

Cool Heads and Helmets

By Eric Konarske

In the year 2000, on the 17th of September, 24 year old Nicole Reinhart was poised to capture one of women's cycling's most coveted prizes. Having graced the top step of the winner's podium in each of the first three of four races in the series, *The BMC Software Grand Prix* title, and the quarter million dollar prize for winning all four, looked almost certain to be hers.

Her display of dominance during the first three races left everyone convinced that the fourth was more of a technicality than a test. Reckless speculation may even leave one wondering if her name may have already been on that hefty check long before the starter's gun put the final race into motion.

To nobody's surprise, her dominance continued through most of final race, and with only two remaining corners standing between her and the checkered banner, victory now seemed absolutely certain. But, as the old saying often reminds us, only two things in life are certain. Victory is not one of them.

The double-edged sword of unpredictability that creates some of life's sweetest moments also has a brutal way of reminding us that the bitter ones are never far behind. On that second to last corner, for reasons still not known today, Nicole lost control of her bike. Just off the edge of the course, a cold and unforgiving Maple stole both her chance of victory... and her life.

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More recently, on the 12th of March 2003, the world of cycling was sent another reminder that even the superheroes of this extremely competitive sport are no match for the Grim Reaper. With 40 kilometers remaining in the second stage of this edition of *Paris-Nice*, Andrei Kivilev tangled with a couple of other riders, causing them all to go down hard.

Tragically, the injuries Andrei sustained in the crash left his wife without a husband, his children without a father, and his fans without a hero. But his death also left many looking for people to blame and places to point fingers.

During times of tragedy, individuals often lose their ability to judge with clarity the facts of a given situation, and this unfortunate instance is no exception. Long before their tears had dried and funeral arrangements had been made, spectators, teammates, friends, families, and coaches were calling for mandatory helmet usage among the pro ranks.

This issue is not new. The world's greatest bike race—the *Tour De France*—was dealt a painful blow in 1995 with the loss of Fabio Casartelli on a spine-tingling mountain descent. Casartelli's death created an emotional juggernaut that almost instantaneously brought to life a new rule in professional cycling—mandatory helmets. But the rule was put to death as hastily as it was brought to life thanks to the absolute refusal of the riders to ride until the rule was no more.

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Deaths in professional cycling are extremely rare. I could bury you with facts and figures to demonstrate that with or without helmets, professional bicycle racing has a much lower mortality rate than other extreme sports that employ rapid motion as a competitive factor. However, I'd prefer to view this issue from another perspective.

Helmet usage, as I see it, is a no-brainer. Today's helmets are extremely light and well ventilated; sometimes it's hard to tell when you're wearing one. For these reasons, I never leave home without one. But if ten, no, if a hundred or even a thousand professional cyclists died every year from head injuries, my belief that every pro cyclist has a right to make the decision for himself would not change.

I was raised on the premise that man's most precious gift is his life. But that gift has value only when accompanied by the freedom to decide how that gift is to be used.

The number of people this issue of choice directly affects is very small. There are only a few hundred pros whose lives will be forcibly changed, so why should the rest of the world care? The rest of the world needs to care because the helmet issue isn't simply a problem; it's also a symptom. It's a symptom of a world of people whose desire to control the lives of others is resulting in the loss of control of their own. One cannot decide the path of another man's life without forfeiting the right to decide the path of one's own.

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The helmet issue interests me personally, but its implications and effects can be applied anywhere. For example, millions of people die every year as a result of what they put in their mouths. People drink, people smoke, people eat things from McDonalds that bear a closer resemblance to a grade school science project than to what I call food. But does my abstinence from these destructive tendencies put me in superior moral position to those who choose to partake in these vices? Should I decide what other people eat? No, of course not.

This struggle may continue forever. Some will not rest until helmet usage is unquestionably enforced. I ask: what then? Where does it stop? Are helmets the panacea their proponents would have us believe? If the deaths don't stop with helmets, what next? Eliminate the more dangerous mountain stages? Then what? Speed limits? Training wheels? Where does it end?

When I ask these questions, I don't get valid, rational, well thought out answers. I get well-intended emotional wishes. I get: "Andrei would still be alive today if helmets were mandatory." But is this true? Is there any way to know for sure? No, there is not. What about Nicole Reinhart? Would she be alive today if she had been wearing a helmet? That question leaves no room for speculation. Nicole *was* wearing a helmet.