



# Foundation Findings

A Boater Education Series

[Return to Main Page](#)

## Report #33: Canine PFDs: November 2000 **How Safe is That Doggie in the Water?**

*If it's true that dog owners tend to look and think like their pets, then canines must be safety-conscious indeed. How else would you explain the sudden popularity of life jackets for dogs? PFDs, pet flotation devices - most often for dogs but also for cats and a few other animals - were among the hottest-selling items of boating equipment this year. Even as this boating season winds down, there is every indication that sales are still wagging the dog.*



Life jackets for dogs are increasingly popular. while not essential safety gear, they function well as "dog overboard retrieval devices."

Life jackets are essential pieces of equipment for the boater, even required by law. But does a boater's dog really need a life jacket? Is it a help or a hindrance in a "dog overboard" situation? And how do you select the proper PFD for your pooch anyway?

The BoatUS Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water has tested human life jackets several times over the years and with the growing popularity of pet life jackets, we thought it was time to look at these devices. But this Foundation Findings, which focuses solely on dogs in life jackets, presented a new set of questions and challenging test protocols.

For one thing, there are no design or performance standards for pet devices against which to measure devices currently on the market. The pet products industry has none and neither does the U.S. Coast Guard (nor would we want them regulating life jackets for dogs).

Another challenge is the fact that dogs come in more sizes, shapes and anatomical configurations than humans. Their real-world use is different, too. Research had shown us that pet PFDs serve as flotation aids and "dog overboard" lifting devices. And finally, we knew we had to rely on human observers to interpret each dog's performance and reactions so we included the owners on the test team. Don't All Dogs Swim?

### ***Don't All Dogs Swim?***

The first question we asked is whether a dog needs a life jacket in the first place. All dogs swim just fine, right?

As a matter of fact, no. Some dogs just don't take to the water well. Breeds with low body fat like Doberman pinschers and boxers can have trouble in the water.

Older dogs may tire easily and breeds prone to hip dysphasia may have difficulty swimming. Hypothermia can be a threat to some breeds of dogs when they are unduly exposed to cold water.

"No matter how well a dog can swim under supervision, any dog can drown," reports Georgia Molek, a veterinarian we contacted through the American Animal Hospital Association. "All dogs can get fatigued, too, and/or become disoriented. I'm sure life jackets are a good idea but they should never replace caution and common sense."

If your dog ever took a long walk off a short dock (or deck), chances are you've thought about the advantage of having your pooch in a life jacket. Most products on the market have lifting handles that make retrieving your retriever much easier for you and safer for all concerned. Thus, the handles, straps, buckles and overall fit of the jackets became the most important consideration in our evaluations.

Some breeds like the Labrador and the Newfoundland are time-honored "water dogs" but it's clear that dogs of all types go to sea these days. Thus, we selected four popular breeds, somewhat arbitrarily, from the Big Dog, Little Dog, Long Dog and All-Around Dog categories. We recruited Jackson, a Labrador retriever; Skipper, a Jack Russell terrier; Lanie, a corgi; and Aspen, a golden retriever, all accompanied by four willing owner/boaters.

Prior to testing, we weighed each dog and measured its girth just behind the front legs. From that we selected products from four manufacturers based on sizing information they supplied (see chart). Our test site, YMCA Camp Letts on the Rhode River off the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, offered a sandy beach ideal for easy entry to the water and a floating dock of adequate height to simulate a boat's freeboard.

## Fetch!

To get our subjects warmed up to the tests, we had the dogs and their owners play at retrieving a favorite toy tossed into the water, sans life jacket, to watch their swimming characteristics.

Next we wanted to observe each dog's swimming ability in jackets from each manufacturer in what we thought would be the correct size, based on the guidelines supplied. That sounds simple enough but we found that each manufacturer uses different size guidelines.

As a result, Skipper, our 22-lb. Small Dog, fit in XS, S and L vests from three different manufacturers. On the other hand, Jackson, our Big Dog (106 lbs.) modeled a jacket for dogs "over 75 lbs." and we found that while it worked, it seemed ridiculously small.

**Moral:** *Try before you buy.*



**A life jacket on a pet provides extra buoyancy as can be seen in two views of the same dog.**

## Swim!

Pet life jackets do not come with buoyancy ratings, as do human life jackets (the Coast Guard requires it). We had hoped to come up with some meaningful measure of buoyancy but decided it would have little relevance given the way dogs behave in the water. In lieu of that, we opted to document in photographs how each dog floated and swam with each jacket.

Three of the four vests buckle underneath the dog and around the neck. That puts the flotation on the dog's back or ribs. The Super Soft Doggie Vest is basically all flotation, an Ensolite panel that the front legs go through, covering the chest and buckling over the front shoulders.

The life jackets clearly changed the way each dog floated and the added buoyancy should certainly help a tired dog. Pet life jackets are designed to float the animal in a horizontal, swimming position, not with head up, out of the water. Thus, we could not measure freeboard - the distance from nose to water - as we would for humans.

None of the jackets interfered with the dogs' swimming ability although we had some concerns about extra-long straps. The straps on the Kent Pet Vest and the Safeguard Dog Life Jacket were long enough to allow for wide girth variations. While the excess strap length did not pose any problems with swimming, an owner might want to

shorten the straps to avoid any snagging problems. (Leave enough for a half-hitch to keep the nylon material from slipping in the buckles, though.)

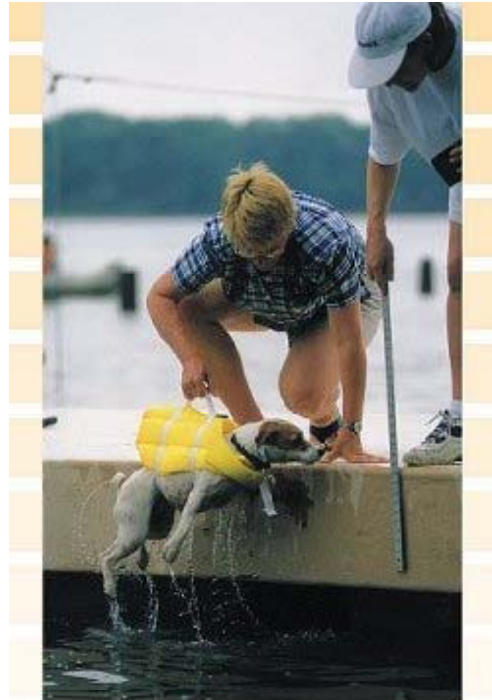
## Roll Over(board)!

Except for the Super Soft Doggie Vest, the jackets we tested, as well as others we've seen, all have handles in the middle of the back. Whether you just pull the dog in with a boat hook or you actually lift the dog out of the water with it, the handle transfers the pressure to the straps that go around the midsection.

All of our observers felt the one-inch straps on the Kent and Safeguard jackets could have been wider and where they cross under the dog's body concerned several owners. They felt the straps impeded their dog's ability to sit comfortably and might cut into the body unduly when lifted by the handle.

The handles on all jackets proved strong enough to lift three of the dogs; however by the time we got to this part of the test, our Big Dog, Jackson, had other interests (and at 106 lbs. bone dry, our test crew didn't chase after him).

The chart below indicates whether or not each dog's owner felt comfortable lifting the dog in a particular jacket. All owners said that in an emergency, they would not hesitate to hoist their hound aboard using the handles and anything else they could grab.



**Lifting handles make it easier to bring your dog back aboard but be sure to consider where the straps contact the body. It's best to check the jacket's fit in the store, before you buy.**

Dog Life Jacket Comparison	Skipper Ht: 14"; Wt: 22 lbs. Girth: 20" (in Ruffwear)			Lanie Ht: 12"; Wt: 29 lbs. Girth: 22" (in Safeguard)			Aspen Ht: 24"; Wt: 55 lbs. Girth: 29" (in Kent)			Jackson Ht: 24"; Wt: 106 lbs. Girth: 37" (in Super Soft)		
	SIZE	FIT	LIFT	SIZE	FIT	LIFT	SIZE	FIT	LIFT	SIZE	FIT	LIFT
Safeguard Dog Life Jackets	L	👍👍	👍	L	👍👍	👍	XL	👍	👍	Super	👍	👍
Kent Pet Vest	S	👍👍👍	👍	S	👍👍	👍	M	👍👍	👍	L	👍👍	👍
Ruffwear K-9 Floatcoat	XS	👍👍	👍	XS	DID NOT FIT	n/a	M	👍👍👍	👍	L	👍👍👍	👍
TX Recreation Corp. Super Soft Doggie Vest	L	👍	👍	L	👍	👍	XXL	👍	👍	XXXL	👍	👍

KEY: Fit 👍 = FAIR    👍👍 = GOOD    👍👍👍 = VERY GOOD  
Lift 👍 / 👎 = Indicates owner's confidence in lifting their dog in this jacket.

---

## Speak!

If you are thinking about a PFD for your dog, talk to other boater/pet owners. And when you shop, remember that while size guidelines come with the jackets, based on our experience we strongly recommend that you take Rover in for "a fitting." Pet shops and marine supply stores should allow you to bring your dog in and try the vests. (All BoatUS Marine Centers encourage shoppers to bring in their dogs.)

Look at where the straps or other attachments contact the dog's body. In the wrong spot, these can make the dog miserable and they may try to chew them off.

Some of these devices are available in colors and patterns designed for high style but not necessarily high visibility

although Ruffwear life jackets have strips of reflective tape on the back. If visibility is important, choose your color accordingly. (A black jacket on a black dog is hard to spot; just ask Lanie.)

Based on our research, these tests and the experiences reported by BoatUS members, we think these life jackets should be considered valuable flotation aids, not essential life-saving devices. A pet life jacket will help your dog stay above water until rescued. Once you get the dog alongside, the handle will help you either retrieve the animal or lead it around to an area where it can reboard the boat on its own.

**So, do dogs need life jackets?** In the final analysis, only the dog's owner can make that decision. After all, this is one case in which you are your dog's best friend.

---

### A Float Plan for Fido

A life jacket on your pet or not, we recommend that you think ahead about the animal's safety, not to mention your own, when a pet is aboard your boat or on the dock.

Consider the scenarios that could result in your pet falling overboard — and do what you can to prevent it from happening in the first place. Next, in the event it does happen, plan how you will bring the animal back on board in such a way as to prevent injury to the animal or yourself. Remember, a wet dog is a heavy dog, so be careful!

---

[return to main page](#)