



ONTARIO EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION

Ontario Equestrian Federation *WHOA!, October 2005*

Forced to Choose Success over Safety

If you believe in stereotypes, English riders wear helmets and Western riders wear cowboy hats. Although this stereotype has begun to fade and many Western riders now choose to wear safety helmets, the Western world remains steeped in years of tradition and a stigma against wearing helmets still exists, even for juniors. Statistics prove that requiring riders to wear safety helmets reduces the number of severe head injuries and yet riders still feel pressured to wear a western hat over a helmet in order to “fit in” with their peers or to be successful in the competition ring.

The passing of Bill 12, The Horse Riding Safety Act, in 2001 has drastically improved the number of junior riders using helmets as the Bill requires all riders under 18 years of age to wear an approved safety helmet at commercial riding establishments and while riding on roadways. Although Bill 12 addresses the mandatory use of helmets for juniors during riding lessons, training sessions, public trail riding and while riding on the road, the Bill, unfortunately, does not apply to riders participating in competitions.

The statistics on head injuries while horseback riding are alarming and should be a “wake-up call” to parents, coaches, trainers, competition organizers, insurance companies and equestrian governing bodies. Athletes involved in horseback riding are hospitalized due to severe head injuries more often than those involved in hockey, football, boxing and soccer. Although there are factors that may increase the risk of falling off such as a green horse, slippery footing or bareback riding, it is the height from where the rider falls, that jeopardizes head trauma. A fall from 2 feet (60 cm) can cause permanent brain damage and a horse elevates a rider to 8 feet (3 metres) or more above the ground. A human skull can be shattered by an impact of only 7-10 kph while horses can gallop at speeds up to 65 kph. Riders age 10-14 are most likely to be involved in an accident with a horse. According to research conducted by the American Medical Equestrian Association (AMEA), the most common reason among riders for hospitalization and equestrian-related deaths are head injuries. In addition, HorseQuest.com and Horse Canada recently published that horseback riding has a higher serious injury rate than motorcycle riding. While a motorcyclist can expect to suffer a serious injury every 7,000 hours of riding, a horseback rider can expect to suffer a serious injury every 350 hours of riding. These numbers do not lie and prove that horseback riding is a leading cause of head injuries.

Although you may be a highly skilled driver and own the safest car on the road, do you not still have to wear a seatbelt? Regardless of experience, training, or the character of a horse, there is no guarantee of safety. Accidents happen and riders can fall at any time, at any speed, on any horse and while riding in any type of saddle. So why are so many riders still not wearing helmets? While most of the rules that govern Western competition in Ontario allow for the use of helmets in the ring, very few enforce it and the competitors still feel that they must wear a cowboy hat in order to be placed by the judge, especially in rail classes.

The Ontario Equestrian Federation (OEF) contacted a variety of stakeholders in the Western riding industry in Ontario and came across a general feeling of support for the use of helmets. Although, in order to institute major changes surrounding helmet use, the professionals including coaches, trainers, judges and competition organizers must begin to “walk the walk”, not just “talk the talk”. The OEF



ONTARIO EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION

recognizes that it is easier to 'talk than walk' and to 'buck' tradition poses a challenge. The OEF will be working with helmet manufacturers to improve the design, comfort and fit of safety helmets so that they will be more readily accepted by all riders – young, old, English, Western, or otherwise. The negative attitudes surrounding helmets for Western riders have been created by social stereotypes and a sense of tradition and do not necessarily reflect the rules that govern the sport.

The OEF sanctions all recognized competitions in Ontario under the auspices of Equine Canada. Although Equine Canada's General Regulations state that all junior competitors must wear an approved safety helmet while mounted on the competition grounds, discipline specific rules can supercede the General Regulations. According to the 2004 Rules of Equine Canada, Section F, Equitation, General Performance, Hack, Reining and Western, Article F1502 states, "(Western) exhibitors must wear appropriate western attire including a shirt with long sleeves and a collar, western hat and cowboy boots. Any competitor may wear protective headgear in any division or class without penalty from the judge".

OEF President, avid rider and past Olympic Equestrian Team Member, Allan Ehrlick, has always strongly supported helmet use, but the issue was truly brought home after his own helmet saved him from major head trauma earlier in 2005. "I strongly encourage everyone to wear an approved helmet every time they ride!"

Al Patterson, President of Equine Canada, stated, "I find it very unsettling in this day and age when other sports and recreational activities such as bicycling, hockey and motorcycling have made it mandatory for participants to wear certified head protection, that riders will spend whatever necessary to protect their horses from injury, yet it takes a fall to give our 'head a shake' in order for us to do the same for ourselves. I would encourage all equestrian organizations and clubs to take the steps necessary to begin to change their rules to reflect mandatory safety helmet use for juniors and amateurs. As adults, we should make safety helmets part of our everyday riding apparel so we set a good example. As a Western rider with decades of experience, I too have recently added a certified safety helmet to my riding equipment."

Many saddle clubs, whose purpose is to introduce new riders to competition, now insist that junior riders wear helmets in all classes. In addition to promoting safety, this policy helps the saddle clubs obtain lower insurance rates. At the very least, most clubs require juniors to wear helmets during the gaming or speed event classes such as barrel racing, pole bending, etc. where they feel the young riders are most at risk. Recently, at the Ontario Saddle Club Youth Team Tournament in Paris, ON, junior riders were forced to make a decision about whether or not to wear their helmet in the rail classes even though most of them are required to wear a helmet at home and at their own saddle club shows. Sadly one parent stated that, "Ten minutes before the walk-jog/trot class, an individual came up to my 10 year-old daughter and told her that she would be disqualified if she participated in western tack/attire in this class with the helmet on." Although her mother was able to clarify that wearing the helmet was legal, the young girl was made to feel that she would have to start wearing a cowboy hat in the ring if she ever expected to place well at higher competitions. "It is time to put away the Western tack and focus on English instead, where I believe riders are competing on a level playing field."

The Ontario Quarter Horse Association (OQHA) competitions are governed by the rules of the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA). The AQHA Handbook of rules states, "It is optional that an exhibitor may wear a hard hat with harness in all classes; however, it is mandatory that all youth and



ONTARIO EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION

recommended that amateurs wear an ASTM/SEI approved hard hat with harness in all over fence classes. It is mandatory that all exhibitors wear a hard hat in all over fence classes and when schooling over fences.” When asked for their official statement regarding the use of helmets in the Western classes, OQHA representative Valerie Love stated, “You’ll never see helmets in the Pleasure classes, it just won’t happen. I am not a judge, I think that wearing a helmet makes the judge think that the rider is insecure about the safety of the horse they are riding when the purpose is to show that the horse is a ‘pleasure’ to ride – a horse that the judge would feel comfortable putting their 80 year old grandmother on.”

In contradiction to this statement, renowned horsewoman, coach and trainer, Patricia Carter, stated, “Contest riders (barrel racers, etc.) are already wearing helmets in competition. As for the rail classes, it is irrelevant to the judge whether or not an exhibitor is wearing a helmet. It is an exhibitor’s preference to wear a helmet and is a legal decision. An exhibitor is not risking negative judgement by wearing a helmet. I speak for my whole family on this issue.” Pat, the OEF’s Western Coaching Master Course Conductor, is married to Joe Carter, AHQA’s Director of Judges. Mr. Carter became an AQHA judge in 1981 and has since judged shows and hosted educational clinics in nearly two dozen countries across the globe. Pat and Joe’s daughter, Patti, joins her family’s passion as an AQHA Director and Judge.

Gary Yaghdjian, a National Reining Horse Association judge, agreed with the Carters’ view on helmets. “When I judge a class, it does not occur to me whether the competitor is wearing a western hat or a helmet. It is not an issue when I score the pattern.”

The rules of the Ontario Barrel Racing Association, as well as the groups that govern the sport of rodeo in Ontario, reflect that while barrel racing, helmets are acceptable and are mandatory for junior competitors. Ross Millar of the Dodge Rodeo Tour stated, “Right now at least 60% of our Ladies Barrel Racers are wearing helmets and the numbers keep going up. We have not made it a rule, it is just a common sense trend that is taking hold.”

“Helmets are an excellent requirement for youth. They have been a requirement for timed events for some time. It is getting more and more common to see youth wear their helmets in the performance classes. Safety should be the primary focus for our youth, or for all riders for that matter. Liability issues have made it more difficult for recreational and show enthusiasts. Helmet regulations may help ease some of the liability concerns,” stated Louise Harris, President of the Western Horse Association of Ontario.

Mike King of Intercity Insurance Services stated, “Falling off of a Quarter Horse is the same as falling off of a Thoroughbred. It (helmet use for juniors) is the law and most insurance companies will not provide coverage if riders are not wearing helmets. Unfortunately, few facts about injuries ever reach the public as cases are often settled before they hit a courtroom.”

Sadly, the facts are only brought to light by the tragic horseback riding-related deaths in Ontario over the past few years. These include Elizabeth Hader, a 10 year-old girl who was killed when thrown from a horse that spooked at a public trail riding facility. She suffered severe head injuries and York Regional Police confirmed that she was not wearing a helmet. Most recently killed was Patricia Moore. Pat, an experienced barrel racer and rodeo contestant, died from severe head injuries when her horse stumbled and fell to the ground after leaving the ring. Pat was also not wearing a helmet.



ONTARIO EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION

Safety helmets should be ASTM/SEI certified for equestrian use in order to provide the necessary protection. The American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) writes safety standards for products that are risk-related and the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI) ensures that the manufacturers comply with the standards. Certified helmets are put through a number of tests specifically related to horseback riding such as, concussion from certain heights and on sharp edges, temperature, moisture, and more. Other types of helmets, including bike and hockey helmets, are inadequate as they are certified for their specific sport alone.

In conclusion, it is up to the horse industry itself to make the necessary changes surrounding helmet use while horseback riding. Riders should never feel that they must sacrifice wearing a safety helmet in order to be part of the crowd or to be successful in competition. It is not only the Western riding industry that suffers from this helmet issue. Dressage at the Grand Prix level, Saddle Seat, and Costume Classes all cater to not wearing a helmet. Parents, coaches and trainers must start setting the example. Wear an approved safety helmet all the time - your children and clients will follow your lead. Old practices remain intact only because no one challenges tradition. It is up to all of us to help educate a new generation and create a new trend where it is "cool" to wear a helmet and "un-cool" to not wear one.

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