



Quarterback's Accident Revs Motorcycle Helmet Debate

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Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, who was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident while not wearing a helmet, has reopened the debate on helmet requirements and other "safety laws."

Ben Roethlisberger, the 24-year-old quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who just came off a successful Super Bowl win, was seriously injured last week while riding his motorcycle without a helmet in downtown Pittsburgh.

Roethlisberger, who suffered a broken jaw and nose, and a mild concussion, had publicly defended his right to not wear a helmet, saying that he would "be careful."

But late last week, he made a public statement from his home, where he is recovering, that he will wear a helmet if he rides again, the Pittsburgh Post Gazette reported.

"I never meant any harm to others nor to break any laws. I was confident in my ability to ride a motorcycle and simply believed such an accident would not happen to me," Roethlisberger said.

On Monday Pittsburgh police announced that Roethlisberger will be cited for failing to have a permit to operate a motorcycle and for failing to wear a helmet.

Motorcycle helmet safety laws

But Roethlisberger's change of heart is unlikely to shift public policy on motorcycle helmet laws, where more states allow some riders to go without helmets.

Twenty states have laws requiring all motorcyclists to wear a helmet.

Twenty-six states have laws requiring only some motorcyclists to wear a helmet, and four states do not have motorcycle helmet laws.

Most states that allow some riders to go without helmets have stipulations that riders younger than 18 wear them.

Pennsylvania, where Roethlisberger lives, allows riders 21 and older to go without motorcycle helmets.

Universal helmet laws fell out of fashion after states successfully lobbied Congress to stop the Department of Transportation from financially penalizing states without helmet laws in 1976.

State legislators who played a part in loosening helmet requirements say motorcycle riders lobbied hard for their personal rights.

"If people want to engage in risky behavior ... is it the state's business to say no?" a former Texas state legislator told The Dallas Morning News. "If you believe that the legislature has a responsibility to outlaw things that result in death, then we have a whole lot of things that we need to outlaw."

Who is behind such laws?

But doctors and safety experts say the trend toward non-universal helmet laws is leading to increased injuries and deaths.

The nationwide fatality rate -- the number of deaths per 100,000 registered vehicles -- rose from 55 in 1997 to 69 in 2003, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

"A helmet is not an absolute guarantee you'll survive a crash," NHTSA spokesman Rae Tyson told the Pittsburgh Post Gazette. "But helmets are tremendously effective in reducing the likelihood of getting seriously injured or killed."

Police officers agree.

"We get tired of picking them off the ground and tired of going to a house to say an 18 or 19 or 20 year old died in a motorcycle accident," state police Master Sgt. David Byrd told the Chicago Sun Times.

Doctors feel the same way.

"Some of the worst injuries I see happen on a motorcycle. ... I am for helmets ... [they] help take away the intensity and severity of injuries," Dr. Phillip Puliyodil, who works with motorcycle victims, told the Chicago Sun Times.

A NHTSA study in Florida also showed that head injuries are getting more expensive to treat, rising from \$10,000 to more than \$45,000.

Many believe taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for uninsured motorcyclists who choose to not wear helmets when they ride.

Seat belts and bicycles

Helmet use is not the only behavior regulated by states. Forty-nine states have safety or seat belt laws. New Hampshire is the only state without one.

Most state laws require people in the front seat to buckle up, although 18 states require back-seat passengers to wear them, too.

All 50 states require children to use some sort of safety restraint.

Like seat belt and motorcycle helmet use, bicycle helmet use laws are determined on the state level.

Twenty states require some riders, mostly those under age 18, to wear a helmet.

Critics of requirements

Critics of universal helmet and other safety laws don't argue that seat belts or helmets are safer. Rather, they argue, these are personal decisions that should not be made by the government.

"Do we want government officials inspecting our cupboards and refrigerators for 'dangerous' foods? Or checking our cholesterol and waistlines? No? Then seat belt laws, mandatory helmet regulations and the like must be rescinded," syndicated columnist Eric Peters wrote in an editorial for the National Motorists Association.

-- Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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