

FRAGILE
This Side Up

How to pack your beer



Illustrations by Scott Krause

Last June I had the pleasure of spending a week at the Anchor Brewing Co., for the most part living out of their walk-in cold box. Why? I was unpacking and sorting the second-round entries for the 1990 AHA National Homebrew Competition. I use the word "pleasure" because any excuse to spend time in one of America's finest breweries, especially behind the scenes, is pure pleasure to me. Even a week wrestling with some of the most stubborn packaging this side of UPS was worth it.

There were certainly some strange items included with the beer in a few of the packages. I'm beginning to believe that homebrewers have

developed little rituals around packing up the brews to ensure a safe journey and possibly a winning position. One box had some poker chips tossed in amid the Styrofoam and plastic wrap. Still another had a plastic Hawaiian lei encircling the bottles. And to whomever sent the dog biscuits, thanks, they went great with the porter I was drinking at the time. Homebrewers are a strange lot. . .

Anyhow, as I was talking to myself one rather lonely evening, surrounded by cases of Liberty Ale and heaps of excelsior and Styrofoam popcorn (or ghost droppings, as one friend calls them), I thought I might put this experience to some practical use by pointing out a few things about shipping beer, particularly to competitions, from the unpacker's point of view.

What struck me as I tussled with many of these stubborn packages was the unavoidable mishandling that the beer received as a direct result of the style of packaging employed. That is to say, the harder it was to liberate the bottle from its wrappings, the worse the beer was handled. For example, bottles that were rolled up in

multiple sheets of paper (news or other) or some other wrap, were almost impossible to get at without unrolling. The quickest way to do so was to hold the package in one hand and pull the roll away as if it were a window shade. Think about how much



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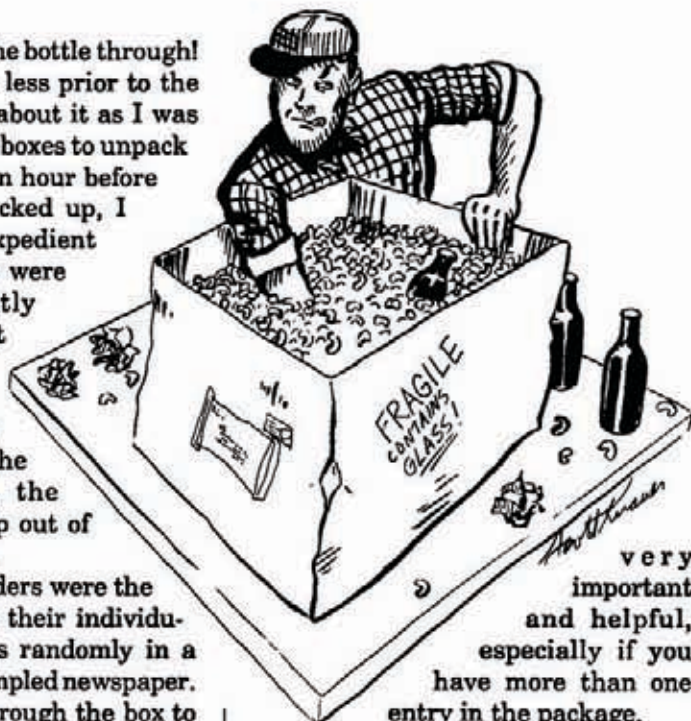
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agitation that puts the bottle through! And only a week or less prior to the judging! I thought about it as I was doing it, but with 50 boxes to unpack and sort, and only an hour before the Anchor folks locked up, I had to take the expedient road. Some entries were wrapped so tightly around the neck that even when the bottom of the bottle was exposed by tearing away the packing material, the bottle would not slip out of its protective jacket.

The worst offenders were the brewers who placed their individually wrapped bottles randomly in a sea of popcorn or crumpled newspaper. First I had to dig through the box to find all the solid objects, then unwrap each one. Not only does this disturb the beer via the movement involved, but I almost missed some of the bottles because they were so well disguised as packing material! Almost no one indicated on the outside of the box how many items were inside. This is



very important and helpful, especially if you have more than one entry in the package.

These hard-to-get-at beers make a lot of extra work for the people at the receiving end. They delay the job by making it very strenuous, time consuming, and therefore frustrating. And, as the level of frustration rises, the care given to the task at hand tends to erode away. Sorry to say, but we are only human! When we get tired, we get careless. In spite of this, I'm happy to report that none of the breakage was caused by any of the Bay Area volunteers, myself included.

What seemed to work the best were the boxes that provided a separate compartment for each bottle. Often it was a wine box with the dividers intact. Newspaper or foam was stuffed into the bottom of each compartment to a depth of about 3 inches. Then the bottles were placed and secured with more stuffing material around the neck. Generally the compartments bordering the outside of the box were not used for bottles, but were filled with stuffing. These boxes are easy to open and empty and give plenty of protection.

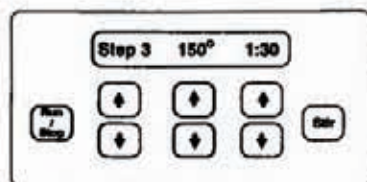
Using a six-pack holder also works; however, it is best to put only three bottles in each holder. Place the three bottles in the alternate holes so the risk of glass contacting glass is reduced. Fill the unused holes with a wad of newspaper. Also, bag each six-pack in plastic or paper to make sure the bottles stay in the holder. Pack the holder in a box that leaves at least 2 inches of space in all directions for

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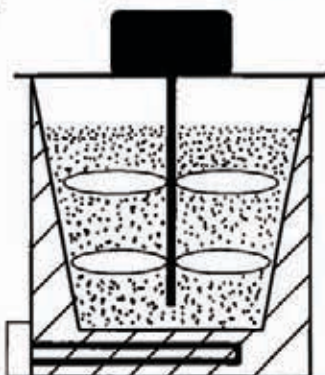
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packing material. Combining a six-pack holder with a box made of Styrofoam works quite well. Check your local hospital or blood bank for boxes used to ship lab samples and blood supplies that must be kept cold.

Another system that works well is the "box in a box" method. The beer is packaged securely in a box that is just a bit larger than the bottles it contains (perhaps a 12-pack box from Anchor or Henry Weinhard's) with a layer of newspaper or foam sheets stuffed between the necks of the bottles. This box is then packaged inside another box that is large enough to create about a two-inch space all around the first box. This space is filled with shock-absorbing material to prevent anything from penetrating the outer box and reaching the inner one should mishandling occur. This method requires that two independent layers of cardboard be broken before the beer is actually exposed. And it does manage to keep multiple entries gathered together in one tidy spot.

Several brewers sent their entries packed in tubes. I used to think this was a good way to go—they're easy to pack, very sturdy and make a nice package. However, I found that the tubes are very hard to unpack, especially if long enough to accommodate three bottles. Forget the tubes, unless you incorporate them into a larger box and simply use them as dividers.

As for packing materials (outside the environmental issues) keep in mind how difficult it can be to keep those Styrofoam things contained. If you can, bag the popcorn first, then use it like a pillow and stuff it around the beer in the box. Crumpled newspaper is much easier to control and it is much more biodegradable. Several brewers used vermiculite, that stuff you mix with potting soil to improve drainage. Boy, were they nasty boxes! I suppose I should be happy that no one thought to use spent grains as insulation—oops, forget I mentioned that idea!

When it comes time to secure the box it is not necessary to use all of the tape on the roll! Use just enough to keep the box closed and the edges sealed. A little added support across the bottom of the package doesn't hurt, but don't wrap the entire box in tape.

Here are the high points:

- If you feel you must wrap each bottle, use a material that can be torn away, allowing the bottle to be slipped out without rolling.

Padded paper or foam sheets are available from most moving and storage companies or packaging stores.

- Use dividers to keep the bottles



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apart. Cushion the bottles at the bottom and immobilize them with packing material around the neck and top.

- Leave about 2 inches around the perimeter of the box in all directions for cushioning material.
- When using Styrofoam chips or popcorn, bag them first and then pack the "pillows" to keep the stuffing under control.
- Don't use cardboard tubes except

as dividers inside boxes.

- Don't overtape the box.
- Indicate on the outside of the box how many "items" are contained inside. You don't have to be explicit, just say "contains three pieces."
- Rubber-band the entry form to the bottle with the brewer's name facing out.
- If several different brewers' entries are sent in one box, be sure

detailed information is included to identify each entry. Also, if the entry fees are paid for with a single check, be very clear on how the payment is to be divided.

- Don't place paperwork just below the top flaps of the box, on top of the packing material. All too often this results in a shredded check or entry form, as we knife through the box to open it. Put the paperwork in a plastic bag, wrap it around a bottle, and secure it with a rubber band.
- Be sure to *clearly* print the destination address as well as your return address on the box in waterproof ink. Then even if a bottle does break and make the paperwork inside unreadable, at least you are identified on the box.
- Of course, always mark the box to indicate which end is "up" and that the contents are "fragile."

I realize that I have not hit upon every point here. These are simply the ones that came to mind as I worked through the boxes in June. For more pointers talk with other experienced brewers, especially those who have entered some distant competitions. And, if you have any unique suggestions, let them be known!

Russ Wigglesworth is editor of the *San Andreas Prost*, newsletter of the San Andreas Malts in San Francisco.

