

How the Tesla CyberCab Crashed Its Own Launch in Just 5 Minutes

They survived a Cybertruck crash. A death inferno came after.

Story by Faiz Siddiqui, Artur Galocha

Following the Tesla Cybertruck his friends had climbed into late one night around Thanksgiving last year, Matthew Riordan spotted a fire blazing in the distance.

The Cybertruck had crashed into a tree and wedged itself against a retaining wall, trapping his friends inside the burning car. He rushed to pull them from a growing blaze — one that would soon engulf the cabin.

Navigating 10-foot flames, he arrived at the truck. But the bulletproof door, opened electronically by a **hidden push button**, wouldn't budge.

The back passenger door also stayed shut when he tried its **push button**. "Just did not work," Riordan recalled in a deposition collected in litigation over the crash.

Riordan began to panic. He had watched a video of a steel ball shattering the **window** of a Cybertruck, which is built with "armor glass" and designed to be "tough on the outside." He picked up a tree branch and pummeled the window with roughly a dozen blows.

The Cybertruck's window soon broke, but three people inside died before they could be rescued. They had died of fire-related causes, including smoke inhalation and "thermal injuries," according to autopsy and fire reports.

The details of the 2024 crash in Piedmont, California, come from documents collected in wrongful death lawsuits filed by the families of 20-year-old Jack Nelson and 19-year-old Krysta Tsukahara, two of the passengers. The case joins a rising number of suits alleging that Tesla's futuristic features have introduced risks and led to injuries, including fatal ones.

Related video: How the Tesla CyberCab Crashed Its Own Launch in Just 5 Minutes (Moon)

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On the 22nd of June, a small fleet of the



Tesla's vehicles have long featured flush-mounted, electronically powered door handles — a unique design for aerodynamic gain. These sleek components have drawn scrutiny, including from federal safety investigators, for potentially complicating escape in an emergency.

The Cybertruck pushes the design philosophy to a new extreme. It's built with what Tesla CEO Elon Musk has [called](#) the "finest in apocalypse protection technology," including "shatter-resistant" glass panels and a rugged stainless steel shell. The next-generation features, aimed at protecting drivers from the outside world, have heightened concerns among vehicle safety experts about the hazards of Tesla's cars.

Tesla has touted the Cybertruck's exoskeleton as capable of withstanding high-impact blows without deforming. These body panels make the "truck tough on the outside to keep you safe on the inside," Tesla [says](#) on its website. Its windows are made from "armor glass," according to a company webpage titled "Throw Anything at It." More than 60,000 Cybertrucks have been [produced](#) since the model, which typically costs upward of \$80,000, was released in 2023.

A Washington Post review found at least a dozen cases since 2019 in which Tesla drivers, passengers or first responders were unable to immediately access or exit the vehicles in life-threatening situations. Two of the cases involve deaths in Cybertrucks.

In several instances, passengers who survived the initial impact of a severe crash were trapped inside as fire spread through the Tesla after the interior buttons ceased to function. Manual latches can open the doors if the buttons fail, but the steps — detailed in Tesla’s owner’s manuals — are not always obvious. Meanwhile, the Cybertruck’s rugged exterior — which is built to both withstand exterior blows and [contain blasts](#) from the inside — has in some cases factored into rescue efforts by first responders, according to documents reviewed by The Post.

A couple in Wisconsin died in November 2024 after a Tesla Model S [erupted](#) in flames following a [crash](#) and the electronically powered doors wouldn’t open, a lawsuit alleges. Months earlier, a man in Texas burned to death in a Cybertruck when he was trapped inside it, another lawsuit alleges.

They survived a Cybertruck crash. An inferno led to a race against time.

Electric vehicle fires can burn longer and more intensely than other blazes, because the concentrated energy in lithium-ion batteries can ignite in a chain reaction, [according to](#) experts.

Tesla didn’t respond to a detailed request for comment about these events and the risks of its cars, but it denied responsibility in the Piedmont incident in a legal filing this month. It argued the Cybertruck met appropriate safety standards, while the vehicle was misused and potentially not properly maintained.

“Any duty on the part of Tesla to warn ... of the risks and dangers of utilizing the product in question, if any such duty existed, was satisfied through the information and warnings provided with the product,” the company said in a filing. “No additional or alternate warnings would have, or could have, prevented the alleged incident.”

Tesla has touted the trucks’ apparent impenetrability as a selling point. It has said the Cybertruck’s stainless steel exteriors can resist a range of impacts, from items such as shopping carts to weapons, without scratching or denting. “You can empty the drum magazine of a Tommy Gun and still not penetrate the Cybertruck,” Musk said in an October 2023 post on X.

Tesla's vehicles have historically earned top marks on crash safety tests, and Cybertrucks built after April were [named](#) a 2025 Top Safety Pick Plus, the highest designation awarded by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

According to the crash report, the Piedmont car's driver, 19-year-old Soren Dixon, had consumed drugs and alcohol, which the California Highway Patrol determined had contributed to the wreck.

Attorneys say their case doesn't center on the crash itself. They allege the occupants died because they couldn't escape after being trapped by the Cybertruck's steel doors and thick shatter-resistant glass.

Photos show pry marks on the Cybertruck door, where firefighters tried to access the cabin. That effort was abandoned once it became clear that the operation was no longer a rescue.

They survived a Cybertruck crash. An inferno led to a race against time.© City of Piedmont

Phil Koopman, a professor emeritus at Carnegie Mellon University who has spent decades studying automotive safety, said the inability to escape or access a Cybertruck after a crash is a "disastrous" design failure.

"It is more obvious how to get out of a trunk than it is the back seat of a Tesla after a crash," he said, noting that U.S. automotive [regulations require](#) trunks to feature a lit release latch or similar system. Teslas [feature](#) an illuminated mechanical trunk release.

In a deposition, Riordan said the minutes he spent trying to open the stuck doors cost crucial time that could have saved the lives of his friends. After breaking the front window, he pulled his best friend — the lone survivor of the crash — from the wreckage. Then he turned to the back-seat passengers.

"The only thing I remember her saying is: help," Riordan recalled of his friend Tsukahara. He tried to pull her out of the front window and then broke the back window. But the flames drove him from the car. She died in the blaze.

Later at the scene, Riordan explained to his rescued friend that the three other occupants were dead.

Koopman said multiple features can cause a chain of problems that prevent riders from leaving a Cybertruck after it crashes. When power fails, the doors won't always open easily from the inside, and it's difficult to open them from the outside, and the windows don't easily break. If all else fails, the doors can't be swiftly pried open.

"If you can't break the glass, the next thing you try and do is you try and pry the door open," Koopman said. "By the way, this is tank-grade stainless steel."

"They had four chances to make it easy to get outside of a car during a crash, and they got all four wrong," he said.

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Ross Gerber, a Tesla investor who owns a Cybertruck, said he has wondered what might happen in a similar catastrophe. Passengers frequently struggle to open the doors to his pickup, he said, raising questions about how a first responder might access it.

"The windows are super thick," he said. "It's a steel door. The power's out. How would they get me out?"

In 2019, Tesla CEO Elon Musk examines a Cybertruck after a demonstration testing the strength of its "armor glass."© Ringo H.W. Chiu/AP

When a Tesla loses power, lawsuits allege, the electronic door switches can cease to function. In a [podcast](#) interview with Bloomberg this year, Tesla's chief designer, Franz von Holzhausen, said the company is working on deploying a design that combines electronic and manual functions, so the same door mechanism still works if power is lost.

"The idea of combining the electronic button and the manual one together into one button I think makes a lot of sense," he said.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration opened [an investigation](#) this year into nine reports of doors being unable to open on Tesla Model Y vehicles. Bloomberg has reported on more than 140 consumer complaints involving Tesla doors dating back to 2018.

The lawsuits in the Piedmont case cite design decisions, including the reliance on lithium-ion batteries that could ignite, “electronic and power-dependent door release mechanisms,” and incorporating “‘armor glass’ and reinforced body panels that, while marketed as protective, made it extraordinarily difficult or impossible for occupants to break a window from inside or for rescuers to execute forced entry from outside in an emergency.”

“These design choices created a highly foreseeable risk that rear-seat occupants who survived a crash would nevertheless remain trapped when the vehicle caught fire,” the Tsukahara lawsuit reads. Both lawsuits in the Piedmont crash note that the backup mechanisms for opening the doors — though explained in the owner’s manual — were unlabeled and thus unlikely to be known by passengers.

Attorneys said Tesla’s process in arriving at its design decisions — including whether the company conducted appropriate risk analysis — are likely to come into question as the cases unfold.

Von Holzhausen said on the Bloomberg podcast that the company has planned a redesign that would make getting out of the vehicles second nature.

“The muscle memory of reaching for something every day is there,” he said. “And so you intuitively just grab the same thing, and you’re free.”

The Cybertruck’s front doors can be opened by **pushing a button**, if there is power, or via a **manual latch**, in case the vehicle’s power system fails.

Earlier this year, Tesla owners [noticed](#) that certain models had been shipped with a **warning icon** on that manual door latch. For those whose models lack an icon, the manner of opening the doors in an emergency is not immediately obvious.

In a power failure, the rear doors in these models must generally be opened via a pull cord, concealed under a **piece of lining** in the storage compartment that must first be lifted. Without a warning label, users would typically learn of the **cord’s location** only via the owner’s manual or instructional videos online.

Some Tesla models — such as those [made in Shanghai](#) beginning in February — also display a **warning icon** showing where to find the rear-door emergency pull cords.

“When you have a car that you specifically market as being almost invulnerable,” attorney Merick Lewin, managing partner of personal injury law firm Good Guys Law, said in an interview, “bulletproof glass, [a] ball and hammer ... when you’re marketing that, obviously something that should come to mind is: How does a rescuer get in in the event of a crash?”

The Piedmont crash is the second known instance of a fatal Cybertruck crash in which, attorneys allege, the vehicle’s electronically powered doors left a person trapped. In the other case, in Texas, the man who died had owned his Cybertruck for less than four months, and it was unlikely he knew how to get out, an attorney for his family said.

That driver, Michael Sheehan, was killed in August 2024 after crashing his truck into a concrete culvert, causing the vehicle to go up in flames. Sheehan, who had been served “a dangerous amount of alcohol prior to ... operating a motor vehicle,” a lawsuit alleges, survived the impact of the crash but was unable “to escape the burning truck.”

“Michael Sheehan was trapped inside the vehicle,” the lawsuit filed by family members reads. “He burned to death at 5000 [degrees Fahrenheit] — a fire so hot his bones experienced thermal fracture.”

The attorney in that case, S. Scott West, argued the Cybertruck’s design created an impossible situation.

“If you survive the initial impact, which he did, you die of the fire,” he said, noting the gruesome manner in which Sheehan died. “It’s just horrific.”

Tesla denied the complaints in the lawsuit brought by Sheehan’s family members and sought to move the case from Harris County District Court, citing a purchase agreement that required disputes to be decided by an arbitrator.

Tesla has for years faced complaints, including for product liability and wrongful death, over its Autopilot driver-assistance system. The company often seeks to dismiss such cases to arbitration or settle out of court. But this year, after a long history of [avoiding trial](#) in such cases, a jury [found](#) Tesla partially liable in one Autopilot case and responsible for \$243 million in damages. Tesla said the verdict was “wrong” and later appealed, [CNBC reported](#).

The Piedmont Fire Department report on the blaze says Tesla engineers investigated the fire but were unable to determine the cause; authorities, too, could not determine why the Cybertruck caught fire, it said.

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Lewin said the Autopilot cases present a stark contrast to the questions about Tesla’s doors and other features.

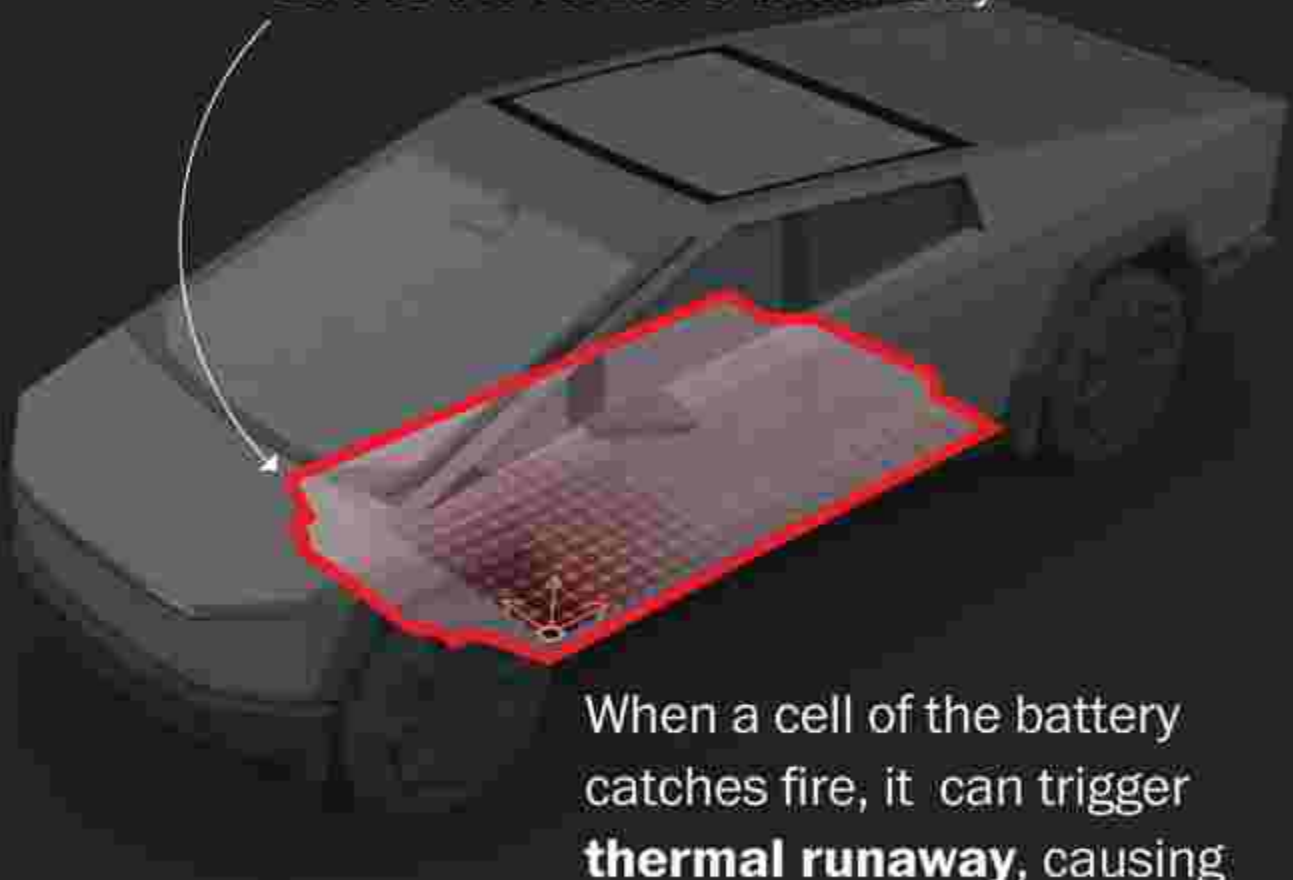
“What’s really interesting about these cases with the electric doors is it’s not cutting-edge technology at all,” he said. “These seem like stylistic choices. ‘We’re going to have a flush handle, an electronic handle.’”

Attorney Matthew Davis, who represents Nelson’s family in the Piedmont case, laid out his argument simply: “They survived the crash. They should be able to get out.”

About this story

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A **high-voltage battery** stretches across the vehicle's underbody



When a cell of the battery catches fire, it can trigger **thermal runaway**, causing heat to build uncontrollably and spread to neighboring cells.



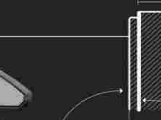
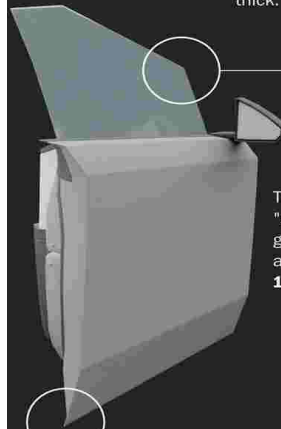
The Cybertruck glass consists of three elements bonded together in a sandwich configuration.



In patent materials for its "armor glass" specific to its windshields, Tesla describes a "multilayer glass stack" that comprises outer and inner layers bonded to an adhesive.

(57) **ABSTRACT**
A multilayer glass stack for a vehicle windshield with improved durability is described. The multilayer glass stack includes an external-facing glass layer, an internal-facing glass layer, and an adhesive interlayer positioned between the external-facing and internal-facing glass layers. The external-facing glass layer may include borosilicate and/or does not include soda lime glass. Methods of manufacturing the multilayer glass stack are also described.

The outer layer, it says, is up to **5 millimeters** thick.



The inner layer, including "chemically strengthened glass with high strength and flexibility," is up to **1.1 millimeters** thick.

The adhesive completing the sandwich, meanwhile, has "energy absorptive properties."

≈ 7 mm



Tesla, meanwhile, touts its **stainless steel exteriors** as seven times stronger than typical steel used for exteriors. Patent materials describe it as up to **4 millimeters** thick.

