Should helmets be mandatory for skiing?

Posted by mkitch March 25, 2009 06:56AM

Natasha Richardson was buried Sunday after a ski accident at Mont Tremblant last week. Helmet mania. I know, I know. You don't want to hear about another mandatory helmet law. The very idea is vaguely annoying. I get it.

So let's not talk about "mandatory" quite yet. Let's just talk about what should be standard equipment when skiing -- namely, a helmet. All over Oregon, that conversation is happening, in the wake of actress Natasha Richardson's death last week. She hit her head while taking a lesson on a bunny slope in Quebec.

The industry is evolving in the direction of helmet use, mostly because of speed, a factor that had nothing to do with Richardson's accident. A helmet cannot remove all danger, obviously, or offer complete protection even against head trauma.

However, a recent survey by the National Ski Area Association showed that 43 percent of U.S. skiers and snowboarders now wear helmets, up from 40 percent a year ago. (That contrasts with 25 percent during the 2002-03 season.)

Richardson reportedly declined to rent a helmet. But that makes sense. Helmets aren't required, and she wasn't hot-dogging it. Why would she think she needed one? If helmets were standardized -- or even, yes, compulsory, as the Association of Quebec Emergency Room Doctors has urged -- Richardson would have strapped on a helmet, without thinking, even on a bunny slope. The main power of a rule is often to reinforce a virtuous circle. As e. e. cummings put, "ignorance toboggans into know." People start doing things because that's the way people do things.

The research is ambiguous, as the New York Times recently pointed out on its blog:

"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: 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," 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."

I admit, I'm not an expert. I've never gone downhill skiing, only cross-country, so at first, I figured I was probably overreacting. Then I started talking to my friends, Dave and Becky Klug, who ski all the time. (Dave is a hotdog on the slopes, and Becky is a hotdog-in-training.) They set me straight: Yes, everybody should wear helmets.

In the United States, 44 ski accidents resulted in death last year. In Austria, 30 people have already died in this ski season (mainly from excessive speed) and, the Austrian Committee on Traffic Safety has estimated that 5,500 skiers will suffer serious injuries on the slopes this season. That has led some in the Austrian skiing federation to call for compulsory helmets.

The National Ski Area Association urges skiers and boarders "to wear a helmet, but to ski or ride as if they are not wearing a helmet." Which is sensible advice. Just as my Subaru's all-wheel-drive gives me a false sense of security and can induce me to drive faster than I should on icy roads, a helmet can give a skier a false sense of security, too.

But it can also protect a head, and a life.

And I wonder if it could have saved Natasha Richardson.

Categories: Health

Comments

taxed says...

More from the nanny (ninny) staters. Amerika land of the highly regulated and home of the wusses.

Posted on 03/25/09 at 7:21AM

JLundegaard says...

I started wearing a helmet while skiing about 7 or 8 years ago. I found was that it was warmer than any hat I'd ever worn skiing. An added bonus. I love my helmet.

I have a daughter who skis and I require her to wear a helmet. She is 6 and being her father, I have the obligation to keep her safe.

However, the state is not my father. I can't support a law requiring helmets. There are far too many
unnecessary invasions of our personal decision making already. How many people a year die on ski slopes? Not enough to warrant this undermining of personal responsibility.

Sometime, we just need to figure these things out on our own. My friends and I skied for decades w/o helmets. Many of my friends still ski w/o one. This should bother no one.

Posted on 03/25/09 at 8:24AM

haroldb says...

Helmets are fine, but should not be mandatory. No science proves they prevent head injuries (they help, but cannot prevent them), science says no helmet CAN prevent TBI over 20 mph (see www.ski-injury.com for the facts), and science, not doctor nor any other so called expert opinion, proves helmets have but negligible effects against TBI at best under 20 mph. No one should remotely think they are immune form injury of any kind with a helmet.

Objectively, helmets can protect the scalp and skull in many cases, but not brain in all but the most benign cases, and even these, as the Richardson case suggested, are not definitive. There is no study to prove the calculus to known what injuries the brain can and cannot absorb so long as one wears a ski helmet. Therefore there is no compelling case for mandatory helmets based on science. I have skied and raced for over 40 years without a helmet in the worst of blue ice and snow conditions completely serious injury free. While some of this was good luck, 99% was due to cumulative experience, judgment and ability. I do not oppose helmets. I oppose simple thinking about them, which leads to unprovable judgments at the risk of personal freedom to choose, to which helmet wearing should remain subject on the facts, at least for adults.

Posted on 03/25/09 at 10:12AM

dtroutma says...

I was on National Ski Patrol for over 20 years. I started wearing a helmet around 12-15 years ago. As Lundegaard notes, it is warmer, and comfortable; especially on a day when I took a dump that could well have resulted in traumatic brain injury, and I wasn't really "hot dogging" at the time, just caught an edge at speed.

It isn't just the "deaths", but traumatic brain injury, which we often saw, that helmets can prevent. These injuries might be minor, or crippling, or like Ms. Richardson - fatal. Helmets conclusively ARE safety devices that prevent or lessen injury, and all skiers should be "smart" enough to wear them. A snowboarder without a helmet is even MORE vulnerable to serious head injury.(being strapped to the board and physics increase potential for head contact and brain thrust inside the skull, causing damage)

While my son was saved injury or death by a helmet when he went down at over 130 mph racing a motorcycle, it is important to realize that even LOW SPEED accidents on a ski hill CAN effect a
dynamic for serious injury to the brain.

I too question making helmets legally mandatory. People should have the right to be stupid in light of current evidence and available statistics. At least on a ski hill, their actions are less likely to hurt others than themselves, or drastically alter other people's insurance rates, as is the case with motorcycle helmets.

Helmets are comfortable, warm, and just might save YOUR life as a skier or snowboarder, I highly recommend them!

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Posted on 03/25/09 at 10:23AM

dttoutma says...

Harold, a well designed helmet significantly reduces brain impacts, not just danger of penetrating injuries, even at low speed. From the very report from Scotland you cite:

So, to conclude, I am a helmet wearer and recommend others to wear one too. There is good evidence to indicate that a helmet will protect you against many of the common injuries that the head is
susceptible too when on the slopes. They are especially important for children, who run a higher generic risk of snow sport injury. Helmets seem to have their most protective effect in incidents involving low speed impacts (below 15 mph) and for falls leading to blows to the head on the snow surface.

Using a helmet reduced the risk of sustaining a head injury by 60% (Odds ratio 0.40, 95% confidence interval 0.3-0.55 for the statisticians amongst you!). They also found a trend towards a lower incidence of neck injuries amongst those wearing a helmet.

In fact, scientific study has indicated that helmets do have a role to play in falls onto a hard snow surface - here they can convert a potentially serious injury into a minor one.

Posted on 03/25/09 at 10:55AM

ruan1965 says...

Helmets should not be mandatory, but I myself would wear one. That would be my Choice. We don't need more laws restricting peoples freedoms. Logically, it would be wise to wear a helmet when doing anything that might be deemed risky, but that should be left up to the individual to decide.

Posted on 03/25/09 at 12:16PM

dmbones says...

well said, ru/dell....

Posted on 03/25/09 at 1:45PM

exiled1 says...

Not necessarily for skiing. I could see mandatory helmets for liberals though. You know the cute little ones with the holes in them.

Posted on 03/25/09 at 4:27PM

orydude says...

Yeah, well. Natasha Richardson might have been saved by a helmet. She also might have been vegetableized or made into one of the "walking dead." No one knows. No one ever will.

You makes your bets and you takes your chances.

Helmets, optional, thanks.

Posted on 03/25/09 at 5:27PM
SnowProducer says...

Think about this: Every skateboard park requires pads and a helmet. Why should the ski resorts? It's just as dangerous. This helmet/no helmet debate is good for the ski and snowboard industries regardless. My outlook is that as Gen Y grows up, helmets will become the norm/fad/standard on the slopes. Younger people already wear helmets, and more and more (myself included) will begin wearing helmets as time goes on. OnTheSnow.com has a great article on the helmet issue here: http://www.onthesnow.com/news/6/a/6482/death-of-actress-fuels-helmet-debate

Posted on 03/27/09 at 3:28PM
Footer