

Vail Resorts Puts Emphatic Lid On Helmet Debate - 'The Right Example,' Says Garnsey

By Roger Leo
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Vail Resorts' decision to require its 6,500 employees at five areas to wear helmets next season came as the result of several years of discussion and thought. It was not, as the timing might suggest, a spur-of-the-moment move prompted by the death of actress Natasha Richardson following a beginners slope fall in Quebec.

"The decision is one that we've been contemplating for quite some time," said John Garnsey, co-president of Vail Resorts' Mountain Division and chief operating officer of [Beaver Creek Resort](#). "We had a pilot program this year, where all of the Executive Committee committed to wearing helmets on a full-time basis. This was like the next step."

Garnsey, like many skiers and riders, did not wear a helmet before this season. Now, he says, he probably wouldn't ski without one - even absent Vail's new rule.

"Our goal is to be proactive. We're very committed to safety for employees and guests, and having helmets as part of the uniform, it sets the right example," Garnsey said.

"We believe helmets contribute to safety," Garnsey told *The Industry Report*. "Statistically, skiing is no more dangerous now than 30 years ago. This decision is an evolution. It's no different from the cycling industry, where 10, 15 years ago people didn't wear helmets, and now you hardly see anyone without a helmet. Is it more dangerous now? No, it's evolutionary."

He spoke of the evolution of ski equipment from bear-traps to safety bindings, from long thongs and safety straps to ski brakes.

"This is a step in the evolution of our sport. There have been numerous studies, and most people feel that in certain cases if you have a helmet, you'll be better off than if you didn't. People use the argument that if you hit a tree at 30 mph, a helmet wouldn't help. I'd agree, but people can receive a concussion from a simple fall and a concussion's no fun," Garnsey said.

"We just feel it's as much about messaging as about anything else. Having it part of employees' uniforms, it's a good example. That's why we did it, and we think it's time, it's inevitable, like with cycling, more and more people wear helmets and feel comfortable wearing them.

"I didn't wear a helmet. I did wear one racing, but not free skiing. Wearing one this season as part of the Executive Committee program was fine, a non-issue. They're actually warm when it's cold. One of my concerns was is it going to be too hot in the springtime? The particular helmet I chose, the ear flaps come off, and it was fine. Actually, once you wear it I don't know if I'd ski without one," Garnsey said.

He said the decision was not universally welcomed, and generated pushback from some employees.

"The Ski Patrol is one group that has concerns. Certainly our position relative to the Ski Patrol won't be black and white. If by trying to put into play a safety initiative, we create a safety issue, they won't have to wear one. In avalanche rescues, hearing is an issue. We won't make foolish decisions. We'll never put employees at risk. If they're doing 'avi' work, and find they can't communicate as well with a helmet on, they won't have to wear one," Garnsey said.

"Again, we as a company just feel it's the right thing to do. We're not anticipating or expecting the industry to all jump on to this right away. But by us being the first to do this, we'll learn a lot of lessons, which we'll share, and if the industry decides they want to follow, we'll have a pretty good case study for them to look at," he said.

Vail Resorts, which owns and operates Beaver Creek, [Vail](#), [Breckenridge](#), and [Keystone](#) in Colorado and [Heavenly](#) in California, will provide the helmets for its employees.

The company also will require all children, ages 12 and under, to wear a helmet while taking a group lesson through one of its resorts' ski and ride schools. A helmet will become a required part of any ski and snowboard rental package for children 12 and under at all of the company's retail and rental outlets, unless a parent or legal guardian signs a waiver declining use of the helmet.

"Vail Resorts is trying to send a message. It's the same message we've all got, which is, 'Put on a helmet, it's a smart idea,'" Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association, told *The IR*. Berry predicted helmet use will continue to grow.

"It's going to go where it's been going since the first helmet was worn by the first person. Tomorrow there will be more helmets than today, and next year more than this year. We're going to make an effort to get as many kids under the age of 15 or so helmeted as we can. We'd like to see that population definitely helmeted, and every adult to make an informed decision about wearing one," Berry said.

Tim White, executive director of the National Ski Patrol, told us, "One should wear a helmet, but ski responsibly at all times.

"Patrollers are role models on the hill," he said. "They can do a great deal to promote safety. Helmets are just one aspect of that, and whether a patroller has a helmet on or not is a personal choice. We're seeing a growing number of patrollers wearing helmets. There's an old guard out there who believe it's a personal choice and, while acknowledging it might be a good idea, choose not to wear them. Younger patrollers are wearing them in greater numbers. It's somewhat based on demographics, experience, views of safety. We're encouraging our patrollers to wear a helmet and be a good role model, but again, it's an issue of personal choice."

The National Ski Patrol Web site is being redesigned, and will reflect growing helmet use. Where no current images show helmets, new images will, White said.

"We need to continue to promote their use, but let people know there are limitations. To do one without the other doesn't tell the whole story and could even lead to disaster if someone thinks a helmet is going to provide protection for high-speed skiing," he said.

"We need to get this upcoming generation in helmets, and their kids in helmets, and in 10 years from now this will be a moot point because we'll saturate the slopes with helmets," White said.

Numbers support this view of the future. Studies for NSAA show that 43 percent of all skiers and riders are wearing helmets, compared with 25 percent during 2002-03. The percentage goes up as age goes down, with 60 percent of skiers and riders age 10 to 14 wearing helmets, and 70 percent age 9 and under.

At some resorts, such as [Smugglers' Notch](#) in Vermont, persistent and persuasive education programs have led to overwhelming helmet use. Dr. Robert Williams, who works with the Smugglers' Ski Patrol, tracks helmet use there at 70 percent across the board.

Williams and colleagues promote helmet use through PHAT - Protect Your Head at All Times/on All Terrain.

"Helmets are a good thing," Williams said. "They're not a license to ride irresponsibly, but an extra measure of protection whose time has come."

White said the National Ski Patrol plans to work with Williams as it rolls out more information about helmet safety.

"We're very excited about Dr. Williams. He has a totally appropriate and non-coercive approach. I think you'll see in the coming months as we work with NSAA and the industry to continue our efforts to promote helmet use, PHAT will become more of a program we'll support," White said.

What It Means: Vail Resorts has taken the first major step toward universal helmet use on North American slopes, bypassing the rugged individualism of skiers and riders by applying a carefully crafted rule to employees only. The Richardson death spurred a great deal of media coverage on the benefits of helmet use. Vail Resorts' action was not reactionary, but may be the beginning of an industry move in what certainly appears to be the right direction.

Editor's Note: OnTheSnow.com Equipment Editor Allen Smith contributed to this article.