, and let go of the slack you created in the previous step. The straitjacket should feel looser now.

Push your strong arm forcefully towards the opposite shoulder. This will move the slack to where you need it for the next step.

Bring your strong arm up and over your head. Keep your weak arm down. Once you've done this, you'll be able to move your arms around.

Unbuckle the sleeve buckle with your teeth.

Unbuckle the top and bottom buckles behind you, using your free hands.

Step on the material of one of your sleeves while tugging your body out of the straitjacket.

- Keep the person who helped put on the jacket close to you just in case you cannot escape and need help getting out.

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There are some straitjackets with which this method won't work, such as if your arms are restrained so that you can't bring one over your head.

Straitjacket



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

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 ends 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.

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 was 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 bear 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 an ineffective method of attempting to move and stretch the arms.



A woman wearing a leather straitjacket with leg irons

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 are 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.

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" 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's official placeholder page for the current record is located here.

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 January 9, 2013 UK female escape artist Sofia Romero, also known as Sof Strait, set a new (Guinness World Record) for most straitjacket escapes in one hour. She escaped from a regulated Posey straitjacket 49 times consecutively on the set of "Officially Amazing" (Lion TV) at The Old Vic Tunnels in London UK.
- On October 8, 2011, illusionist Lucas Wilson 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 straitjacket escape. She escaped a regulation straitjacket secured with 50 feet of 1/4 inch chain and 10 padlocks in 2:37. The Universal Records Database 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)". *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*. Random House. 2006. Retrieved 15 January 2009.
2. ^ Thatcher, Virginia S., ed. (1970). *The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of The English Language*. McQueen, Alexander. Chicago: 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
5. ^ Stephen M. Soreff, Patricia H. Bazemore (June 2006). "Confronting chaos... early psychiatric treatments". *Behavioral Healthcare*. Retrieved 2011-09-23.
6. ^ Black 1926, pp. 241–245.
7. ^ Glenday, Craig (editor) (2011-06-09). "Fastest escape from a straitjacket" (Reference). *Guinness World Records*. Jim Pattison Group. ISBN 978-1-904994-67-1. Retrieved 2012-08-23.

8. ^ Glenday, Craig (editor) (2009-11-17). "Fastest escape from a straitjacket (2009 record)" (Reference). *Guinness World Records*. Jim Pattison Group. ISBN 978-1-904994-67-1. Retrieved 2012-08-23.
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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Thwarting a Straitjacket Escape



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Introductory note:

This was initially constructed from an e-mail to Harold & Bob who were expecting a visit from Max Cita. Max Cita had issued them a challenge that he could get out of one of his Psycho straitjackets. As of today (February 24, 2001), several months later, it looks like his visit is at least several months out. So Max may not be in for as big a surprise when he arrives (assuming he reads this).

It has also become the combined work of Don and myself. I have provided most of the details and he has made the reading more fun.

Oh, please don't tell Max about this page until he visits Harold and Bob for his challenge escape. (Though I'm personally not convinced he actually wants win the straitjacket challenge anyway.)

As of Monday, April 29 at 2:30 AM () this page has been accessed 34769 times. (zeroed 2/24/2001.)



They Check In, But They Don't Check Out:

Thwarting a Straitjacket Escape

So you're in the audience at a magic performance, and you're chosen to help put the performer in a straitjacket. Would it be it fair game to try to foil the escape?

In answer, I'd like to ask if you think it's fair game to fool an inexperienced mark with a gaffed--tricked--jacket. If you're on the committee charged with making sure the escape is legitimate, are you under any kind of obligation to collude with the performer to carry out an intended deception? What's your obligation to the audience: to help the performer pull off a smooth show, or to give them a proper challenge?

If it's only the performer's pride that's at risk, I'd do what I could to be sure the performer gets a thorough challenge. Your escape artist might disagree.

In order to take suitable countermeasures, you need to be able to anticipate your challengee's options, tactics, and strategies. So here let me explain how I go about getting myself out.

My approach depends on so many contingencies--the particulars of the jacket's construction, how it's been applied, and what's available in the immediate environment--that it's hard to give a simple explanation. Whatever choice I take--and, though it may not look like it when I'm all strapped in, I still have a range of options--this activity is definitely not one-size-fits-all.

My first objective is usually to free my arms. I can generally work up enough slack to slide my arms over my head if there aren't any arm loops to secure them to my torso. To get the slack I

need, I may get down on the floor and thrash about-- audiences eat this up--so that I can push my elbows into the floor. By a happy accident, I'm so built--thin and long-armed--that I can generally still get my arms over my head even when the jacket's strapped so tightly that I have trouble breathing. Trying to work the sleeves down under my butt has never gotten me anywhere. And here let me stress that this is due to an accident of anatomy that your contender may not share.

If there are arm loops securing the sleeves, then I'll try to get my fingers to the buckle connecting the sleeve ends. I'll slip one arm into its sleeve as deeply as I can manage while withdrawing the other. (This is also a useful maneuver for shifting slack from one arm to the other, as is frequently required.) Then I'll try to work the sleeve buckle into reach so I can work on it through the sleeve. Here, too, by pressing my elbows against the floor I can gain useful slack.

Next I'll try to work the sleeve buckle against something. Chair legs and backs, table edges, door knobs, coat hooks, drawer pulls, half-open drawers, and cell bars: I've put them all to good use. If my challenger is foolish enough to leave a mirror around, it's a lot easier for me to follow what's going on behind my back.

In working on a buckle, my first goal is to get the strap out of the keeper. Now the going can get slow and tedious, and often exhausting and painful. It may take an hour--or even longer--before I see clear signs of progress. At this stage it can come to seem easier to give up. But then again, I tell myself, all trussed up like this, can you think of any better way to spend your time?

What am I doing all this time? I'm trying to snag a little section of the strap on something so I can give it a pull. This will withdraw a bit of the strap's tail through the keeper back toward the buckle, where the slack will form a little loop. Then I'll try to repeat the operation, to enlarge the loop, and continue till I've pulled the whole tail out of the keeper. With a friction buckle, the rest is easy.

A roller buckle at this point still presents a challenge. I still need to get the tongue out of the hole in the strap, and I'll do this by pulling on the end of the strap. I'll try to close a door or a drawer on the end of the strap. This gives me an opportunity to pull the strap free of the pin.

Of course, if the end of the strap gets jammed in a doorframe and I can't get it free, it's also given me the opportunity to get really stuck.

If I can't seem to make any progress on the sleeve buckle, I'll try working on the buckles holding the top two back straps. If I can work the top buckle free and loosen the second one, I should be able to pull my arms out of the jacket.

Some people can manage to draw their arms out of the sleeves into the body of the jacket. I've never succeeded in doing this myself, you understand, but some people can. Having short arms would help. So would a tricked or poorly constructed jacket.

Which brings me back to your challenge. Most magicians and escape artists use a gaffed or tricked straitjacket. How do you spot one? How might it be tricked?

In many gaffed jackets, one or both sleeve straps can surreptitiously be drawn a few inches into the sleeve from inside, before the sleeve straps are fastened. Once the sleeves are secured, those extra inches of slack can make the difference between an easy escape and a real challenge.

To give the jacket a proper inspection:

- Make sure that the straps at the ends of the sleeves are really attached to the sleeve the way they appear. You shouldn't be able to pull out either strap.
- Check both straps. Only one needs to be tricked.
- Now try to push/slide EACH sleeve-strap into its sleeve. Again, only one needs to be tricked. In the absence of arm loops, three inches of slack can make for an easy escape.
- Turn both sleeves inside out. Look closely and carefully at each.
- Be especially suspicious if there are no loops to pass the sleeves through, to keep the prisoner from working the arms up over the head or down under the legs.
- If roller buckles are used, the buckle holes should begin just beyond where the straps are attached--otherwise, you may have no choice but to leave the performer some slack.
- In an honest straitjacket, the sleeves and shoulders should fit snugly but comfortably. There shouldn't be a lot of extra material. Some gaffed jackets have sleeves that are extra-wide, especially in the shoulders. This can enable the performer to draw the arms out of the sleeves even if they're tightly strapped down. As a challenger, there isn't a lot you can do about this, except to point out how easy this makes it to escape, and maybe to demonstrate how.
- The seams of a legitimate straitjacket will be double- or triple-sewn, and the most critical will be reinforced with webbing. If you don't see this, look extra hard for the gaff. Likewise if there's no crotch strap.

Now that you know how a real escape artist might proceed, and how to spot a tricked jacket, let's talk about how to apply a real straitjacket in a real challenge. Most of my experience has been with real straitjackets made for institutional use, not tricked straitjackets designed to make things easy on-stage.

Some institutional straitjackets are fairly easily escaped, if they aren't correctly applied. For example, my first time in a standard Humane Restraint jacket, it took me less than two minutes to get out. With a very small change in how it was put on, I might still be there today.

Today four North American companies manufacture straitjackets not designed for stage performance:

1. Humane Restraint jackets are by far the easiest to escape. There are no loops to retain the arms, which can be worked up over the head. (Unless, of course, before fastening it you run a sleeve strap under one of the back straps. That would give someone a much greater challenge.) Some of their jackets also don't come with a crotch strap. Humane Restraint also makes a gaffed model specifically for the magic trade.
2. The standard jacket from Posey can be very challenging. These have two or three loops to keep the would-be escapee from working the arms up over the head. They also come equipped with a crotch strap.
3. The Psycho model straitjacket from Caught-in-the-Act is the greatest possible challenge to the serious escape artist.
4. The Fetters "Historical Pattern" in all canvas or canvas with leather reinforcement available from Mister S. (San Francisco and Los Angeles) also presents a formidable challenge.

Before we begin, you should understand that a properly applied straitjacket should be snug but NOT tight. Tightness beyond what's strictly necessary can turn a restraint into a true instrument of torture. It can cause permanent damage. Most to the point, it won't help keep someone restrained, but will reduce the length of time it can be tolerated. (Yes, straitjackets have been used for both punishment and torture. See Jack London's *Star Rover*.)

So the following tells you just what steps I'd take in challenging a highly skilled escape artist. This would tax the skills of a better escape artist than I --in this department, my physical skills are rather modest.

Some of what follows may seem tediously technical. Believe me, reading it isn't half as tedious as performing an escape. But remember the saying: the Devil (or is it the Divinity?) is in the details.

Note: several of these measures might not be considered quite kosher--particularly by your would-be escape artist. But as they say, all's fair...

1. If this is a stage escape, from the very first try to get the audience on your side. Some performers show an unconscious streak of arrogance. Where applicable, use it to your best advantage. People hate a bully, and love to root for the underdog. Play the scene accordingly. The crowd can get the performer to accept conditions they'd never accept voluntarily.

Oh, that's good. You catch on quickly.

2. Bring the most difficult jacket you can find. If at all possible, use a Psycho model straitjacket from Caught-in-the-Act--it's positively diabolical.
3. As I've explained above, a fixed point--a coat hook, a door handle, the knobs on a brass bedstead--is invaluable in working the straps loose. So if at all possible, prepare in advance the room where the escape attempt will be held. Remove anything that might offer any assistance, starting with the furniture. Obviously this is impossible on-stage, but may be possible in a private challenge. On-stage, you might tether a foot where any potential help is beyond reach.
4. Videotape and/or watch successive escape attempts -- this is invaluable, if you can arrange it. If you know how your escape artist gets out you can arrange suitable countermeasures. If you're going to get more than one chance, first put the jacket on the standard way and watch what happens. If you only get one try, I'd use every trick in my book.
5. Gloves or mitts worn under the jacket will help control those tricky fingers. You might also tape the fingers together and the thumb down.



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6. Depending on the straitjacket's construction and fit, a bulky jacket worn underneath--a flak jacket is perfect--can make escape much more challenging. It will make the sleeves and body fit much more snugly. For me--skinny as I am--it makes most maneuvers tremendously more difficult. And if by some mischance your escape artist should manage to work an arm out of a sleeve, it imposes an extra layer between those busy fingers and any buckle.
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386x.jpg

In addition, the extra insulation makes the work just that much sweatier. The heat alone can cut down on the amount of work your performer can accomplish in a given time. In the course of a routine escape I will regularly soak through both a double layer tee-shirt and the straitjacket.

7. Buckle a short strap about each wrist. Locking Humane Restraint cuffs are even better. These will make it much harder (read: impossible) to draw the arms out of the sleeves. Over the strait jacket sleeves is best, but even inside the sleeves they'll make escape more difficult. This might not be seen as fair play.
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8. Don't forget to secure the crotch straps. It's hard to do this before an audience without looking like a bully, and your contender will make the most of it, but it's got to be done. If your contender is male, do watch out for the family jewels, but don't let this make you squeamish. Without this step, the whole thing can be shrugged off like a sweater. (Well, almost.) Pass the crotch strap to one side, and you can make it as tight as you like without causing discomfort, except perhaps to the spine and shoulders.

With my build, I can work a leg through a Posey's single crotch strap. If there are two crotch straps, I suspect you could foil this move by knotting them together where they cross. Do make sure the knot falls somewhere painless.

9. When crossing the arms, be sure to interlock them properly. Don't just place one on top of the other. Pass one sleeve over the opposite bicep. Then take the end of the other sleeve over the forearm of the first and under the bicep. If there's no front loop, as with Humane Restraint jackets, this is a fairly effective substitute.
10. If there's no front loop on the jacket--it holds the arms to the chest--don't forget to run the arm strap under one of the back straps. And before securing it, work hard to remove every last bit of slack. A helper would make this is much easier, but would cost you any claim to underdog status. Instead, stand hip-to-hip with your escape artist with their near elbow against you. With one hand pull the far elbow toward you while with the other hand you draw the sleeve strap taut. Now give 'em a good big bear hug while doing this, and draw that strap tighter--if it doesn't open you to charges of sexual harassment.

Yes, that's very good. Now let 'em push those elbows against the floor as hard as they can. You've already taken up that slack.

11. Bear this in mind: When you go to saddle a horse, sometimes the beast will take a deep silent surreptitious breath and hold it while you're trying to tighten the cinch. You turn away, and the next thing you know, the saddle hanging under the creature's belly, while he give you an innocent look as if to say, "Who, me?" When someone goes to tighten either the back straps or the sleeve straps on a straitjacket, I'll try to steal some slack just like that wily animal.

And whether you're contending with a horse or a two-legged critter, the solution is the same: a sudden knee in the ribs. Of course, unless you're auditioning for a spot on TV wrestling (and even then you'd better be trying out for the role of "Dark Invader"), never try this on-stage. Or, if you do, be prepared for the audience response.

12. Now buckle the sleeve strap the "very hard way". Remember how, with a lot of hard, tedious work, I can get the strap end free of the keeper without using my hands, if the buckle is fastened the regular way?

Refer to my buckle page at <http://sj.blacksteel.com/buckle/>. It shows various ways of fastening the friction buckle currently sewn on a Posey straitjacket. All are much harder to undo from within than the standard way.

To secure the buckles on a Posey or a canvas straitjacket from Caught-in-the-Act, pass the strap:

1. through the toothed opening
 2. past and over the keeper
 3. through the last slot on the buckle
 4. back up under the strap (next to the pivot pin)
 5. and back through the toothed opening. It will come out UNDER the incoming strap.
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6. Last, tie a knot in the end of the strap.

Again, referring to photos on the buckle page should help make this clear.

Two additional steps for the compulsively thorough --

7. Tie the buckle to each of the arm loops with a cord or leather thong. This is devilish. Now the sleeves can't be shifted at all. And even if somehow the buckle gets undone, one arm is still secure.
 8. Wrap the buckle with a piece of cloth (to keep it clean) and then with duct tape. It is also easy to make buckle covers with Velcro-closing strips. In Jim Stewart's experience these super-efficient inhibitors and something to be reckoned with.
13. If you like, in addition to the arm straps, you can secure any or all of the other straps as per the above.

I'd rank the buckles in the following order of importance:

1. The sleeve strap.
2. The back strap just below the arms.
3. The topmost back strap.
4. The crotch strap(s).
5. The waist strap (depending on the fit).
6. The lowest back strap.

(Note: Caught-in-the-Act supplies an extra strap to go over the arms. I wouldn't even bother with it. It looks nice but it hurts the arms, and I don't think it makes a challenge any more difficult. Better yet, take the strap out of the arm keepers and just put it around the chest just under the shoulders. This foils any attempt to draw arms out of sleeves and restricts breathing slightly which makes all activity harder work.)

- Tie the top two back strap ends together with a ring bend or water knot. (insert link here)
- Any collar is potentially hazardous. For safety reasons, it's important to monitor the would-be escapee at all times. Choking isn't the only danger--there are pressure points in the neck that can induce loss of consciousness, and in rare cases cardiac arrest. Jackets designed for institutional use, quite properly placing safety first, have very wide neck openings.

I've described above how I sometimes work one arm deeply into the sleeve while withdrawing the other as far as I can. This shifts the body of the jacket to one side and moves one side of the collar over against the neck. A snug collar will reduce the amount of play available. It can also asphyxiate the maniacally determined. The Psycho design--incorporating a tall snug collar--assumes that you're only just crazy enough to get yourself into a mess like this but not outright suicidal. In certain cases of testosterone poisoning, this may not be a safe assumption.

With this caution in mind, I'll tell you that locking the collar on--this assumes that your jacket comes equipped with locking buckles--will make a complete escape next to impossible. Even if your escapee manages to free the arms, the darned thing will still dangle frustratingly about the neck.

□ Your contender isn't likely to be any too eager to consent to this one. But if you can get the audience on your side, they may not give 'em much choice.

Secure the arms with pinion straps, as follows: Fasten a pair of leather cuffs (Humane Restraint cuffs are perfect) or broad heavy straps about the biceps, just above the elbows. Then connect them behind the back by rope or strap, and make things snug without impairing circulation. This measure alone will make almost any strait jacket virtually escape-proof.

□ A simple rope harness can be used to hold the jacket sleeves next to the body. Under an arm, over the FAR shoulder, back under starting arm, across chest/back, under other arm, over the FAR shoulder, back under the arm, and tie it off. For safety, never around the neck! The knot should be out of reach around back. Yes, of course, you can tie the ends off to some fixed point. I can see you're getting the hang of this. But first you might want to read the next step.

□ This is an effective countermeasure when you have no control over the challenge site. It's likely to be considered foul play--and it isn't something I'd ever let you do to me, no sirree! But just in case it's allowed--and again, if you can get the audience with you, you may be able to shame your contender into consenting--equip yourself in advance with a modified duffel bag. Use a heavy canvas one like a laundry sack, with the opening at the end and not down the side. Cut an opening in the circular bottom to accommodate your contender's head. The hole should be slightly offset, like the neck of a t-shirt, and on axis with the closing. Slip it over your contender's head, straitjacket and all, till the head emerges and the bag covers everything but the head and the legs. Now, if you're nice, you'll clip it closed between the legs and lock the shoulder strap around something fixed. If you want to be nasty, before you close it stuff the duffel bag with laundry till it's full, and make sure you secure that crotch closing with a lock.

Now, let 'em rub those buckles against whatever they can find. Let 'em do it to their heart's content. It won't do 'em a lick of good.

□ If you can get your contender to consent--and this, too, might be seen as a dirty trick-- tie 'em down to a backboard, ladder, litter, gurney, cot, stretcher, or chain-link fence. Even an eight-foot-long 2-by-4 board will do. If this isn't acceptable, strap or tie the legs together at the ankles and just above the knees.

One more measure that might not be considered legit: A blindfold or hood will impair your contender's ability to see what needs to be done. In addition, it's unexpectedly and disruptively disorienting. Not to mention intimidating.

And now, while your would-be escape artist flops about cursing on the floor behind you, don't just stand there. Take your modest bow. You've earned it. Congratulations!

Just don't ever turn up in the audience at any show of mine.

You may want to look at a PBS page on Houdini's straitjacket escapes.
Please mail me your comments and suggestions at louis@sj.blacksteel.com. Escape artists willing to share secrets are especially welcome!

Thanks, Yossie, for hosting my page at blacksteel.com