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## Jury Awards \$45 Million to Boy Paralyzed in Minivan Accident

By John Ryan

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CHATSWORTH — A Chatsworth jury slammed the Ford Motor Co. and a trucking company with a \$45 million verdict Tuesday in a case brought by a 12-year-old whose lawyers said he was paralyzed by a defective seat belt.

The boy, Johan Karlsson, was injured in a car accident seven years ago in a 1996 Ford Windstar minivan.

"I am looking for 12 pieces of marble to begin building statues in honor of this jury because that's what they deserve," Thomas Girardi, Johan's lawyer, said Tuesday. "They spent a great deal of time trying to do the right thing, looking at every document and taking their time. And they did do the right thing."

Ford's lawyers have denied that the Windstar's seat belt caused Johan's injuries.

The jury awarded Johan \$30.5 million in compensatory damages. Ford is responsible for \$15 million of that amount, and Trans Continental Transport, which was involved in the accident, is responsible for the balance, said Ford attorney Frank Kelly of San Francisco's Shook, Hardy & Bacon.

The jurors also hit Ford with \$15 million in punitive damages.

Trans Continental Transport settled with the Karlssons before trial and will not pay any additional money.

"They found the trucking company to be primarily at fault in the accident," Kelly said Tuesday.

Kelly added that, once the judgment is entered, "we will pursue post-trial and appellate remedies."

In trial, Ford lawyers blamed Johan's injuries on trucking company Trans Continental Transport and its employee, Michael Savage. A roll of steel tumbled off

Savage's truck after it hit another truck on Interstate 5. Johan Karlsson's spinal cord was broken, and he suffered other massive internal injuries when the family minivan crashed into the 29,000-pound roll.

Ford lawyers, led by Kelly, also argued that Johan was not wearing his seat belt properly at the time of the crash, which was "extreme" in its severity.

But Girardi criticized this argument as factually inaccurate and as a distasteful attempt to blame Johan's mother, who testified to securing the belts of her children before the accident.

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**Thomas Girardi,**  
Plaintiffs' attorney

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Girardi's team repeatedly pointed out at trial that six other family members in the minivan did not sustain major injuries. They had been wearing three-point seat belts, with straps across the belt and shoulder. However, the rear center seat, where Johan was sitting, only had a lap belt.

Ford's own safety tests and other industry reports had revealed the dangers of lap-only belts decades before Johan's 1996 accident, Girardi's team argued. Ford attorneys tried to portray such arguments as misleading by referring to several reports pointing to the effectiveness of lap belts.

Kelly's team also said that the Windstar had high safety ratings.

"Ford and all of its employees are sympathetic to the tragedy caused by the

truck driver falling asleep," Kelly said Tuesday. "The evidence [at trial] did confirm the position that Ford had taken all along that lap belts are safe and effective when worn properly."

Jurors began deliberating Oct. 1, following a four-week trial.

"I think the jury came to the conclusion that there's a huge difference if your product failed and you didn't know it could happen," Girardi said Tuesday. "Ford's tests proved that its product could hurt little kids, and they went ahead and built it anyway."

Before the trial began, Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Howard Schwab hit Ford with sanctions for violating court discovery orders. Jury instructions included a court finding that Ford tried to hide evidence during the case. Another instruction read to the jury was that the lap belt did not adequately protect Johan and that Ford had failed to provide warning of this danger.

Girardi of Girardi & Keese said Tuesday that the sanctions point to bad behavior on Ford's part but probably had little impact on the case. He felt his side clearly proved in trial that the lap belt failed to protect his client. He also said that showing the jury in detail how Ford attempted to conceal evidence would have been powerful.

The amount of Tuesday's verdict came as some surprise to Girardi because Chatsworth juries tend to be conservative. He said the \$45 million award is important because it sends Ford a message and will help the Karlssons care for Johan.

"If I'm a mom or dad, I'm just as sad as I was two weeks ago because money is irrelevant," Girardi said. "On the other hand, it's good for mom and dad to know that, if we're not here, there's plenty of money to take care of our little boy."