

From Raye Lochert Horsemanship 2007
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Wearing Helmets

There are two opinions on helmets. You either wear them or you don't. I, for one, have always worn one....sometimes. This doesn't mean that I think helmets should only be worn sometimes but rather they should be worn all the time - just when nobody is looking.

Last year (2006) I had three separate accidents that changed the way I ride. I ended up in the hospital all three times. Broken ribs, damaged shoulder and a concussion. The last one really woke me up - by knocking me out!

I was riding a 2 year old in the arena for the first time. Because I had ridden him several times before with no incidents, I chose not to warm him up in the round pen. At the last minute, just as a precaution, I put my helmet and vest on. Everything was fine until he spooked and took off bucking down the arena. While in the middle of changing directions I realized my reins were too long. For about 2.8 seconds I was pretty proud of myself thinking I might actually ride this one out. Silly me! At the end of the arena he let out one big kick, stopped abruptly and sent me airborne. When I awoke everything was black and buzzing so staying on the ground a bit made sense. Looking around I could see that during my "nap" the horse had time to move to the other side of the arena, poop, and leave a lot of tracks in the newly dragged sand. Getting up was not easy and the nausea wasn't helping. Pulling the helmet off my head, now the crack in the lower back of the hard plastic made it clear just how violently I had hit the railroad tie that lines the arena. I figure I was out for at least 10 minutes – BUT - I was alive, able to move all my appendages, could see, and walk. I was lucky.

It's pretty clear that if I hadn't worn that helmet on a fluke I wouldn't be here today. So I decided that when riding green horses I would wear one every time as well as a protective vest. That's just fine for when I'm at home and nobody can see me. My ego is still intact and I really don't mind looking "goofy" when I'm alone. Matter of fact, every time I have come off a horse I have been alone.

Today's expos have a new attraction commonly referred to as a "colt starting challenge". You have 2 to 4 hours to start an unbroken (essentially wild) horse and ride it through an obstacle course. Judging is based on the trainer's ability to get the most out of the horse while competing against 2 or more other trainers. The stands fill up at these exciting and educational events and, while not everyone will admit it, there is definitely a bit of the NASCAR "I want to see a wreck" expectation in the air.

When participating in these events I realized that there are a lot of young (and not so young) people in the stands who are going to try and do things the way I do. Even with my years of practice working with horses things still go wrong. Though my reading and reactions are a little faster than most, they are not always as fast as the horse. So this year, right in front of EVERYONE, I started wearing my vest and helmet at these events. It was a tough thing to do! None of my peers did and I was afraid of being considered a coward or sissy. But every time I put that helmet on the response I received from all of you told me it was the right thing to do and LONG overdue. Anymore, it's no big deal – especially when I hear from so many parents how it has affected their kids' attitudes towards safety.

Wearing my helmet saved my life and I'm still around for my wife and kids. Helmets are a good thing and they are becoming more stylish and comfortable to wear. What's hard to erase is the stigma that is especially prevalent in Western disciplines. Somehow the doning of a helmet says that you are a relatively low level rider. The reality is, nobody can ride that well. The best of the best have been seriously hurt on horseback. Horses are strong, fast and, at best, unpredictable. When things go wrong, they go wrong quickly and usually at high speed with you at a severe height disadvantage. Though a shorter horse provides a shorter fall and a slower horse subjects you to less speed, due to the magnificent strength of the horse, you can be seriously hurt from any height or speed. Even the steadiest, most broke and trustworthy horse can have unexpected moments and his natural instinct can turn a perfectly safe endeavor into a serious injury in a split second. A helmet won't protect you from everything but it will give you better odds to protect your most precious organ. Think about it!