

The New York Times

**The Lede**

The New York Times News Blog

---

MARCH 18, 2009, 10:35 AM

## Richardson's Accident Reignites Ski Helmet Debate

By LIZ ROBBINS

**Update | March 20** The Associated Press [reports on Friday](#) that: “Quebec is considering making helmets mandatory on ski slopes following the death of actress Natasha Richardson and after doctors tried to persuade the province’s sports minister to do it.”

**Update | 9:05 p.m. Eastern** – Natasha Richardson died on Wednesday, according to a statement issued by her family. Our full report is [here](#).

**Original post:** Whatever it was that [befell Natasha Richardson](#) on the beginner slopes of the Mont Tremblant ski resort in Quebec on Monday — so far, about all we know is that she had a fall and later had to be hospitalized — the incident has once again ignited an [industry debate](#) about skiing safety, and specifically about helmets, the kind of debate celebrity mishaps seem to inspire.

It has been a little more than 11 years since [Michael L. Kennedy and Sonny Bono died](#) in separate but eerily similar accidents: each was skiing without a helmet, and each crashed into a tree at high speed. Mr. Kennedy was reportedly playing a dangerous game of ski-football, while Mr. Bono was skiing off-trail.

Ms. Richardson, by contrast, was on a beginner slope taking a lesson — but she was not wearing a helmet, either, according to a spokeswoman for Mont Tremblant. The fall seemed to be a minor one, and she was not only conscious afterward, but talking and joking. It was only an hour later, when she complained of severe head pain, that she was rushed to a local hospital, transferred to one in Montreal for a higher level of care, and then airlifted to Lenox Hill Hospital in New York.

Though a confusion of unconfirmed reports were [swirling in the news media](#) about how grave her condition was — several, including [The Gazette](#) in Montreal and [The New York Post](#), say she was profoundly and irreversibly brain-injured — no specifics had been officially released by Wednesday morning either about her condition or its cause; the fall on the ski slope on Tuesday might have simply aggravated a previous injury, or even have nothing to do with it at all.

Even so, people are already wondering whether the effects of the fall might have been mitigated if Ms. Richardson had been wearing a helmet.

Helmets, once rarely seen on recreational skiers, are becoming increasingly popular.

According to the National Ski Areas Association, [43 percent of all skiers and snowboarders surveyed in the United States wore helmets](#) in the 2007-2008 season. That is up from 25 percent in 2002-2003, the association says.

Even so, the rate of accidental deaths on the slopes — there were 53 recorded last season, 44 from skiing accidents and 9 from snowboarding — has not changed much.

“The situation is sort of mixed,” said Jasper Shealy, a professor emeritus at Rochester Institute of Technology who has been tracking skiing and snowboard fatalities since the 1970s. “We’re now at the point where roughly half the population wears a helmet, and we’ve seen no difference” in fatalities.

But helmets do seem to make a difference in the head-injury statistics: Mr. Shealy’s own research found a 35 percent reduction, and he said that other studies had found as much as a 50 percent reduction in head injuries.

“Typically, in the scenario that results in death, you need something more than a helmet to save you,” Mr. Shealy said. Referring to helmet-wearing, he said, “Where it really comes into play is if you fall into hard-packed snow, and that can turn a serious head injury into a minor injury.”

Helmets have been shown to protect the heads of recreational skiers traveling at a rate of 12 to 17 miles an hour, but typically not at higher speeds. Professional skiers and snowboarders, who surpass those speeds, are required to wear more sophisticated helmets.

Mr. Shealy’s research has shown that for those wearing a helmet, “the chance that the primary cause of death will be a head injury is going down.” But even if the pattern has changed, he said, the outcome has not.

The debate about helmets raged in Europe recently, after a prominent German politician, Dieter Althaus, was [charged with negligent manslaughter](#) and [convicted](#) after colliding with a woman on the slopes in Austria on New Year’s Day. The woman who was killed — Beata Christandl, 41, a mother of four from Slovakia who lived in the United States — was not wearing a helmet, but Mr. Althaus was; he spent days in a coma but awoke again. Since then, ski helmets have [soared in popularity](#) in Germany and Austria.

Ski resorts in the United States do not require people to wear helmets, although at Aspen Mountain, since 2003, children 12 and under who participate in ski school have been required to wear them. At Vail, children 14 and under who participate in the ski school are strongly recommended to wear helmets, and must decline their use in writing. According to the ski resort association, the vast majority of children 9 and under wear helmets.

“If people are entrusting their children to our care, we want to ensure that they are protected as best they can be,” said Jeff Hanle, spokesman for the Aspen Skiing Company, which operates the area’s resorts. Concerning the age requirement, he said: “Kids who grow up skiing with a helmet tend to continue to wear it. As far as mandating

it for adults, they have their own informed opinion on the matter, they can make up their mind.”

The most common arguments against helmets is that can be cumbersome and restrict vision, and that they give wearers a false sense of security, perhaps encouraging more reckless behavior.

“I’d be surprised if it didn’t lead to that,” Mr. Shealy said. “But that’s not a sufficient reason not to wear one.”

Troy Hawks, the spokesman for the National Ski Area Association, said it had adopted this policy: “We highly recommend that folks wear helmets,” he said, “but our position is that people should ski and snowboard as if they are not wearing one.”