



Helmets top off sports gear - More skiers, snowboarders playing it safe

Republican-American (Waterbury, CT) - Saturday, January 9, 2010
Author: BY RICK HARRISON; REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

John Baden bundled up his 5-year-old daughter at Mount Southington Ski Area Thursday - puffy parka, ski boots, gloves. Before hitting the hill, he secured a pink helmet with cartoon decals to her head.

"She's already been saved a couple of times," said Baden, a 38-year-old Plantsville resident, of the protective plastic. "They definitely help."

Although no legislation mandates helmets on U.S. slopes, their use has boomed over recent years as more skiers and snowboarders have accepted the comfort and sleekness of new models while gaining awareness of the risks of head injuries.

"It's a little bit of monkey-see, monkey-do," said Troy Hawks, spokesman for the National Ski Areas Association. "Other folks who haven't traditionally worn helmets are thinking this is something they should do."

According to the association, about half of skiers and riders nationwide wore helmets last year, up from 25 percent six years ago. In the Northeast, including New York and Connecticut, helmet usage is close to 59 percent. Sales of ski helmets have jumped 43 percent in the last two years alone, with models ranging from \$50 to \$200 or more, complete with venting systems, multiple shells and wireless audio systems.

"There are a lot more sizes and model varieties," Hawks said. "Technologies have come a long way. They are a little more comfortable. And they have removable ear flaps so they are more comfortable in warmer conditions."

Ski helmets received a boost in publicity following the death of actress Natasha Richardson, who died last year after suffering a head injury during a ski lesson. Singer Sonny Bono and Michael Kennedy, son of Robert F. Kennedy, died in ski slope collisions while not wearing helmets. Over each of the past 10 years, an average of 39 people have died each year on U.S. ski slopes, according to the NSAA.

Studies show helmets can reduce the incidence of head injuries from anywhere between 30 and 70 percent. But Jasper Shealy, a researcher with the Rochester Institute of Technology, concludes the reductions are limited to cuts, bumps and mild concussions rather than more serious fractures or severe concussions. Fatalities have not decreased even as helmet use has increased, he argues.

In a 2005 study, Shealy concluded the average speed of helmet users - 28.4 mph - was significantly greater than for those not using a helmet, who rode at an average of 25.4 mph.

But Robert Williams, a pediatric anesthesiologist at Vermont Children's Hospital who helps lead a helmet advocacy campaign, believes Shealy is thinking like an engineer and not like a doctor.

"What drives (the medical field) wild is someone talking about a minor head injury," Williams said. "There is no such thing as a minor head injury."

Williams said other research has disproved arguments that helmets give people false security and encourage them to go faster or lead to more neck injuries. He hoped that a continued focus on head injuries - including those suffered by NFL players - will help underscore the importance of protecting against an often-misunderstood risk.

"Concussions really are a big deal," he said. "When someone hits their head, there's not a lot of blood or broken bones. But they can be very difficult to heal and have long-lasting consequences."

At Mount Southington, general manager Ed Beckley said equipment rentals do not include helmets because many aren't designed for more than one big impact and it is difficult to ensure that a dinged helmet will offer the protection it was designed to deliver. The store does sell helmets, though, and he encourages their use.

At the Woodbury Ski Area, Rossignol ski helmets are available to rent, and signs around the lodge read, "Helmets Are Highly Recommended."

But for people like Angela Cellucca, a 25-year-old Stamford resident who tubed down the Woodbury trails Thursday, helmets are an unnecessary precaution, particularly on small local mountains.

"It's kind of hard to fall on my head," she said. "I don't try to do anything out of my ability."

Chris Soucy, a 26-year-old Bristol resident snowboarding at Mount Southington Thursday, said a helmet might have saved his life after he blew a trick nine years ago. But on Thursday, he only wore a soft cap on his head.

"Now I have my balance," he said. "I know how to fall."

Walt Behuniak, a 60-year-old ski patrolman at Mount Southington, wears his helmet for both safety and comfort.

"I started to wear it just to set a good example," he said. "But once I started wearing it, I loved it. Now I feel funny skiing without a helmet."