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Helmet-Safety Foundation Tries on Some New Hats

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SACRAMENTO -- Tragedy has always been the mother of invention at the Snell Memorial Foundation.

From its founding nearly 40 years ago as a memorial to amateur auto racer Pete Snell, a series of horrific motor-vehicle and sporting accidents has spurred the foundation to devise design specifications for helmets that can protect against catastrophic head injuries. "We don't make helmets. We make them safer," is the nonprofit group's credo.

Now, five decades into writing and rewriting those specs for safer motorcycle, race-car and bicycle helmets, the collapse of the bicycle-helmet market has forced the foundation to trim its operations while it looks for new business elsewhere. And once again, tragedy is pointing the way, leading Snell's helmet designers into such areas as horseback riding, skateboarding and in-line skating.

"It's made my life interesting," says Edward Becker, Snell's executive director. "But the board figures they'll expand and contract operations here to keep up with the markets."

Unlike other standards-writing organizations, Snell not only drafts specifications for products but also gets manufacturers to cough up tens of thousands of dollars to subject their products to safety testing. The foundation prides itself on its independence by refusing to accept any donations from manufacturers to enhance its roughly \$1.5 million annual budget.

Snell's laboratory, hidden here in a gray low-rise building northeast of downtown, is a torture chamber of sorts. Technicians spend their days trying to burn, smash, puncture,

crack, crumple, melt, soak and freeze shelves full of helmets submitted by manufacturers. If a helmet passes muster, it wins the coveted Snell seal of approval.

Mr. Becker says the foundation has flunked 48% of all the bike helmets it has tested in the past six years, 41% of motorcycle helmets and a somewhat smaller percentage of race-car helmets.

Snell officials estimate -- and manufacturers agree -- that the certification program adds about 50 cents to the wholesale cost of every helmet, which can carry a price tag of \$25 to \$130. That includes testing several samples; adding stickers to every helmet whose samples pass; and performing follow-up tests of helmets purchased from bike shops and catalogs.

But in the past couple of years, the bicycle and bicycling-accessories market has collapsed -- with bicycle sales alone off more than 20% since 1994. Suddenly, in the summer of 1994, "it seemed like ... everyone who wanted one had a bicycle helmet," Mr. Becker says. "The whole industry slammed into a wall."

Almost immediately, some of North America's biggest bicycle-helmet manufacturers -- including market leader Bell Sports Inc. and a subsidiary, Denrich of Canada -- dropped Snell's certification program. Instead, they sought to develop their own certification program, or join standards-writing panels, as a way to cut costs and have a bigger role in the development of safety standards. (Industry analysts say those two companies alone control 50% to 55% of the helmet market.)

The consequences for Snell: The number of bicycle helmets it tests will fall to about 1,100 this year from a peak of around 5,000 in 1993. Largely as a result, Snell's paid staff has dropped to 11 from 21 in 1994.

But while Snell has been stung by the tumult in the bicycle market, its testing of motorcycle and race-car helmets has remained fairly steady. Meanwhile, Snell says it is branching out into other areas:

When a teenager in Ireland was killed last year in a horseback-riding accident -- his head crushed when the horse threw him and then toppled onto him -- Prime Minister John Bruton encouraged the boy's parents to contact Snell's lab in England. Today, the lab director is working on standards for an equestrian helmet. The standards are expected to be published next spring.

When emergency-room doctors in Malaysia saw too many of their nation's ubiquitous moped riders suffering severe head injuries, they called on Snell to write a standard for a low-speed

motor-vehicle helmet that riders would wear in warmweather climates. Those standards are expected within a few months.

When the federal government in 1992 released statistics for the first time on serious in-line-skating injuries -- 29,000 that year alone, 5% of them head injuries -- Snell researchers realized that even Snell-certified bicycle helmets weren't providing enough coverage to the back of the head for that particular sport. So they went to work, and by 1994 -- when those injuries had rocketed to 76,000 -- Snell published the first helmet standards for activities such as in-line skating, skateboarding and mountain biking. This market is so new, however, Snell tests just a "minuscule" number of these helmets, says Mr. Becker.

Snell says the changing market hasn't affected its primary mission: studying head injuries and designing specs for safer helmets. "These cutbacks did not affect the core of the foundation," says Gib Brown, Snell's director of test development. "I would like no hint that we're in trouble, because basically we're not."

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