

## Kayak Car Topping 101 - Part III

### Rack Accessories by Tom Holtey

*The third in a series on roof racks and the car topping of boats*

In part two of this series we learned about sport racks and how to select them for your specific car. For most kayakers, as well as other outdoor sports enthusiast, some accessories will be wanted on those bare crossbars. We will address the needs of kayakers, while knowing that many other sport rack accessories exist for cyclist and other water sports.

Carefully consider your needs as the one who loads the kayaks and provides the muscle to do so. Consider the kayak's needs as well, its strong points, best load orientation and its hull shape, to ensure that you have a good ensemble of compatible accessories. Tie down straps were covered in part one of this series.

### Kayak Stackers

One challenge a paddler faces in car topping is how to get more than one kayak on the roof rack. A sport rack allows for efficient use of space of the rooftop of your vehicle. The humble and simple Kayak Stacker (*left*) allows kayaks to be stacked on their side, taking up about 50% less crossbar space per boat.

Typically this might allow as many as 4 white water kayaks on top of one car, great news for a shuttle driver. The cost of stackers is generally low, but the kayaks often slip a bit on the smooth bars. Some kind of friction surface, like crossbar pads, can help. A stacker can work well with any type of kayak, but not as well with very wide tandem sit-on-tops. Stackers are sold as pairs. Some only mount onto after-market sport racks.

It is best to secure your kayak to the stacker's upright bar, top and bottom, for a secure tie down. If you tie off to the cross bar only the load can loosen in the straps and slip. A second kayak can be tied to the stacker's upright bar in the same way. Then the 3rd and 4th kayaks can be tied to the stacker and the cross bar. (*Please refer to [part 1](#) for basic tie down info*)

### J-Cradles



A J-Cradle is an accessory that holds a kayak sideways, as the name implies, cradled in J shape form. J-Cradles come in a variety of styles and trade names. They are very secure and work well with most sea kayaks, day touring kayaks and recreational kayaks, including many sit-on-tops.

They do not work well with some very wide tandem sit-on-tops, or sit-on-tops with very sharp rails or sides that do not conform well to the shape of the J-Cradle brand being used. Two sets of J-



Cradles can be used to put two kayaks on a small car side by side, on edge. Some wider vehicles may be able to accept 3 J-Cradles, but bear in mind that access to the center J-Cradle could be difficult, so look for a folding J-Cradle for the outboard position. J-Cradles are sold as pairs, hold one kayak, and many can be mounted on standard luggage racks. J-Cradles come with a variety of trade names like Yakima's Hull Raiser, Bow-down, or Thule's Hull-A-Port .

It is best to secure the tie down straps to the top section of the J-Cradle prior to lifting the kayak in place; otherwise it becomes difficult to reach. The tie down strap can then secure to the lower portion of the J-Cradle or crossbar.

### Saddles

Kayak saddles carry a kayak right side up, deck up, hull down, in a V or U shape holder that often conforms to the shape of the hull. This can be an excellent way to carry two sea kayaks, day touring kayaks or recreational kayaks, including many sit-on-tops, side-by-side. The use of saddles will often allow one to load two wider kayaks onto short cross bars, as the saddles supply good support for the kayak, even though the width of the two kayaks exceed the length of the crossbars. Generally this configuration will limit the load to only two kayaks, even when on wide cars with long bars. Some sit-on-top kayaks with odd shape hulls may not conform well to the shape of the saddle, while other sit-on-tops will. Saddles are sold as pairs (4 pieces), for use with one kayak, or in some cases in saddle & roller sets. They come in a variety of styles with many snappy trade names. Most kayak saddles can be mounted onto luggage racks. Follow the tie down instructions that come with your set.



### Rollers



Rollers are a neat innovation allowing the car topper to lift one end of the kayak (1/2 the weight) onto the car top, and then lift the other end, rolling the kayak into the saddle placed on the forward bar. Yakima Hully Rollers are a good example of this. You will always want to combine rollers with a saddle, one each per each kayak. Two sets of rollers, used with only one kayak, offer very little advantage, and can cause extra point loading of the hull.

The down side of rollers is there can be excess pressure from point loading the weight of the kayak on a small surface area of hull. Place rollers to contact the strong part of the hull, up along the curvature of the hull to the sides, and not in the middle or on the very bottom flat part of the hull. I find that the Yakima Hully Rollers are better suited to Thule bars, thus preventing base rotation.

Thule makes a slippery saddle, called a Hydro Glide (*right*). It has a friction free surface area providing good hull support. (Clean sand off kayak before use.) Hydro Glides should be used with a regular "friction surface" saddle per each kayak for a more secure load. I find that Hydro Glides are better suited to Yakima bars,

allowing the saddle to pivot and cradle the kayak on its way onto the rack.

Rollers and "slippery saddles" only provide their benefit when used on the correct vehicle. A sedan with a rear trunk is not a good candidate for rollers. You would have to lift the kayak up and over the trunk to reach the rear bar. The best vehicles for rollers are SUVs, vans and hatchbacks, with the rear bar placement as far aft on the car roof as is possible. As such they do not usually work well with luggage racks. Follow the tie-down instructions included with your rollers or Hydro Glide.

### Accessories For Leverage

The greatest challenge a car topper might face is lifting a 17-foot, 50 lb+, touring kayak up onto a tall vehicle after a long days paddle. In fact many folks might find even a small kayak a challenge to place on a regular size car even before the boat gets wet. Yes, there are accessories that can help. However consider your car. You do not need to transport your kayak with a large vehicle; a small short car will do just as well. A SUV is a popular style vehicle, particularly among the outdoors crowd, but tall for kayak loading, and some are not very roomy inside. The humble "old fashion" station wagon is/was probably the most practical vehicle ever for the kayaker, wide, low to the ground, plenty of cargo space.

If you have the strength to lift a kayak up to head high, like an Olympic weight lifter, you are already at car top level, and indeed, maybe you have to portage your kayak in that fashion to get it to the car in the first place. The hardest part is lifting the kayak past chest level. Others will want look for an easier way.

We have covered rollers and slippery saddles above, two handy loading devices, but there are more gizmos to help you load a kayak. The primary key to easy solo kayak loading is lifting only 1/2 the weight of the boat. The old trick is to put a beach towel on the car roof and/or trunk. With the kayak very close to the car, lift the bow onto the car. Act quickly to reach the stern end, to prevent slipping, and lift the stern, while jockeying the bow into position on the roof rack. A bit of pushing and shoving and you have the kayak in place.

Both Yakima Boat Loader and Thule Outrigger are extension bars that extend way out to the side of the car. This will allow the car topper to load the kayak, or canoe, in much the same fashion as the beach towel method above. Place kayak on the ground, along side the car, in the approximate position it will ride on the roof, leaving space for the extension. Pull out the extension bar.

Lift one end of the boat up and onto the bar. Quickly move to the other end of the boat and lift it up onto the sport rack. Lift the 1st end again and place it securely onto the sport rack. Push the extension bar back into the storage position. Extension bars will work on any vehicle and are very well suited to those that are a high reach. Extension bars are a good alternative to rollers on sedans. Extension bars will only work on sport racks, never on a factory installed luggage rack. Extension bars must be securely stowed while driving, never extended, and never loaded onto.

There are now lifting mechanisms for kayaks. The Thule Hullivator utilize gas struts that you will find on heavy lift gates on the back of cars. The whole device mounts and stows on the sport rack atop your car. It will have a set of kayak cradles on it. To use, you release the system form the sport rack and lower it down to the side of the car. (The doors must be closed of course.) The kayak can then be loaded at a below waist level. Secure the kayak to the cradles. Then lift the kayak up onto the car top with the assistance of the gas struts. Lock the lift in place. Bow and stern tie downs to bumpers are recommended. Such a system will add considerably to the cost of the rack, and reduce overall weight capacity. However, it will do all the heavy lifting. One Hullivator per kayak, typically you can use two Hullivators per vehicle to carry two kayaks. Other types of lifts work just as well but are very different. Thule's Hullivator:

Bear in mind that paddling is often a group sport, and you should be able to get help from your buddies at the put-in and take-out. Tandem kayaks seat two, so your crewmate should be able to help you load, unless that crewmate is a dog, child, or disabled.

A variety of locking systems exist for car topping. Sport racks will lock to the top of your car, so that they will not be stolen. You can get matching lock cylinders for your locking accessories. Cable locks, such as the Lasso can be used to lock a sit-in-side kayak to the rack system. A standard bike cable lock can be slipped through the scupper hole of a sit-on-top kayak to lock it to a rack.

Cross bar pads can be used for padding of the hard rack bars. Cross bar pads are excellent for surfboard like wave skis and sit-on-top surf kayaks. They can be used for many sit-on-top kayaks when loaded hull-up. Cross bar pads are made primarily for use with surfboards and wind surfers. Pay special attention to the length, most board pads are only 18 inches. A kayak will want pads about 24 to 48 inches long.

Two part kayak paddles, and canoe paddles, are best stowed inside the car. One piece kayak paddles and long oars of rowboats are best secured to the cross bars in a fashion that will prevent them from coming off. Accessory devices or your regular tie down straps may be used. Take extra precautions to ensure paddle, or oars, will not come off the rack while driving.