

By: Darlene M. Cox
darlc5@aol.com

Whenever we saddle up and head out on the trails for a nice relaxing ride, the furthest thing from our mind is that we may end up having to spend time in a hospital emergency room due to a fall from our horse; however, those of us who are seasoned riders know that it is not a matter of "if" I fall from the saddle, but "when". We are subject to possible ejection each and every time we sit in the saddle. There are so many factors that can play into any unexpected dismount: rider error, terrain inconsistencies, unexpected stimuli causing a horse to react; tacking issues/problems, etc. The list could go on and on.

Traumatic brain injury is the most highly attributable cause of horse-related injuries and mortality events. Horseback riders sustain more head injuries than participants in other sporting and recreational events such as football, hockey, and bicycling. Yet, those who participate in the sport of leisure trail riding are less likely to protect themselves when enjoying the avocation of horseback riding.

Throughout the many years that I have actively campaigned for rider safety, I have heard many excuses from riders not wanting to wear helmets. Some of those excuses are: "I trust/know my horse", "My horse is well trained", "My horse is bomb-proof", "I'm a skilled rider", "Cowboys don't wear helmets", "You've got to go sometime", "I don't like helmet hair", "Helmets are too hot/heavy/cumbersome". It is evident that sometimes vanity, machismo, and pride prevent some from providing themselves with the life saving protection from riding accidents that helmets afford.

I was once one of those people who felt that helmet wearing was a sign of weakness; either in my own riding ability or in trust of my horse's training. That was until I personally witnessed someone who sustained and irreparable traumatic brain injury. My friend's accident occurred 20 years ago, and she remains wheelchair bound and cognitively challenged as a result of her brain injury. Her wearing a helmet on that fateful day those many years ago would have prevented such serious injury. It was a sobering moment for me, and from that point forward I have worn a helmet each and every time I have mounted a horse.

Many states within the United States, as well as other countries have laws and/or governing regulations that require children wear helmets when riding. Mandates within many public and private riding entities require helmets be worn by riders. While I would not be an opponent of a government implied law requiring all equestrians to wear a helmet, I would first like to see an increase in the number of riders who personally want to provide protection from head injuries for themselves.

Today's helmets are light weight and comfortable. There are several styles and types from which to choose, not to mention a myriad of colors. Riding helmets should bear the "ASTM" or "SEI" or the Australian equivalent seal, which indicates they have been tested for protection and durability. Finding a helmet that you can comfortably ride in is quite possible if not ascertained.

I have read somewhere that it only takes 21 days of repetitious action to transform an action into habit. I would challenge each of you who currently do not wear a helmet when riding to begin developing this habit. Every time, every ride; the life you save will be your own.

Happy trails!