Why Not Use A Bicycle Helmet for Horseback Riding?

Why would a horseback rider choose a helmet made for another sport, rather than one which was specifically designed for riding and certified to pass the toughest riding helmet standard in the world?

The argument has been made that U. S, bicycle helmets are similar to helmets made to American Society of Testing and Materials (ASTM) Standard F1163 and certified by the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI). On the surface there are many similarities in testing systems and requirements. However, there are some key differences, and an educated consumer needs to consider these carefully.

ASTM/SEI helmets are made in Western and English styles, come in many colors and styles, are cooler than the "item of apparel" black hunt cap, and weigh as little as 10 1/2 ounces. ASTM/SEI helmets cover most of the back of the rider's head, and are required to provide protection for a specific area. Without proper coverage, the helmet does not pass certification testing. "Item of apparel" helmets have liner material only at the top of the head and partly down the side (with as much as two inches of unprotected gap) and comfort foam, which offers no protection, around the sweat band area. In many cases, bicycle helmets currently on the market offer a protection area which only covers the top of the head.

ASTM/SEI riding helmet manufacturers are visited periodically by a quality auditor who makes certain that all certified helmets meet the minimum standards. Only bicycle helmets made to ASTM F1447 have this same requirement, and bicycle helmet manufacturers are not required to have SEI certification by any federation or law,

ASTM/SEI helmets must be covered by liability insurance for as long as the helmet model is in use, even after it has been replaced by a new model. Only SEI certified bicycle helmets must carry similar coverage.

ASTM/SEI helmets are made in several different shapes and a variety of sizes, so that every rider can he properly fitted. Although some models come in a range of Small, Medium and Large, if none of these fits perfectly even with the addition of the sizing pads included with the helmets, the rider still has the option to buy another model helmet for his or her specific head size. Bicycle helmets do not offer this option.

The usual reasons for preferring a bicycle helmet to a riding helmet are:

1. My child already has a bicycle helmet, why should I buy another helmet?
2. Price
3. Price
4. Price

American Medical Equestrian Association; February 1996, Vol. VI, Number 1, http://www.emsaonline.net/Archives/feb96nws.htm

It is true that you buy a bicycle helmet for $11.00 and up in a discount store. Even discounted or on sale one can seldorn find an ASTM/SEI helmet for less than $40.00. So you can save $29.00 or even more by buying the bike helmet. But what have you given up in return?

1. Coverage area is generally not independently certified. Although the three U.S. bicycle standards show specific areas of the head which must he protected, only those made to ASTM F1447 (bicycle) and SEI Certified are tested in an outside laboratory to meet that standard. Not all manufacturers choose to have their products certified.

The Snell Foundation does its own internal certification and testing of helmets made to their standard. Unfortunately there are bicycle helmets on the market which say they pass Snell, but which do not contain an official Snell sticker showing that they have actually met the basic requirements.

Helmets made to the ANSI bicycle standard are all "self-certified." This means that a consumer takes the manufacturer's word that the product meets the standard. Consumer Reports in 1990 checked bicycle helmets, and found that 15% or more of the self-certified helmets met no current U.S. standard.

Because the organizations seriously concerned about riding safety have required in their rules that their members wear SEI certified helmets, all the helmets made to ASTM F1163 (equestrian) standards and sold in the U.S. are SEI Certified to pass all tests required in the standard.

2. Testing with a sharp anvil surface. All three bicycle standards drop test helmets on flat, hemispherical, or curbstone anvils. The equestrian hazard anvil has a deep and sharp design, meant to approximate the angle of a horseshoe or a jump standard edge. Helmet testing for both disciplines does not allow any hazard anvil to make contact with the testing head form.

Which do you think provides a tougher test, a sharp or a rounded or curbstone flattened anvil?

3. Insurance which covers equestrian activity. All three bicycle helmets specify that they are intended for bicycle use ONLY. This disclaimer means that in the case of a defective bicycle helmet used in horseback riding you will probably not be able to sue the manufacturer with any degree of success, since his insurance will not cover a riding activity

4. A design which will be accepted in riding competitions. Certain competitions require the use of particular types of headgear. You will not find bicycle helmets listed in horse competition rulebooks as recommended for riding competitions.

No helmet made can protect a rider from all possible injuries in every possible accident. Most riders capable of making a sensible decision can see the value in buying "state of the art" head protection made for their particular sport, and using it "EVERY TIME ....EVERY RIDE."

Perhaps the best argument to be made for the use of an ASTM/SEI riding helmet is to ask yourself if you, or someone you care about, has an $11.00 head. The choice is yours.

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