

▶ HELMET DEBATE

If I have a reputation for anything, it is for being logical and looking at the facts before all else. So why, then, am I often seen without a helmet? For those who are curious to know why, read on. For those who have already decided I am "irresponsible" or "sending the wrong message", you'd probably best stop now as this article is likely to do little more than irritate you.

Whatever your position on headgear, it is not my intention to change anyone's point of view, but simply to present you with some other facts that you may not have considered and, hopefully, to provide a bit of entertainment to boot.

I think helmets are a great tool – both my kids and I use them often. The reason for this article is to consider the reasons helmet-wearing has almost been turned into a religion by some, and to consider the wider effect this may be having on us in society.

It is widely accepted that human beings are instinctively programmed for self-preservation, so one could argue that the safest cars in the world should have sharp steel spikes

on the inside facing the driver. Faced with this device,



It was pictures of Chris Boardman such as this helmetless shot from the pages of *Pro Cycling* that drove some readers to write in

someone driving such a vehicle is almost certainly not going to speed or use a phone while driving as the potential consequences would be too severe to warrant the risk. Yes, it's an off-the-wall, overly simplistic concept and hardly a serious suggestion, but it's worth considering for the simple reason that, although it would almost certainly result in more people using public transport, a reduction in road traffic accidents and a generally nicer environment, it is in fact the opposite of what we do. But why is this?

Perhaps because, despite the likely "overall" reduction in accidents, I, the individual, feel safer surrounded by airbags and roll cages – in short, it's a case of sod the other guy and sod society, self-preservation overrides all. But does this same rationale apply to cyclists?

If facing a fast, hairpin descent, I, like most people, would choose to wear a helmet. I would do so

because it would make me feel safer around the corners and on steep gradients. If I was forced to ride without a helmet, I would feel more vulnerable and, in all likelihood, ride more cautiously. Does this train of thought mean I would be at higher risk of crashing with a helmet or without? Would my wearing a helmet prevent a

simply moving around your house? Despite these figures, I am happy to continue these activities without wearing headgear. Of course, we wouldn't dream of campaigning for head protection in the shower, at swimming pools, for car drivers or for walkers. That would be silly, wouldn't it? Yet hospital admission figures show

"Helmet-wearing has almost been turned into a religion and I'd like to consider the wider effect of this"

single accident or – dare I say it – make me more likely to push the envelope that bit further?

Again, this is a simplistic example, but it perhaps illustrates how what sometimes seems totally obvious might not be. We certainly feel safer in a helmet; what I want us to consider is whether we are actually safer, or whether people are looking for rationales to back up their instinct.

IN TERMS OF head injury, did you know that cycling is statistically far safer than playing in the park, walking, or

these activities have a greater incidence of head injury than cycling.

If the risk of injury when cycling is very small, so the risk of head injury is even smaller, it takes more than 3,000 years on average cycling to suffer a serious head injury according to the Transport Statistics for Britain 2001 and this, I think, is where the real issue or misunderstanding lies. There is, of course, no such thing as "average cycling". Talking in such terms is like lumping together Formula One accident figures with those for

“When I was racing, I always chose to wear a helmet – even before they became mandatory”



Boardman (above) uses a helmet when riding on fast and tricky descents

in a position of authority is made to feel irresponsible if they don't promote what looks safer, regardless of the facts gathered worldwide over decades that would seem to clearly indicate the opposite. If Torvill and Dean had decided to start wearing helmets when skating, how long do you think it would have been before taking to the ice without one would have become seen as irresponsible? This may sound daft, but don't underestimate the power of the media.

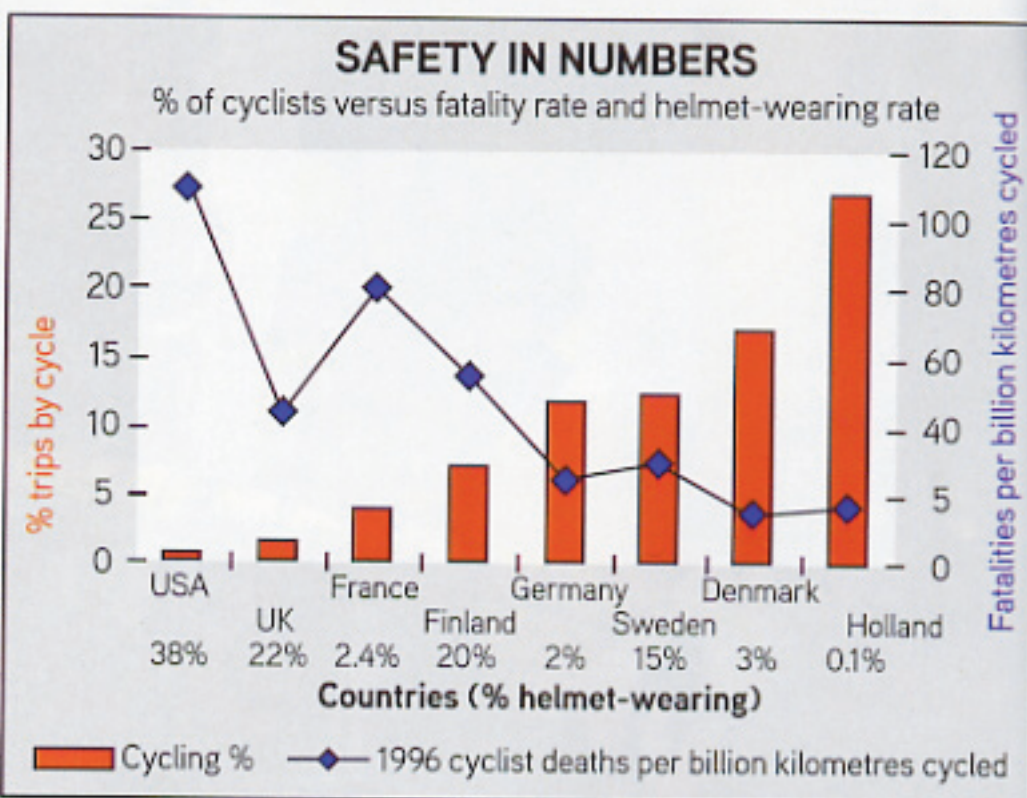
So how did I come to know all these bits and pieces? A few years ago, I sat on a government advisory body, the National Cycling Strategy Board, which

“The causes of head injuries are more to do with vehicle collision and reduced road space for bike riders”

pensioners driving to the shops. This is why, when I was racing, I always chose to wear a helmet – even before they became mandatory – because it was a higher risk environment. I still wear one now if it's raining or I'm riding off-road, but in most other situations I don't.

Studies around the world repeatedly show that more people wearing helmets does not equal fewer head injuries. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. I'm not suggesting that wearing a helmet is dangerous, rather that the causes of head injuries are more to do with vehicle collision – cycle helmets are not designed to protect against impact with cars – and reduced road space for cyclists.

THE REAL DRIVING force behind pushing for helmet use seems to be perception-based; it simply looks safer and anyone



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It was formed to, amongst other things, advise the Government on all things cycling-related. It was while I held this position that Eric Martlew MP put forward a private members' bill that, if accepted, would have made cycling without a helmet for children under 16 illegal. We were given the task of researching what effect such a law might have, and reporting back to ministers. We looked at what had happened in countries around the globe with both high and low helmet usage and, as you can probably see from the Safety in Numbers graph on page 86, the results were enough to influence my own views dramatically.

In 1990, Australia became the first country in the world to make the wearing of helmets mandatory. Recorded cycle use fell dramatically, with particular impact on teenagers. For instance, the number of

secondary school children riding bikes in the Sydney area alone fell by an obscene 91 per cent, yet statistically, cycling injuries carried on increasing. Data indicated that increased use of helmets seemed to have no effect on overall safety and,

in fact, discouraged people from riding bikes altogether. The Safety in Numbers graph indicates this finding was not unique to Australia. In fact, in Holland, where only 0.1 per cent of cyclists wear helmets, the risk of fatal injury is lower.

There is too much data available – over 15 years' worth – to quote it all here, but you

“The number of secondary school children riding bikes fell, yet cycling injuries carried on increasing”

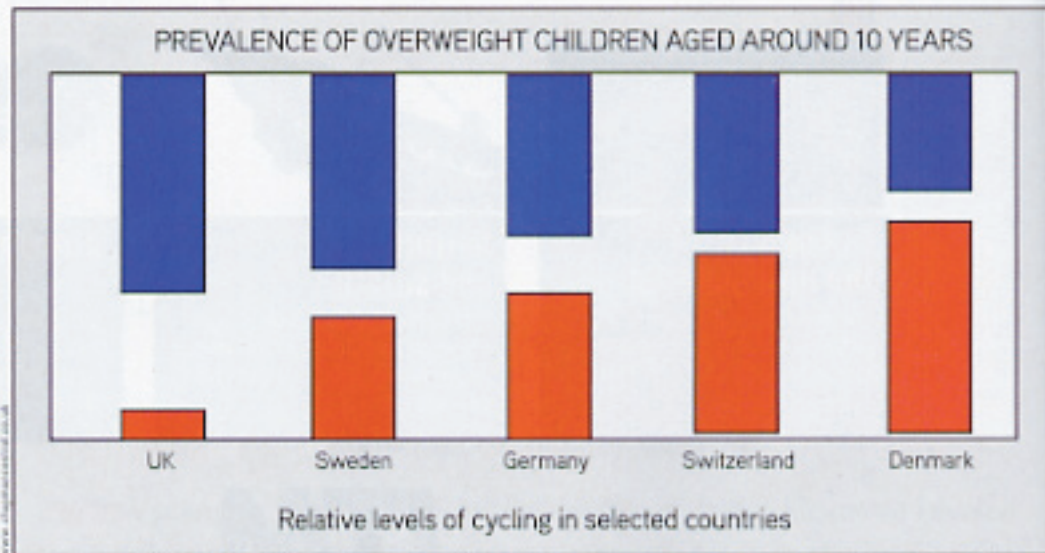
can easily research the subject yourself on the internet. Whatever your personal views are on the merit of helmets, the inescapable conclusion from every jurisdiction where compulsion has been tried is that levels of cycling drop substantially, yet injury rates among cyclists do not fall.

TAKING THE BIGGER picture into consideration, a study of European countries seemed to show a direct correlation between the prevalence of overweight

children and low cycling levels [See Prevalence of Overweight Children... below].

Since there are many studies showing how increased helmet use has a profound effect on the number of people who ride bikes, and since cycling is proven as being a safe and healthy activity that would benefit both individuals and society, and considering 157,000 people die of heart disease each year according to the Office of National Statistics – with one third of these directly linked to inactivity (see Cycling Deaths in 2002 on page 90) – in my view it seems inescapable that any measure proven to discourage cycling will probably have a profound effect on average life expectancy and health. The question is, how many lives are saved by encouraging the use of helmets, and how many do we lose by discouraging cycling?

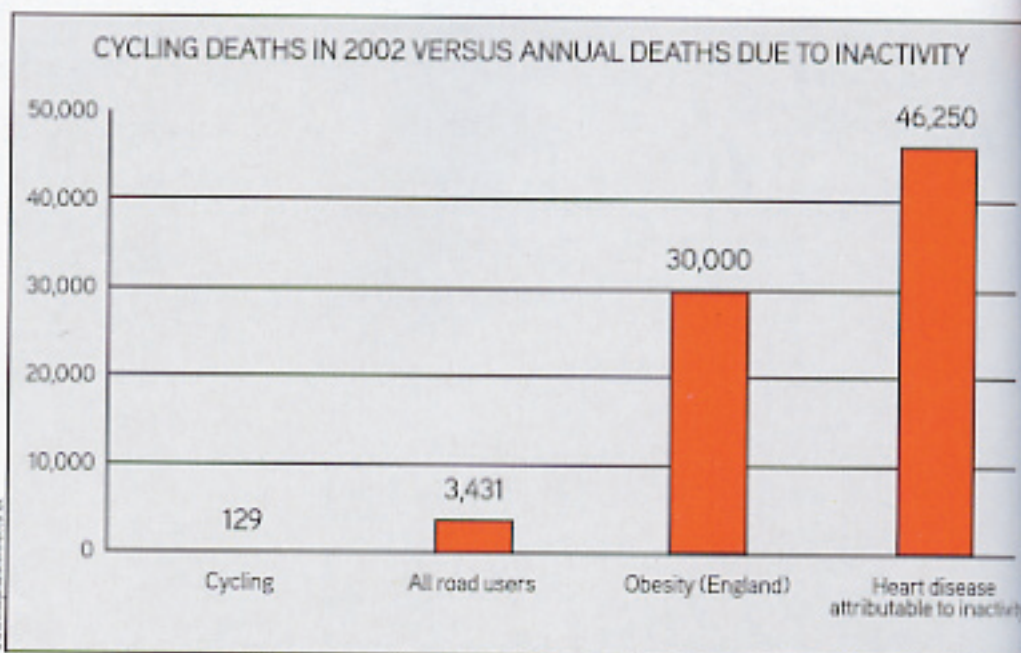
I WOULD ENCOURAGE anyone to wear a helmet if it is going to make them more likely to ride a bike. I am not in any way anti-helmet; I am very much pro-choice and pro-cycling. Cycling is not a dangerous activity; it is statistically safer than playing in the park, and I hope that the facts that I have presented here)



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It will help to explain why I choose to take a wider – and statistically supported – view. It is also a statistically-backed fact that many more people will die from ill health related to inactivity, so it follows that any measure that significantly reduces the amount of people riding bikes will add to these numbers.

My 15-year-old daughter rides to her friend's without a helmet. I'm much more interested in encouraging her to exercise for her long-term health than stopping her doing so unless she wears a helmet. However, when she raced a couple of years ago, she wore a helmet, and would have worn a helmet whether it was



Boardman wearing a helmet in what was clearly a high risk environment at the 1998 Tour

mandatory or not, because she was riding in a higher risk environment.

I was one of the first to use a helmet in competition, well before they became mandatory. I still use one now and will continue to use one in the future – where I feel it is appropriate – and so will my kids, because like knee-protectors, safety glasses and overalls, they are tools that have a place. When we use them shouldn't be down to peer pressure or law, but judgment.

If you would like to investigate some of the research in this area yourself, go to:
www.cycle-helmets.com
www.chapmancentral.co.uk/web/public.nsf/Documents/martlew_bill

