

Helmets

By Danica Yates

Throughout the sporting industry, helmets are becoming more widely used and more acceptably 'cool.' The equine industry has seen a rise in safety standards and regulation. ASTM International/SEI certified helmets are now required for some competitions. At home however, what percentage of riders religiously wear helmets and what percentage of professionals really find it 'cool' to wear their helmet?

We have all heard statistics on how dangerous horse riding is: you are 20 times more likely to have an accident on a horse than a motorcycleⁱ. Studies show that horseback riding is more dangerous than motorbikes, skiing, and football.ⁱⁱ However, when we are out in the backyard riding old Chipper, it is easy to forget the dangers involved with the hobby we choose to pursue. Perhaps the most common reason that riders feel comfortable climbing aboard their trusty old steed without their helmet on, is that in all their years of riding (or sometimes *lack* of years), they have never had a serious head injury. A recently-turned-legal young adult who curled her nose up and asked me, 'do we *have* to wear a helmet' I told her, it depends on who you ask-- the number of days spent in a hospital bed dictates the amount of conviction in that person's "yes."

It is easy to forget that not only young, green or spoiled horses are dangerous, even with 'safe' horses you can get in dangerous situations, and not only rookie riders but experienced riders alike take falls. Dr. Rob Mulloy, a clinical assistant professor of surgery in University of Calgary Faculty of Medicine, and a Calgary Health Region trauma surgeon says, "Previous studies assumed that major accidents on horseback were caused by rookie riders on untrained horses or bad weather – something we now know is simply not true. While 64% of the riders we interviewed believe their accident was preventable, only 9% were wearing helmets. That tells us we need to focus our efforts on experienced horsemen and women, reminding them to respect their training, and embrace the safety equipment that saves livesⁱⁱⁱ."

A helmet to me does not indicate that the rider is a 'wimp' or overly cautious, but that the rider understands risk and strives to minimize that risk. When I drive in a car I wear my seatbelt, when I ski, mountaineer, rock climb or ride horses, I wear a helmet. The amateur, experienced or not, who wears a helmet, shows that they acknowledge the inherent risk in riding. Further, people who acknowledge and accept the risk usually choose to play an active role in their horse's training. Rather than calling their trainer over to get on the horse when he needs to be schooled, with correct instruction, they work through it themselves learning and perhaps gaining more in the end.

Head injuries comprise about 18 percent of all horseback riding injuries, and they are the number one reason for hospital admissions and the leading cause of death^{iv}. Olympic dressage rider Courtney King Dye suffered a skull fracture head injury on March 3rd riding a dressage horse who tripped and fell. Courtney remained in a coma in the hospital for multiple weeks. On April 7th she started saying a vague 'hi' in her speech therapy sessions^v. Courtney clearly is not a rookie. She was not wearing a helmet. When I was 14 years old I was training myself independently during the winters and taking clinics when I could. At a clinic, a friend's horse was rearing. I told her to get off, I would deal with it. The horse kept standing up. A trainer on the side of the ring told me to not 'let him get away with that,' and 'reach back and smack him.' So when he reared again, I reached back and pulled him over backwards. The fall knocked me out, then the horse kicked me in the head as he scrambled up. I remained unconscious for only 5 hours and in intensive care for only 2 days. Thanks to my mom, I was wearing a helmet.



For amateur and professional riders alike who wear helmets, minimizing risk is more important than image.

Steps are being taken to encourage riders to use headgear. The US Pony Club has been a leader in safety standards. Mandating helmet use lowered member head injury rate by 29 percent^{vi}. The jumping industry is ahead of dressage in helmet usage. In 2005, the United States Equestrian Federation made it compulsory for participants in horse jumping competitions to wear a protective helmet that meets or exceeds ASTM International/SEI standards^{vii}. Approved helmets are now commonly being seen in the dressage ring at the lower levels, but there are no rules mandating helmet usage. Further, it is not uncommon for dressage riders, especially professionals, to wear headgear in competition or photo shoots but not use helmets at home.

Drusilla Malavase, safety chair for the New York State Horse Council says, “Unfortunately, there are many traditional competitors who have taken the requirement as a personal affront along with complaints that helmets are ugly, hot, heavy and don’t fit^{viii}. I think perhaps the main reason that professionals in particular choose not to wear helmets, is image. Traditions change and safety has evolved in all sports. Skis did not used to have safety bindings, cars originally did not have seat belts. To me it is important to not be a poser in the sport of dressage who cares more about style than performance. It does not matter in the least what type of shirt you are wearing, how expensive your horse show stall decorations are or what is strapped to your head. Let your riding and training speak for itself.

Danica Yates is a sporthorse trainer in the Portland, Oregon area. FEI and European experience, four years private training with Olympian Debbie McDonald. Training, lessons and board are available. Call (503)278-1112 or visit www.danicayates.com for more information.

ⁱ http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/yorkslincs/series11/week9_horse_riding.shtml

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ucalgary.ca/news/september2007/horseback>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ucalgary.ca/news/september2007/horseback>

^{iv} http://www.neurosurgerytoday.org/what/patient_e/sports.asp

^v <http://www.courtneykingdressage.com/4436.html>

^{vi} http://www.emsaonline.net/helmet_safety.html

^{vii} http://www.astm.org/SNEWS/JULY_2006/spotlight_jul06.html .

^{viii} http://www.astm.org/SNEWS/JULY_2006/spotlight_jul06.html