

Head Shot

By Richard Bennett
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I saw it coming; it looked like one of Saturn's moons. Even though it seemed like slow motion, I didn't have time to duck. A jagged rock, the size of a large marble hit my face shield directly in front of my left eye. The impact sounded like a gunshot inside my helmet, and I felt my head involuntarily ratchet to the left.

I was in commuter traffic, surrounded by cars and trucks. Going with the flow, I was doing somewhat over the speed limit. If I had gone down, I would just be a grease stain in lane number two. A direct hit in my left eye with that rock would have almost certainly caused a momentary loss of control. Sometimes that is all it takes to have a catastrophe.

I wear a full-face helmet. It hasn't always been that way for me. In my "younger" days, I wore the minimum helmet in hot weather, and an open-face helmet the rest of the year. Before the California helmet law took effect in 1992, I sometimes wore just a bandanna. In the 1980's I wore a full-face helmet to compensate for the tiny windshield on my Harley FXRS. Once I moved on to touring bikes, the full-face went onto the shelf.

Helmet use is arguably one of the most controversial topics among motorcyclists. In the 1990's the U.S. and State governments mandated helmet use for motorcycle riders. Early laws were pretty straight forward: all motorcyclists and their passengers must wear D.O.T. approved helmets on public roads. Like the first anti-smoking laws, this one had a lot of out-spoken critics.

The "biker" types hated the new law, and argued that helmets actually made their riding *more* dangerous. They cited the extra weight, and reduced visibility and hearing as diminishing their ability to perceive and react to danger.

The Highway Patrol enforced the new law, citing riders with non-D.O.T. helmets. Riders began putting D.O.T. stickers on "novelty" helmets; the beanie, head-hugging plastic kind that are less effective than little league hats. Sympathetic courts didn't back the Highway Patrol enforcement, so they and the local cops looked the other way.

Today, many helmet-law states have repealed or amended their laws. Some don't require any conditions, while others have set age or insurance qualifications.

Wearing a helmet has always been an option for motorcycle riders. There were plenty of good helmets available when I began riding in the early 1960's. I most often wore a helmet, but sometimes I just wanted to be a "biker" and let the wind blow through my hair. I'll admit that I was against the original helmet law, since I didn't want to be told I *had* to wear one. Now, I support it.

During my research as the Blue Knight Southwest Conference Safety Officer, I discovered some interesting facts. Since states have modified or repealed helmet laws, fewer riders have worn helmets. Each year for the last ten years, motorcycle fatalities have increased in the United States, especially among states without helmet laws. Now, I am not saying that head injuries were the only cause of fatalities, but I am convinced that helmet-less riders made a significant difference. Many of them chose to *not* wear a helmet; they chose wrong, and now their loved ones miss them.

As for me, I have seen the value of wearing a full-face helmet. Modern helmets are lighter, stronger and more comfortable than earlier models. In heavy rain, my face stays dry. The fully tinted face shield means I don't have to wear sun glasses when I ride. Bugs, bees and rocks don't hit my face, either. There is no loss of peripheral vision; I am warmer in cold weather and comfortable in hot weather. And if I ever have a serious get-off, the helmet will do its best to protect my noggin. And that will make my family happy.



Give it some thought.