

How Much is that Belt Pack in the Window?

Testers take seven belt pack inflatables for a walk in the park

Belt pack inflatable life jackets are the hippest new thing in boating safety, giving boaters a cutting-edge option for staying out of harm's way while on the water. Compact and clever, these life jackets will charm the topsiders off the boater who's got to have the absolute latest in boating gear, while their safety side will pique the curiosity of even the most stoic mariner.

Just like that adorable puppy in the pet store window that catches your eye, belt packs will steal your affection. But are these diminutive little PFDs really as lovable and loyal as they look? In Foundation Findings #37, we set out to find everything there was to know about these new models. In this issue, Part I of our two-part article, we'll tell you all about the care and feeding of your belt pack inflatable. In Part II, we'll take our testing to the water and tell you how it feels to wear one in real-life conditions.

The Latest Litter

In order to check out the latest in belt pack technology, we scoured boat store shelves and the Internet for U.S. Coast Guard-approved inflatable belt pack models. We came up with seven including two from SoSpenders, three from Stearns, one from Mustang, and one from SeaPro. For this article, we created a shorthand name for each unit that includes the manufacturer name and cylinder size (for instance, the Stearns Inflata-belt Max Manual Belt Pack is simply the Stearns 25).

Talk about evolving technology: After conducting these tests last fall, we learned almost immediately that two readily-available models were being discontinued, and new versions were already on the way but not yet available for testing. With new models rapidly hitting the market, we decided to focus this article on qualities to look for in a belt pack, rather than the best or worst models.

A Walk Around the Park

With seven models in hand, we started our three-tiered test. We began with a repacking exercise for four boaters who were interested in, but not knowledgeable about, belt packs. In a quiet room, one by one, they were given a fully inflated jacket and were asked to read each unit's instructions for three minutes.

To simulate conditions out on a boat, they read only the instructions attached to the jacket, not the entire user's manual. Each of the testers repacked the jackets in a different order, to ensure fairness.

Each tester deflated their jacket, rearmed it with a CO2 cartridge, and repacked it into the pouch while a knowledgeable staff member observed.

Finally, at the end of repacking, each tester put the unit around their waist, imagined they were jumping into stormy seas, then pulled the jerk cord and hoped for the best.

We were curious about the quality of the instructions and were eager to know if regular boaters could master rearming and repacking. We also wanted to address an unanticipated piece of information we ran across: that a large majority of people we talked to — experienced boaters and staff members included — had never inflated their own inflatable life jackets. Surprised? So were we, but more on that later.

Paper Training

Our testers found little uniformity with the instructions, even among jackets from the same manufacturer. Across the board, instructions with pictures were a favorite. In particular, the SoSpenders 16 and 38 models had simple and clear pictograms, however, the testers were disappointed when the pictures did not exactly match the way the units looked when folded. On all but one jacket, the Mustang 33, the rearming



Inflatables: A Breed of Their Own

To many boaters, inflatable life jackets are still a little mysterious, so here's the story in a nutshell. Each inflatable is equipped with a small carbon dioxide (CO2) cylinder. When a jerk cord is pulled, a lever comes down and pierces the cylinder, quickly inflating the jacket. Some inflatable life jackets even inflate automatically when they come into contact with water.

When a belt pack is activated, an air bladder bursts out of the front of the pouch, then you must manually pull it over your head.

These life jackets can be rearmed with CO2, repacked, and worn again and again, provided they're kept in good condition and repacked properly.

Who can use a belt pack inflatable? Well, you must be 90 pounds or heavier and at least 16 years old to legally wear one. They aren't meant for weak or non-swimmers since there is some effort involved to don the jacket once you are in the water. Also, they aren't intended for watersports like personal watercraft, waterskiing or whitewater rafting.

If you'd like to learn more even about our tests on belt pack inflatables, please visit www.boatus.com/foundation

instructions were placed separately from the repacking instructions, which was difficult to follow. In addition to having written instructions, the Mustang 33 and Stearns Auto 33 got high marks for the dotted lines right on the life jacket bladder that said "Fold here."

Because of the nearly ubiquitous small print and poor organization of the attached directions, we concluded that a belt pack owner's first experience with the instructions should definitely be in a stable well-lit room at home, rather than a rolling galley table midway through a cruise.

Obedience Issues

Our testers spent anywhere from five to 25 minutes repacking and rearming the jackets. By far, most frustrating for testers was simply trying to squeeze every hint of air out of the bladder before attempting to get it back into its pouch. Most models were intricately folded and required fastidious attention to the instructions.

Rearming the jacket with CO2, which

would seem to be the most difficult part actually proved to be the easiest. All testers successfully rearmed each jacket, though in two of our 28 repackings, the lever attached to the jerk cord was not set correctly and accidentally pierced the cylinder, instantly inflating the jacket.

One reason the testers were so successful in rearming could be the relative consistency of rearming mechanisms. On all inflatable life jackets, to show if a jacket is ready to inflate, a red and green color coding system is in place. Essentially red means stop and green means go. To show this, almost all models require you to install a green plastic "pin" into part of the lever arm during rearming. About the size of an earring, this pin is easy to lose or break. The pin comes with the CO2 cylinder as part of your jacket's specific "rearming kit."

On most models, the rearming mechanism is hidden inside the belt pack. However, we loved the extra safety of the SoSpenders 16 and Stearns 16 models in which a clear plastic window showed the cylinder and consequently the green pin that indicates the unit is ready. The SeaPro 25 went further by having the cylinder assembly on the outside of the pack for excellent viewing, but we felt uncomfortable about it being exposed where the cord could accidentally get caught on something. Another great safety feature of this model is its rearming mechanism that shows readiness by green automatically appearing in a small window (as opposed to remembering to insert the pin) when you screw the cylinder in all the way.

When it came time to take that deep breath and imagine going overboard, all our testers' life jackets inflated when the jerk

cord was pulled — except one. In this case, the tester had run out of patience while repacking the SoSpenders 38 and had simply forced the bladder into the pouch. After it failed to inflate during testing, she freed the bladder from the pouch manually and the jerk cord worked fine.



A belt pack's low profile means it doesn't interfere with tasks around the boat.

Old Dog, New Tricks?

After going through the rearming and repacking exercise, several testers commented that wearing an inflatable belt pack without going through this process — or supplying one to an unknowing guest — was just plain dumb. And you know what? We did feel dumb, since many of us had to admit we had never actually inflated our own life jackets. Gulp.

Why hadn't we inflated our jackets? The main reason, we decided, was the high cost of CO2 cylinders. We concluded that the cost of testing the unit — at least once — should be factored into the cost of owning the jacket. In lieu of that, remember

that every jacket can be inflated orally either to test the jacket onshore or to inflate it in an emergency.

A Big Commitment

Having the coolest, most current technology will get you nowhere if you don't understand the animal you've brought home. To become a good owner, we cannot stress enough that you must spend time reading the user's manual. Then, practice rearming and repacking. You'll feel better wearing the belt pack if you understand how it works. Additionally, we strongly suggest you buy a couple of spare rearming kits when you purchase the unit.

For those up to the commitment, we found belt packs offer an economic, easy-to-wear life jacket for cruising, sailing, kayaking, or dinghying around in warmer, inland waters. A belt pack can be a perfect transition into safer boating, especially for the boater who simply isn't in the habit of wearing a life jacket.

Countdown to Splashdown

Cold water, a steady supply of rolling waves, and a breezy fall day made for life-like boating conditions and a lot of chattering teeth when our testers hit the water in a local wave pool this past fall. Check out the March/April issue of *BoatU.S. Magazine* to find out what happened when the belt packs — and our testers — went overboard! ■

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Model	SoSpenders 16 Gram Scout Belt Pack	Stearns Multipurpose Inflata-Belt Lite Manual	Sea Pro Marine Swimmer Safety Belt	Stearns Inflata-Belt Max Manual Belt Pack +	Mustang Survival Airforce Inflatable Pouch PDF	Stearns Inflata-Belt Max Automatic/Manual Belt Pack	SoSpenders World Class Belt Pack +
Shorthand Name	SoSpenders 16	Stearns 16	Sea Pro 25	Stearns 25	Mustang 33	Stearns Auto 33	SoSpenders 38
Cylinder Gram Weight	16 Grams	16 Grams	25 Grams	25 Grams	33 Grams	33 Grams	38 Grams
Belt Pack MSRP	\$59.99	\$59.99	\$139.95	\$69.99	\$80.00*	\$95.99	\$69.99
Rearming Kit MSRP	\$9.99	\$9.99	\$25.00 for 3	\$13.99	\$15.00*	\$21.99	\$16.99
Dimensions of Pack (L x H x W)	10 x 3.5 x 2.25 in.	24.5 x 3.5 x 2 in.	16.5 x 2.75 x 2.25 in.	9.5 x 4.75 x 2.5 in.	8 x 4.25 x 2.5 in.	10.5 x 4.75 x 3.25 in.	8.5 x 5.5 x 3 in.
Overall Pack Weight	13.4oz	12.8oz	17.4oz	17.0oz	19.6oz	22.0oz	21.8oz
Rearming and Repacking Test Ratings							
Speed of Repack Rating (1=fastest; 7=slowest)	4	1	6	3	2	5	7
Ease of Repack Rating (1=easiest; 5=hardest)	3	1	4	1	2	3	5

+ Discontinued * No MSRP available, average price