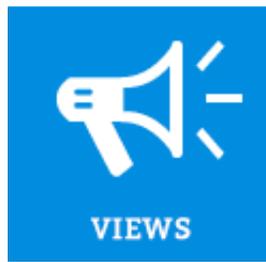


# The Great Helmet Debate – Pros and ‘Cons’ of Bicycle Helmet Use

<https://www.roadbikerider.com/the-great-helmet-debate-pros-and-cons-of-helmet-use/>



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A few weeks ago, we ran a column by **Jim Langley** titled “Why You Should Wear a Helmet.” It chronicled Jim’s last day on the bike without one – in 1982 – and the bad head-first crash that day that left him temporarily paralyzed. He’s had several more crashes since then, landing helmet-first many times. But none of those has resulted in a head injury requiring hospitalization.

Jim’s column sparked a few comments and emails from readers about their own crashes or falls where their helmet helped prevent calamity. One reader, Premium Member Ken Schack, provided his own “testimony” about a shrine he’s built in his bike shed to house all the helmets of friends and riding buddies that have done their job in crashes.

“John, I have a bike shed attached to the side of my house where I keep my bikes and cycling items. Most importantly, the shed is the home of the Helmet Hall of Fame (HHOF).

“A number of years ago a cycling buddy had a bad crash on a ride and was saved by his helmet. A few weeks later at my annual Tour de France party he gave it to me to hang in the bike shed. That was the beginning of the HHOF.

“I now have filled one entire wall with 36 helmets, all of which have hit the ground with the rider’s head inside of them. Each helmet has written on it the rider’s name, and the date and location of the accident.

“At first, people viewed the wall negatively but, in time, they came to realize that

the wall is a positive statement on the effectiveness of helmets. I have no doubt that if they were not wearing helmets, some of those people would be brain-damaged and others would have died. I recently had to have a new wing constructed to hang more helmets on another wall.”

That same week, our reader poll asked: ***Has a Helmet Ever Saved Your Bacon in a Crash?***

The results were overwhelmingly in the affirmative, with 83% of readers voting as follows:

- 32% said, “Sure. Several times.”
- 41% said, “Yes. At least once.”
- 10% said, “I have scraped my helmet on the ground, so probably so.”

And, yet, one email stood out to me more than all the others. It was from a cycling industry colleague, **Tom Petrie**. Tom wrote to offer me the chance to run an article he had written about helmets. But Tom’s piece was not at all like the other comments. His article argued ***against*** wearing a helmet.

I read it carefully and recognized a number of anti-helmet arguments I’ve heard over the years. As someone whose own bacon has been saved by a helmet in a crash (twice), I bristle when I hear such arguments.

But I’m also a fair guy (or like to think I am, anyway), and I believe it’s actually helpful in cases like this to allow the opposite side to have its say.

So I made Tom a deal: I told him I would run his article if he would shorten it a bit and consent to me writing a rebuttal to it, which I promised would be kept to nearly the same word count. I also told Tom I would provide the link to his [full-length article](#), which is posted on his website. **See full article below! (page 3...)**

I told Tom I would do all of this despite the fact that I disagreed with nearly everything he said in his piece. An exception was his citing of studies showing that cycling safety increases as the number of cyclists on the road increases. I

agree, and RBR recently ran a piece on just such a study conducted in Boulder, Colorado.

When it comes to helmets, I want to be absolutely clear: RBR believes in helmets and their usefulness. And we will continue to follow their evolution as a safety tool.

But when it comes to helmets, I want to be absolutely clear: RBR believes in helmets and their usefulness. And we will continue to follow their evolution as a safety tool.

We have a long history of being a proponent of helmets and of helping teach road riders the skills and provide the knowledge and tips to help readers learn to ride as safely as possible. If we do nothing else, I'd be fine being known only as a strong advocate of rider safety. (I certainly hope – and believe – we offer much more than that.)

So, with that introduction in mind, following is Tom's article, **The Case Against Helmets**, and my rebuttal article, **The Case For Helmets**.

As always, we welcome your feedback and comments on the subject, as well.

—John Marsh

## **The Case AGAINST Helmets**

**By Tom Petrie**

A bicycle helmet is the last thing you need. Sure, a bit of polystyrene foam between your head and the pavement at the moment of impact might be nice in the event of a crash, but that's exactly the point – it's your last hope. And it's not nearly the fail-safe protection you'd like to believe it is.

Rather than the first thing you need to keep safe, it should be considered for

what it is – the last line of defense. It plays no active role in keeping you safe. A helmet is only your last hope when all else has failed. And wearing a helmet may even put you at greater risk than not wearing one at all.

In Europe, millions of people ride their bikes every day without helmets. Yet, most Americans seem to believe that “a helmet keeps you safe” and that failure to wear one angers the gods and tempts fate. “Was he wearing a helmet?” is the first question you invariably hear at the news of any bicycle accident, as if not wearing one is a reprehensible act of irresponsibility. “No? Well, then it serves him right!,” as if pain and suffering are the justifiable penalty for not wearing a polystyrene hat. Why does no one ever ask, “Was he wearing ear buds?”

Do you ride with a helmet and ear buds? Think about it. Your standard of safety is so high you’d never consider riding a bike anywhere without first strapping on a helmet, yet you plug-in earbuds because you like to listen to Juicy Lucy when you ride. Earbuds block out ambient noise, which is exactly why it’s so dangerous to wear earbuds when you ride. However much you may enjoy Juicy Lucy when you’re deep in the pain cave, you’re deluding yourself if you think you’re not actively compromising your safety by doing so. A helmet is a last-chance passive defense against the risk of an accident; wearing ear buds actively multiplies that risk.

It’s comforting to believe that wearing a helmet “keeps you safe,” but maybe it makes you less safe. If you ride more aggressively when you’re wearing a helmet because you believe the helmet “keeps you safe,” your faith in that helmet is misplaced and, because of it, wearing a helmet may actually make you less safe. This is called “risk compensation.” Why does nobody ever ask, “Was he descending at the limit of control?”

Try this. Go for a ride wearing a helmet. Then, do the same ride without a helmet. Did you ride more cautiously without the helmet? Is your faith in a helmet so strong that you feel comfortable riding with less caution when you’re

wearing one? You might as well be clutching Dumbo's magic feather.

You may believe that your helmet "keeps you safe," but how much safety does a bicycle helmet truly afford? Risk compensation notwithstanding, how much protection does an 8-ounce piece of polystyrene provide? Sure, a helmet will diminish trauma within a low-velocity range of incidents (although they do a surprisingly poor job of mitigating concussions), but beyond that, people start whistling past the graveyard. Example: you crash head-first at 20 mph into an on-coming truck that's traveling at 40 mph. Your closing speed is 60 mph. Will a bit of sculpted foam make any difference? Sadly, no. But, you reason, accidents like that are rare and, if you ride, it's a risk you accept.

The question is, does risk compensation cause you to ride less cautiously when wearing a helmet and, if so, does that reduced caution outweigh any additional safety a helmet might otherwise afford? Does wearing helmets actually increase the frequency of accidents?

Helmets are a religion that feeds on itself. The message "helmets keep you safe" has been told so many times that many Americans accept it as gospel truth. The dogma, in a nutshell, is this: They make helmets for bicycling because bicycling is dangerous. Since it's dangerous, you should never ride without a helmet. As with any religion, people don't like to have their beliefs challenged. But I will. While it's comforting to believe that wrapping your head in foam will keep you safe, maybe (forgive me) you're burying your head in the sand.

As numerous studies have shown, cycling safety increases as the number of cyclists on the road increases. As more people ride, bicycling becomes a safer option, so more people ride. And then it becomes even safer, so even more people ride. It's a virtuous circle in which every additional cyclist makes the community safer for cycling.

Instead of focusing so myopically on a safety product of limited value, the goal should be doing things that'll get more people on the road riding responsibly.

The problem with helmets is they discourage cycling. The message it sends to potential cyclists is that cycling is so dangerous nobody should ever ride without a helmet. Is this really the message we want to send? If you're not already a cyclist, why would you ever want to take up something so dangerous? Why take the risk? Why not drive instead? What responsible mother would ever allow her child to ride a bike to school when it's such a dangerous activity?

But cycling is not dangerous. And, before 1980, almost nobody even considered wearing a helmet. For decades, millions of American kids rode their bikes to school every day without helmets. And millions of adult Americans rode without helmets. And thousands of amateur and professional racers rode without helmets. Yet there was never any cycling-related head injury crisis. Zero. It wasn't even an issue. It didn't become an issue until there was money to be made selling "safety."

[RELATED ARTICLE Essential Self-Defense Techniques For Cyclists](#)

Rather than focus on the supposed "danger" of cycling and the "need" to protect your head (however low the risk and however limited that protection may be) why not proactively encourage cycling?

Ride like you'd ride without a helmet. Maybe even dare to do it. The best and fastest way to make cycling safer in America is to get more people riding bikes and riding them responsibly. Wrapping yourself in body armor provides less protection than you'd like to believe, especially if your belief is so strong that you take risks you wouldn't otherwise take. Making cycling seem more dangerous than it really is retards growth. And that's why I'm real iffy about the conventional wisdom. Maybe it's not a small price to pay. Maybe it's the reverse.

Think twice about that helmet, and definitely lose the ear buds.

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[www.CantitoeRoad.com](http://www.CantitoeRoad.com), a bicycle parts e-commerce company.

## The Case FOR Helmets

[By John Marsh, Previous Editor & Publisher](#)

Let me just go through some (there's not enough time or space to cover them all) of the anti-helmet arguments and offer what I believe to be a reasoned rebuttal.

**"...most Americans seem to believe that 'a helmet keeps you safe.' ... It plays no active role in keeping you safe. A helmet is only your last hope when all else has failed."**

This line of reasoning begins with an unfounded generalization, and ends with nearly the perfect rationale FOR wearing a helmet.

Let's start with that first claim. I have never known a cyclist who subscribes to the opinion that a helmet alone keeps you safe. Of course it doesn't. A helmet can't prevent the wearer from being hit by a car. A helmet can't prevent the wearer from crashing because of another's negligence (or even his/her own mistake).

There are a million and one ways for a cyclist to fall, crash, or otherwise meet misfortune on a ride. And, like life itself, close to a million of those are out of our control. A helmet is, in fact, our last line of defense. It is insurance – just like wearing a seat belt, or a batting helmet in baseball.

We strap it on just in case. Because life happens – quite often unexpectedly, and quickly. And why **wouldn't** you do what you can to protect yourself when it does? Wearing a helmet is, quite simply, a sensible precaution to take when riding.

**"...wearing a helmet may even put you at greater risk than not wearing one**

**at all. If you ride more aggressively when you're wearing a helmet because you believe the helmet "keeps you safe," your faith in that helmet is misplaced ..."**

Helmet proponents do NOT believe that a helmet alone keeps us safe. Learning the skills and techniques of safe riding, not taking unnecessary risks, ensuring our equipment is in good working order, wearing appropriate and sensible gear, well-maintained roads and infrastructure – **all** of those things, and more, contribute to keeping us safe.

We ride at the level at which we feel capable based on our abilities, our trust in our equipment, the specific conditions, and our trust in those around us. There are numerous factors that come into play in deciding to ride "more aggressively" or not. Ascribing that decision to the singular act of putting on a helmet willfully ignores the myriad other factors involved.

**"In Europe, millions of people ride their bikes every day without helmets. Yet, most Americans seem to believe that 'a helmet keeps you safe' and that failure to wear one angers the gods and tempts fate."**

This argument is based on a false equivalency, and the total lack of consideration of the role of law and culture in cyclists' safety.

The U.S. and Europe are NOT the same when it comes to cycling infrastructure, cycling as an accepted part of the culture, or the laws that govern driver-cyclist interaction on the roads. In fact, they're vastly different. It's disingenuous to compare them as if they're the same.

In Europe, many cities feature vast networks of bike paths, bike lanes, traffic signals for bikes, and the political/social will to expand their infrastructure to make cycling even safer. Projects like the [Hovenring](#) in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, and the [Cykelstangen](#) in Copenhagen, are recent examples of multi-million dollar projects built for that sole purpose.

On top of this vastly better infrastructure and cultural acceptance of cycling is the fact that much of Europe also has “strict liability” laws that, in all but limited cases, assigns liability to the driver of a motorvehicle in the event of an accident between a car and bike. Drivers are taught to fully respect the rights of cyclists on the road, and to be vigilant about keeping an eye out for them.

I’ve driven extensively in Europe, and I can attest that it’s a completely different mindset behind the wheel than what I witness in the U.S., where our weak safe passing laws (18 states still have no specific passing law) are regularly flouted and only ever enforced “after the fact” – that is, after a car has hit a cyclist.

In Copenhagen, where more than 40% of the population commutes to work or school by bike, studies have shown that accident rates drop when cycling infrastructure is added. “A cyclist will now on average cycle 4.4 million kilometers (2.7 million miles) before being involved in a serious accident.” (“Bicycle Account 2010,” City of Copenhagen)

All of this taken together – the infrastructure, cultural acceptance and legal protection – makes cycling in much of Europe safer than in the U.S. So it’s not surprising that “millions of people ride their bikes every day without helmets.” They feel safer because they **are** safer.

***Addendum (May 2016):*** Since writing this in fall 2014, I’ve had the chance to do some city riding in both Belgium and Amsterdam, spending hours on the bike in both places. And while there, I keenly observed helmet use. Here’s my takeaway: Among city riders using a bike as transportation, about the only helmets I saw were on small children riding alone or as passengers. However, I also saw a number of road bike riders in both countries, and **every single one of them was wearing a helmet.**

*To me, this is the perfect argument in favor of helmet use among road riders*

*everywhere. Even in the bedrock cycling countries where the infrastructure, culture and laws provide the best possible environment for safety for cyclists, roadies in those countries still wear a helmet.*

*Oh, and I recently crashed as well, fracturing a clavicle and requiring surgery. And even though my head forcefully hit the road, I suffered zero head trauma – because I was wearing a helmet, which slightly broke apart and shows some serious skid marks from the crash. That impact would have caused serious trauma and shorn away my scalp had my Lazer Z1 MIPS helmet not been on my head.*

*Come to think about it, **that's** the perfect argument for helmet use. Just ask anyone who's ever been wearing one in a crash if they wished they had not been wearing one!*

**“The problem with helmets is they discourage cycling. The message it sends to potential cyclists is that cycling is so dangerous nobody should ever ride without a helmet.”**

Helmets do NOT discourage cycling. The lack of adequate infrastructure discourages cycling. The lack of cultural acceptance discourages cycling. The lack of adequate laws governing driver-cyclist interactions on the roads discourages cycling. Inattentive, distracted and outright hostile driving behavior discourages cycling. And on and on.

Making the helmet a bogeyman is baffling in light of so many real reasons people are discouraged from cycling.

**“...cycling is not dangerous. And, before 1980, almost nobody even considered wearing a helmet.... Yet there was never any cycling-related head injury crisis. Zero. It wasn't even an issue.”**

This brings to mind the seat belt analogy again. Like many of you, I'm sure, I grew up in an era when seat belts – if the car you were in actually had them – were seldom, if ever, used. Was that because traffic accidents and related injuries and

deaths were unheard of? Of course not. It was because public policy and common practice had not yet caught up to reality. Do you know anyone who doesn't wear a seat belt today?

There may not have been "any cycling-related head injury crisis" before 1980, but there absolutely were – and still are – cycling injuries happening all the time. That includes head injuries.

This [CDC report on bicycle-related injuries](#), updated last year, bears that out: "While only 1% of all trips taken in the U.S. are by bicycle, bicyclists face a higher risk of crash-related injury and deaths than occupants of motor vehicles do. In 2010 in the U.S., almost 800 bicyclists were killed, and there were an estimated 515,000 emergency department visits due to bicycle-related injuries.... Adolescents (15-24 years) and adults aged 45 years and older have the highest bicycle death rates. Children (5-14 years), adolescents, and young adults (15-24 years) have the highest rates of nonfatal bicycle-related injuries, accounting for almost 60% of all bicycle-related injuries seen in U.S. emergency departments."

And the CDC's first recommendation to reduce cycling injuries and fatalities: Always wear a helmet! "Bicycle helmets reduce the risk of head and brain injuries in the event of a crash. All bicyclists, regardless of age, can help protect themselves by wearing properly fitted bicycle helmets every time they ride."

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**John Marsh** is the previous editor and publisher of **RBR Newsletter** and **RoadBikeRider.com**. A rider of "less than podium" talent, he sees himself as RBR's Ringmaster, guiding the real talent (RBR's great coaches, contributors and authors) in bringing our readers consistently useful, informative, entertaining info that helps make them better road cyclists. That's what we're all about here —always have been, always will be. Click to read [John's full bio](#).