

CASE REPORT

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Car Surfing in Indiana—An Unusual Form of Motor Vehicle Fatality

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ABSTRACT: A new form of joyride known as "car surfing" with fatal results is documented. The possible role of this activity in extra-vehicular motor vehicle deaths involving teenage or youthful drivers is described. Potential scene and autopsy findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, motor vehicle fatality, car surfing, accidental death

Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child. . . Prov 22:15

Joyriding takes many forms as a youthful diversion. Recent experience in the Vigo County Coroner's Office has demonstrated a new form of joyriding, known as "car surfing" which resulted in a fatality. A few months later a remarkably similar event ended in a nonfatal injury. This activity has not apparently been published elsewhere in the medical or forensic science literature.

Report of a Case

Three teenagers had spent a portion of a Sunday afternoon engaged in "car surfing." After many such runs, the 13-year-old participant again took his position on top of the hood in front of the car's windshield (Fig. 1). A strap of seatbeltlike material had been tied to the hood hinges to provide a foot-hold (Fig. 2). The 18-year-old then drove the car down a dirt road, reaching speeds of up to 40 miles per hour (65 kph). Possibly because of poor visibility caused by the "surfer" in front of him, the driver lost control of the vehicle causing the auto to roll over. The "surfer," rather than being thrown clear, remained attached to the vehicle by the foot strap. When the car finally came to rest, he was pinned underneath the hood with the partial weight of the car compressing his chest. Although his companions were able to escape from the car, they were unable to free the youth trapped beneath it. Rescue personnel freed him after approximately 30 min, but resuscitative efforts at the scene and a local hospital were unsuccessful.

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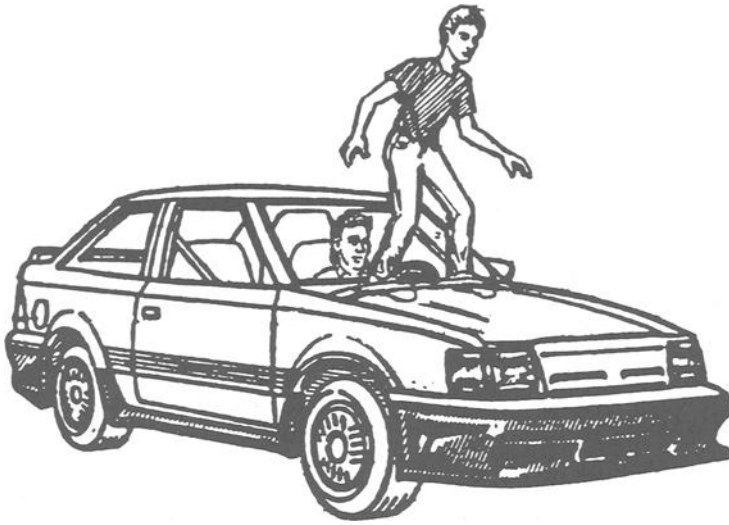


FIG. 1—Artist's rendition of the "surfer's" position on top of the car's hood.



FIG. 2—Photograph of car position after victim removed.

An autopsy performed the next day demonstrated a single bone fracture involving the left clavicle. Soft tissue injuries were minimal, with no evidence of crush injuries to any visceral organ. The autopsy demonstrated no cranial injuries. The head and neck however demonstrated severe suffusion that prevented the assessment of petechiae of the head or neck. Pleural petechiae were not identified. The cause of death was attributed to positional or compression asphyxia, because of a lack of any other demonstrable fatal injuries.

Discussion

The exact origin of the practice of "car surfing" is unknown, although it has been depicted in one movie aimed at a teenage audience (*Teenwolf*) [1]. In that setting, an

individual rode on top of a van as it drove down a city street, assuming an upright “surfing” position. This case was slightly different concerning the position of the surfer, although the same principle applied.

In the only other reference to such an activity found during a search of the literature, the victim was thrown from the roof of a van and landed with an initial upright impact on the heels of both feet. Traumatic injuries included vertical loading injury of the heels, pelvis, skull (ring fracture of posterior fossa) and brain, followed by gliding ground impact of the back and posterior head with a second skull fracture and contrecoup cerebral contusion [2].

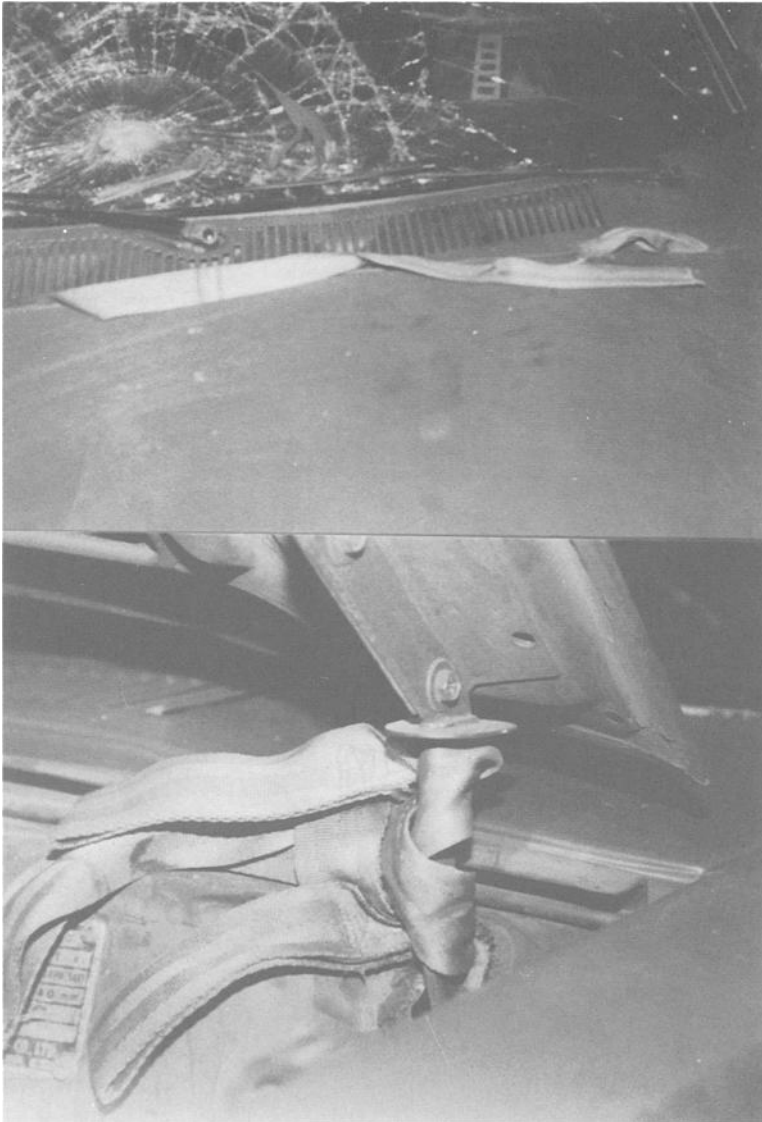


FIG. 3—*Photograph showing fabric strap tied to hood supports.*

The case presented here is unusual for a number of reasons, including the fact that the cause of death, compression asphyxia, is fairly uncommon in motor vehicle deaths. More unusual is that this represents the second case of a so called "surfing" accident resulting in death in a small population area. The first death, the result of "elevator surfing," was previously reported in this Journal [3]. A final bizarre feature is that both deaths were due to compression asphyxia.

The reason why "surfing" should suddenly become an important cause of accidental death and injury in western Indiana is a mystery. A few months after this fatal case of "car surfing," a group of individuals in their 20s were attempting the same activity when a similar accident occurred with the car being rolled. Fortunately the "surfer" was thrown clear of the car and suffered only minor injuries.

As Vigo County represents an unlikely source of new fads on a national basis, the implications would appear to be that these are not isolated activities, but are quite widespread throughout the United States. Accordingly, there is a high likelihood that similar deaths may be seen in other jurisdictions in the near future. As such, Medical Examiners should be aware of these possible etiologic activities when investigating any suspicious death involving a motor vehicle and a young victim who has either been thrown clear or remains attached to the vehicle.

Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank Kris Ghosh for assistance in reviewing the literature for this case presentation. The artist who prepared the first figure was Tom Plantz.

References

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- [2] Krouse, M., Peerwani, N., Harvey, C., Putthoff, S., and Sisler, G., "An Unusual Injury Pattern Due to Separation from a Moving Motor Vehicle: Even Landlocked Texas Surfers Can Die," American Academy of Forensic Sciences, 43rd Annual Meeting, Feb. 1991, Abstract.
- [3] Kohr, R. M., "Elevator Surfing: A Deadly New Form of Joyriding," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, JFSCA. Vol. 37, No. 2, March 1992, pp. 640-645.

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