



Local ski areas promote helmet use

By **Bruce Edwards** STAFF WRITER

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Killington and other Vermont ski areas are getting the word out that helmets for skiers and snowboarders are cool. Next week marks National Safety Awareness Week (Jan. 16-22) and ski areas around the state are going all-out to promote the use of helmets and safe skiing and snowboarding on the slopes. It wasn't too long ago that many skiers and snowboarders shunned the use of helmets, but that attitude has changed dramatically through the years.

"From my personal vantage point, I've seen a lot more people wearing helmets at both Killington and Pico over the years," Killington Resort spokesman Tom Horrocks said Tuesday. Horrocks, who began wearing a helmet 10 years ago, also said helmets shouldn't give someone a false sense of security. "A helmet is just another safety precaution, just like airbags and seat belts are in a vehicle," he said. He said skiers and riders still need to stay in control and use common sense on the slopes.

A study by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission concluded that nearly 8,000 head injuries a year could be prevented if all skiers and snowboarders wore helmets. In a statement last month announcing a partnership with the National Ski Patrol, **Dr. Robert Williams, a pediatric anesthesiologist at Vermont Children's Hospital at Fletcher Allen Health Care**, said helmets should be regarded as a critical piece of equipment.

"In the past several years, the medical literature has made it very clear that helmets are effective in reducing the chance of a head injury while skiing or snowboarding," said Williams, who founded PHAT, the Protect Head at All Times program. "They certainly won't prevent all head injuries, but the time has come for all skiers and riders to wear a helmet every time they hit the slopes."

Some ski areas around the country require children enrolled in their ski schools to wear helmets while others require their employees to don a helmet. Vermont ski areas embrace the PHAT or Lids on Kids programs that promote helmet awareness. But no resorts mandate helmet use for skiers of any age, Parker Riehle, president of the Vermont Ski Areas Association, said Tuesday. Riehle said education rather than legislating or mandating helmet use is a more effective approach.

"If you just mandate it, as often is the case, people don't know the shortcomings and benefits associated with wearing a helmet," he said. "They would naturally assume, 'OK, I'm wearing a helmet, I'm complying, therefore I'm all set, I can ski as fast as I want to.'" Riehle said mandating helmet use also creates a problem of enforcement and potential liability for the resorts.

To encourage more skiers and riders to wear helmets, Killington and Pico are offering a free mid-week lift ticket for every helmet purchased at one of the resort's ski shops. Okemo Mountain Resort in Ludlow is offering a similar promotion. Anyone who buys a new ski or snowboard helmet at Okemo's Snowsports Shop will receive a coupon for 50 percent off a full-day lift ticket, or 50 percent off a full-day equipment rental or high-performance demo, or 50 percent off a group lesson or adult clinic. Also Okemo is donating \$10 from each helmet purchase to the PHAT program. Okemo, Killington and other resorts are also holding events throughout the week to

educate skiers and snowboarders on helmet use and safety on the slopes.

Killington is handing out Know the Code and Smart Style stickers for skiers and snowboarders.

The Protect Head at All Time program (www.fletcherallen.org/phat) has concentrated its efforts on helmet use in Vermont. For example, at Smuggler's Notch Resort helmet use was approximately twice the national average for the 2007-08 season.

The importance of helmet use was highlighted last year with the death of actress Natasha Richardson on the slopes of Mont Tremblant in Canada. Richardson was not wearing a helmet when she fell while skiing on a beginner's trail at the Quebec resort.

This season, a helmeted snowboarder died last month at Killington. Horrocks said the man died of trauma to the body after hitting an object.

There were no fatalities last season at the state's ski areas, Riehle of the VSAA said.

According to the National Ski Areas Association, during the past 10 years, an average of 40 people died each year skiing or snowboarding. During the 2008-09 season, 39 fatalities occurred out of the 57.4 million skier/snowboarder visits during the season. Among the fatalities, eight were reported as wearing a helmet. The rate of fatality equals 0.68 per million skier/snowboarder visits.

An NSAA study found:

Helmet usage by skiers and snowboarders nationwide has increased over the past several seasons with a 12 percent increase last season to 48 percent. During the 2002-03 season, only 25 percent wore helmets.

77 percent of children 9 years old or younger wear ski helmets.

66 percent of children between 10 and 14 wear ski helmets.

63 percent of adults over age 65 wear ski helmets.

Helmet use by skiers and boarders between 18 and 24 is 32 percent, a 78 percent increase in use since the 2002-03 season, when only 18 percent wore helmets.

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