

The case for ditching bike helmets

By Erin Beresini, Outside

Helmet advocates have been dealing with a PR crisis ever since a new study questioning the lids' efficacy in preventing brain injuries received widespread attention this month. But it was Olympic gold medalist Chris Boardman's BBC morning show appearance that truly set people off. Why? He refused to wear a helmet while giving cycling safety tips.

Boardman defended himself, arguing on the BBC's Facebook page and later in an article on British Cycling.org that helmets "discourage people from riding a bike" and shift the attention away from what's most likely to kill a rider – a car.

So is Boardman right? Yes, cars pose the greatest threat to riders (more on that later). But the science surrounding helmets is a bit murkier.

First up: the recent helmet study. Led by a trauma surgeon from the University of Arizona, Dr. Bellal Joseph, and published in the European Journal of Trauma and Emergency Surgery, the study reviewed 709 cyclists who came through Joseph's trauma center.

"Bicycle helmets protect against bruising and scratching," Joseph concluded from examining the cyclists, but not against intra-cranial bleeding – the bleeding inside the skull that ultimately causes brain injury and death. The non-helmeted cyclists in the study were more likely to have a skull fracture, but not any more likely to have intra-cranial hemorrhage than cyclists who crashed while wearing a helmet.

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