

» GEORGE KOCH

IMAGE TO COME



# HELMETS:

Free choice or social obligation?

**A** ski helmet first went onto my head way back in 2000, when helmets were just this side of exotica. So why does the hectoring of helmet zealots for mandatory universal usage bother me so much? There's a triplet of reasons. First off, it fails the utility test—helmets aren't needed by all skiers under all circumstances. Indeed, they can be counterproductive. Second, free choice and personal responsibility should trump the transformation of misguided sanctimony into unneeded regulation. And third, arguments that lean on emotion, fanaticism and moralistic ideology generally run in inverse proportion to their inherent logic and factual substance.

Ski Canada has never gone out of its way

to flout helmet use, let alone denounce it. Nor does the magazine urge taking needless risks. In fact, other magazines make fun of us for not running enough photos of microdots plummeting in freefall alongside cliff faces. Yet this isn't good enough for some readers who think we should be a social vehicle to help force everyone to wear helmets. Over the years we have run letters in SC from readers who have complained that the magazine falls short in failing to actively manipulate readers into helmets. One reader cited "photo after photo of skiers not wearing helmets." Her letter ran above two ads, one of an adult skiing in a tuque, the other of two kids—both of whom were wearing helmets. She urged people to be "mindful" of helmets. Fair

enough. My brain is sometimes encased in a helmet. Is that mindful enough?

Another reader went much farther. As a ski patroller, he found it "disappointing" that SC runs photos of skiers without helmets. He called our occasional true-to-life shots of the terrain park "irresponsible." He intoned, "As a ski patroller, I've seen things you could never imagine..."

At this point a lot of adjectives come to mind. The statement is patronizing—claiming a special moral perch by virtue of belonging to a special class. It reveals the essential arrogance of our culture's ubiquitous safety totalitarians. First off, how can this reader know what we've seen, or can imagine? Before I'd even finished journalism school I watched an elderly woman, her head staved in by a rock, die in a ditch in Ontario. What I was shown in the Bosnia-Croatia war back in the '90s likely exceeds even a Canadian ski hill's weekend carnage. But so what? I don't throw this around to bully my way through an argument. Okay, just this once.

He further claimed we have a "social obligation" to "make skiers understand the importance of helmet use." But the term "social obligation" has no actual meaning. It's a mere concoction, a dressed-up way of saying, "This is what I want." It has roughly the equivalent logic to my claiming that this reader has a "social obligation" to carry me down the stairs of the après-ski bar dead drunk, or that the Lake Louise trail crew has a "social obligation" to tune my skis because they didn't mark every rock.

He concludes: "...you guys need to start promoting helmet use in your magazine more seriously." In fact, no we don't. As law-abiding citizens, we have a general duty not to counsel people to break the law. We

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shouldn’t extol driving drunk from the ski hill, or urge people to steal medical supplies from the patrol shack. We also have a civil duty to avoid defaming individuals. But beyond that, we operate under our society’s centuries-old tradition of free expression, which latterly was enshrined in writing in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Any media outlet’s main ethical duty is simple: the truth.

My informal (but repeated) lift-line surveys at Lake Louise last season suggested that about 25 per cent, perhaps 30 per cent of skiers wear helmets. It could certainly be more at some areas, like Ontario’s private clubs or at Whistler, where some express their gnarliness through the display of safety chic. But it’s certainly much lower in Europe. Even our Ski Canada testers, who spend their lives on skis, rarely wear helmets—only five out of a roster of 28. Depicting 100 per cent of our photographed skiers in helmets would distort reality—like Photoshopping out lift lines or adding powder to bare slopes. This would defraud and mislead Ski Canada’s readers. In one stroke we’d be serving the political goals of a particular skiing faction and be telling a falsehood about what goes on at ski areas. We prefer objective reality. This has bothered many over the ages who want to remake disappointingly flawed humankind in their image. But we’re not the servants of an agenda.

Look, helmets can be useful kit. But they’re not a political statement signalling one’s commitment to “safety”—like some moral litmus test. They’re morally neutral. They’re a tool. They’re useful in some specific situations, like preventing lacerations and lessening the degree of low-impact concussions (plus protecting fragile items in your luggage while travelling!). But they’re superfluous in others. Standards, if they exist, are inherently low, so they don’t work as well as proponents hope in preventing serious head injuries.

Some perspective is needed. Not only

do they not always work, only someone pathologically afraid of the slightest risk would argue they’re an absolute must in every skiing situation. Few would disagree that I don’t need an avalanche transceiver, crampons or headlamp to ski groomed runs. If it were literally true that I was taking an insane risk skiing bare-headed on gentle open powder slopes, then what would I need to descend offset couloirs through cliffs: a bubble-wrap body suit, parachute and jet-pack? Donning a helmet can’t be precisely sufficient in both cases: it’s either overkill in one case, or not enough in the other.

Plenty of patrollers ski without helmets. And so what? That’s their free choice, even though some vollies are decidedly shaky on the steeps, while the pros occupationally expose themselves to hazards far beyond those encountered by everyday skiers.

This ambiguity isn’t just created by selective anecdotes. The medical professionals themselves can’t agree. There’ve been duelling-banjos-type arguments in other magazines in which well-qualified MDs and other medical specialists hurl contradictory statistics back and forth. The interesting thing is, the stats are from the same studies, showing that a common set of facts can generate wildly different conclusions. In one such recent item Dr. Rick Bortz of Colorado mentioned that head injuries were the cause of death in 14 of 16 fatalities cited in one study of 1,214 skiing injuries over a 16-year period. Sounds scary. But of course the study ignored the dozens killed every year in avalanche accidents.

And as duellist Dr. Todd Yerman of Vancouver pointed out, trauma-induced skiing fatalities are statistically rare. Mathematically, helmet use isn’t adding much of a safety margin. Even more curious was that recorded serious head injuries went up in the period since helmets came into general use. There simply isn’t a firm, let alone linear, relationship between helmet use and injury reduction. Certainly, it’s not a firm basis

for all-helmet-all-the-time rules—nor for hounding those who remain skeptical.

Usually about this point the safety-zealot, badly losing the argument over facts and statistics, comes back with the “even one life” argument. Something like, “Okay, helmets may not be absolutely necessary every time your four-year-old pedals his tricycle down the walk of your fenced backyard. But if helmets save even one life, they’re worth it.” Few claims encapsulate this much ignorance in such a short statement.

For one, this ignores the most basic principles of economics. Let’s say over the past five years one-million Canadian skiers each spent \$100 on a skiing helmet. One-hundred-million dollars applied to virtually any other problem would save many more lives. Cancer research, better roads (one stretch of road near Banff suffered nearly 10 fatalities before it was twinned, and zero in the decade thereafter), four real snow tires on half-a-million vehicles, paid guides and safety gear for all those who got killed stumbling around unequipped in the backcountry—take your pick.

It’s true our society is immensely wealthy by any historical standard. But still at any given moment our overall stock of wealth is finite. That reflects scarcity—literally Hour 1 of any introductory economics course. And by definition, anytime you spend \$100 million on something, you implicitly decide against spending \$100 million on innumerable other things. That’s called the opportunity cost. The money lavished on skiing helmets has been largely wasted if the actual goal is to save lives and not merely prance around accoutred in safety chic.

There’s also the law of unintended consequences. Everyone I know who’s gone helmet admits they instantly skied faster. Two years ago a friend cartwheeled horrifically at 100 kph, snapping his femur. He could easily have bled to death from that injury—but good thing he had a helmet on! When I venture out in a tuque, I know I dial back my speed. Other times I hanker for my helmet. It’s about personal judgment. Head injuries can be nasty and tragic. But there are far greater risks in life and in skiing. And nobler causes than berating magazines for publishing photos of actual skiers skiing. ❧

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