

Around the shows this summer, I heard a lot of discussions about the new helmet rule that goes into effect later this year for show jumpers. From these discussions, I gathered that there is still some confusion about the rule. It is a fairly simple rule to grasp--approved helmets for all contestants while jumping on the show grounds. The show grounds of the discussions was a hot debate about freedom of debate about circumstantial evidence about whether "approved helmets" actually reduced head injuries.

The Board of Directors of the United States Equestrian Federation announced Rule GR318 which pertains to the use of approved safety helmets by everyone, juniors and seniors, competing over fences. Previously, only juniors were subject to the subject to the rule (See <http://www.usef.org/conte'/ww.usef.org/conte;plained/in dex.php>). I heard some confusion about whether we all need to replace "an ASTM/SEI approved helmet" purchased a few years ago in favor of the latest models. As I read the new rule, there is no increase in the level of safety approval. It is just that the rule now applies to all competitors.

The rule provides that beginning December 1, 2005, approved helmets will be compulsory in all Hunter, Jumper and Hunt Seat Equitation classes, both open and breed restricted including Hunter Hack, where jumping is required and when

Lest you believe this is just a show jumping trend, effective April 1, 2005, the USEF announced the same rule for driving competitions, requiring all drivers competing in obstacles on the marathon to wear ASTM/SEI certified protective headgear. The Paso Fino Horse Association requested that the Board add this statement to the rule: that approved helmets must be worn in all Paso Fino classes requiring jumping, and by all sub-juniors (exhibitors under 12 years of age) at all times when riding on the competition grounds of a Paso Fino show. The Board also approved this rule change.

The debate rages on about whether there is any scientific evidence that approved helmets actually reduce head injuries or whether they can contribute to other injuries such as broken necks from the chinstraps or inadequate protection from approved helmets, which are only available off the peg, rather than custom fitted. As the evidence is confusing and mostly anecdotal, I imagine the debate will rage on, but the evidence seems to favor those advocating approved helmets. So in light of the new rules, if any one wants to unload a Patey hunt cap for cheap in my size, I'm buying. The unapproved helmets are still proper in the hunt field, but not encouraged there either due to liability concerns. Maybe I'll even drive without a seatbelt and turn off the airbags on the way to the next show or hunt--just one more time for old time's sake, before I go out and buy a new GPA. I may even enjoy some French non-pasteurized cheese before that gets regulated away as well. C'est la vie. And, speaking of the French, my Parisian friend tells me that in France, there is a new helmet law that prohibits merchants from selling unapproved helmets. If true, there may be a big market for Americans looking to unload their unapproved wares, as French riders take to eBay looking to replace their traditional helmets with ones that are no longer available in tack shops. In Western states, it is tough to give up our freedoms and personal choice by virtue of legislation and regulation. We can only hope the regulators have science on their side.

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