

LAP #9, PERSONAL SAFETY

The driver's seat of a racecar is a hot, smelly, noisy, cramped space that should feel as comfortable to the driver as sitting in their favorite reclining chair. Properly selecting personal safety equipment can save your life and make the time you spend behind the wheel much more enjoyable. At a minimum, to go road racing, you'll need a good helmet, eye and ear protection, a neck brace, arm restraints, fire suit, shoes, socks, and gloves in addition to a 5-point harness, head rest, fire extinguisher, and safety shut off switch mounted in the car. Your safety gear will become an extension of your persona as you become very familiar with it through constantly putting it on and taking it off before and after each race.

Your helmet should be a closed-face design, though not as stylish as open faced versions your face will look much better when wearing one in an accident that results in contact with the steering wheel or flying debris. Don't be swayed by those professing the advantage of open faced designs and the ability to "feel the wind on their face" when driving. Buy a closed faced design with moveable visor and you'll be much happier in the long run. Designs with removable linings and cheek inserts make for much easier cleaning and drying. A neck roll or brace is a necessity and a Hans device is preferred. Don't forget ear plugs, the disposable soft foam type are very good and a ready supply can easily be kept nearby in the breast pocket of the fire suit.

Your fire suit should be a one-piece design with two layers and an SFI rating. The one-piece design provides no opportunity for fire to reach you when compared to

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the separate jacket and pants used in two piece designs. Make sure you sit in a chair when evaluating the length of your suit, making sure your calves and ankles are covered in the normal driving position. High-topped driving shoes worn over Nomex socks are the next line of protection and provide the advantage of giving excellent feel of the critical clutch, brake and accelerator pedals. Another area where feel is important is the hands where high-quality gloves are required. Look for designs with a gauntlet and elastic cuff to keep fire on the outside where it belongs.

Make sure the 5-point harness is installed where the buckles don't easily get stuck in crevices between the seat and car. Install SFI-rated padding on the roll cage anywhere your body or helmet might make contact. The head rest should be adjustable for comfort and both the fire extinguisher and safety shut off switch should be mounted where you can reach them while fully strapped in and wearing all your gear.

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After you get your personal safety gear, become familiar with it by practicing taking it on and off then getting in the car and make sure you can easily reach and activate your ignition switch, starter, fire suppression device, and emergency cutoff switch. You'll need to develop a routine procedure for entering the car, securing yourself, and getting on your remaining safety gear. Everyone is different but to give you an idea here is mine.

Outside the car I don my socks followed by fire suit and then shoes. I leave the helmet, neck brace, arm restraints, and gloves inside the car with the shoulder belts fully extended and the lap belt pre-adjusted. Upon entering the car, I buckle into the 5-point harness leaving the shoulder belts extended and loose. Next are arm restraints followed by the helmet and then the neck brace. Gloves are the very last, which are my reminder to check the lap belt for looseness and then pull the shoulder straps down very tight.

When I arrive back at the pits the first thing to do is loosen the shoulder straps prior to unbuckling. This makes later re-entering of the car much easier.

One thing to remember about your personal safety gear, it cannot help you if left behind so if you own it, wear it. Don't make the mistake of getting into the car even at an open track or drivers' education event without wearing it fully. Over time, it will become your uniform and you'll feel uncomfortable in the car without it. I've seen student drivers making fun of instructors for wearing full safety gear at open track events when it's not required. Think about it, who's the fool in this situation?

Now put the pedal down and go pass somebody!

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