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Williams making headway

Helmet safety is goal of PHAT initiative



Dr. Robert Williams founded PHAT in 2002, a helmet advocacy program that's now in place at 11 participating Vermont ski areas. (Caleb Kenna/For The Globe)

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Dr. Robert Williams, a pediatric anesthesiologist and critical care specialist at Vermont Children's Hospital, was enjoying a brisk afternoon of backcountry snowboarding last week when his mobile phone rang. Since he wasn't expecting calls on his day off from the hospital's media relations staff, Williams said his first reaction upon seeing the number on his caller ID filled him with dread. "Somebody else died on a ski slope," he thought.

Fortunately, no one had perished — it was a staffer passing along an interview request regarding helmet safety. But as the founder of the nonprofit group PHAT ("Protect Your Head At All Times"), Williams can be forgiven if he's adopted a grim sense of expectancy about reporters seeking comment when fatalities occur at ski resorts. That's happened three times already this season in

New England, where two skiers and one snowboarder have lost their lives after careening off trails. Two of the victims were not wearing helmets.

“I take care of kids and adults who suffer the consequences of head injuries in this sport,” said Williams. “There is zero medical reason not to wear a helmet. There is no downside to wearing a helmet, ever. Yet there’s a big dichotomy between the ski industry and the medical community on this. The thing I don’t understand is why the industry is not more aggressive with regard to helmet use.”

According to the National Ski Areas Association, 25 percent of skiers and boarders wore head protection in 2003. By 2010, that figure had risen to 57 percent.

And although NSAA research shows helmet use reduces the risk of head injury by 30 to 50 percent, ski-slope fatalities remain unchanged over the past decade, averaging 40 per year nationwide. Of last season’s 38 deaths, only 19 of the victims were reported to be wearing helmets.

Head safety in all sports is under increased scrutiny, and recreational skiing is no exception. Some states are poised to step in and mandate helmet usage, with legislation either pending or under serious consideration in New Jersey, California, New York, and Illinois. Could similar laws be forthcoming in New England?

“In my personal opinion, I don’t believe that is necessary,” said Williams. “But this is a good time to have that discussion. Operating on a shoestring budget, we’ve had good results with PHAT. At 75 percent, our resorts exceed the national helmet-use average. Getting this message out nationwide is the next step. That’s my challenge to the industry.”

Williams came up with the concept for PHAT in 2002, and it’s now in place at 11 participating Vermont ski areas. The program’s strategy is to change snow sports culture so helmet use is accepted as the norm, using an approach that does not rely on preaching or scare tactics. Marketers are encouraged to make sure all advertising images depict skiers and boarders wearing helmets. PHAT hosts weekly helmet giveaways at on-mountain informational booths, and also distributes posters and stickers to kids. Most importantly, the organization relies strongly on role models — not Olympic or X Games stars, but everyday ski patrollers — to deliver its message.

Kelly Davis, director of research for SnowSports Industries America, said helmet sales topped 1 million units for the first time during 2009-10, a 21 percent increase over the previous season. The average helmet retails for \$87, and Davis said “positive peer pressure” is what drives buying decisions for younger snow sports participants.

“When helmet sales are good, heads are safer,” Davis said. She explained that newer helmets have ports to incorporate everything from video recorders to smart phones to music headphones, increasing their appeal. “You’ve got your own personal show, and the helmet fits right in there.”

Although trade groups tout rising helmet usage and sales figures, Williams is quick to caution against complacency.

“The NSAA is very happy to report that 57 percent of its guests wear helmets,” Williams said. “That is not a number to be proud of. When I look at that statistic, my reaction is that more than 40 percent of the skiing public is at immediate risk for serious head injury.”

Williams said it’s important to extend the safety crusade to off-mountain public perception.

“If you Google the words ‘ski patrol, role models, helmets,’ the very first thing that pops up is a National Institutes of Health paper titled ‘Ski patrollers: Reluctant models for helmet use,’ ” Williams said. “That’s terrible. That’s unacceptable. These are the people on the snow interacting with the public. We know they are very powerful role models.”

Williams said snow sports entities need to be more proactive than reactive. The 2009 death of actress Natasha Richardson, who was not wearing a helmet when she died following a fall on a beginner-level trail, sparked intense nationwide debate. The industry responded with reams of damage-control statistics, but once the sensationalism tailed off, Williams said there was very little follow-through, other than relief that another celebrity skiing accident had faded from public view.

“It’s not clear to me if we will ever get to near-universal helmet use,” Williams said. “We don’t know if these small grass-roots programs like PHAT are going to be enough. But let’s not give mixed messages. Let’s have an enthusiastic response.”

The alternative, Williams said, is to have the government step in and require helmet usage, which brings up thorny enforcement issues: Everyone or just minors? Who’s liable, parents or resort operators? If not wearing a helmet becomes a criminal offense, will police patrol the lift lines?

Geraldine Link, the NSAA director of public policy, said her organization wants to achieve universal voluntary helmet usage. But she realizes that’s an “aggressive goal” that might not be possible, so the NSAA has reached out to various legislative initiatives to help shape any laws that might be passed.

“I think the bottom line for our industry is personal responsibility,” Link said. “I think their intentions are good, but legislators will look for the silver bullet. We can support a helmet bill for kids that’s based on a bike helmet model.”

Most children’s bicycle helmet laws place the burden of compliance on parents.

“The New Jersey bill does a great job of spelling out that the parent will pay a fine or be responsible, and the resorts will not,” said Link. “I think New Jersey will be the first one, and I think it will be fairly soon. I think there is momentum there, and I think that it is primed to pass fairly quickly.”

Williams said he remains hopeful that New England states will not have to resort to legislation. Whenever he meets a skier or boarder who is skeptical about head safety, Williams pulls out a helmet of his own that he recently retired after it saved his skull from a high-impact introduction to a tree in the backwoods glades of Mt. Mansfield.

“PHAT has already paid me back, because I would have been in the ICU or in the morgue,” said Williams, whose injuries were limited to scars and bruises. “I skied away from that, and I am absolutely certain I wouldn’t have done that without a helmet.” ■

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