

Take Your Bike Helmet to the Safety Museum

by Ted Roberts

I like to bike down to our neighborhood park. The wind sings along with the spinning bike wheels, an easy, five-minute downhill ride. On the way down, you coast like a hockey puck on buttered ice. Of course, going home is a chore that would daunt Sisyphus. As they say, there ain't no free lunch.

But the destination is worthwhile because Willow Park boasts grass-bordered, tree-shaded bike paths as well as soccer and football fields, two baseball diamonds, and tennis courts.

Strangely enough, this bandbox of a park doesn't attract many kids or customers of any age. Were it owned and operated by Walt Disney Enterprises, it would have closed decades ago. But the mayor, who manages my city without benefit of shareholders or owners, never fixates on the bottom line. He loves taxpayers with unzipped wallets who swoon with compassion every time he mentions "our kids." And parks are for kids, aren't they? Everybody says so.

So, even though bereft of youthful laughter, the city keeps Willow Park open, which is great if you're one of the few users, like me. I love those free tennis courts and the green space to bike in. I commend and appreciate the generosity of my fellow municipal taxpayers who provide me this

absolutely free entertainment complex. It's almost my private domain.

It is small and natural. Sometimes, the spring beside the football field bubbles over and muddies its banks. Sometimes a tree falls over. It lies there for months reminding us that trees fall and new plants spring up around their splintered stumps. This is not Disneyland. Nobody is picking up trash except the blackbirds who confiscate shredded paper or small sticks—construction materials for their spring nest-building.

But there's something eerie about Willow Park. Except for the blackbird chatter, it's too quiet. No kids. No treble voices exulting over touchdowns or homers, or an ace on the tennis court. Soccer field, baseball diamonds, and a pond where you can snag a careless crawfish—but no young sportsmen? Where have all the children gone? Has some tax-crazed Pied Piper led them all into the Tennessee River? This park, built for the molding of young bodies and spirits, is childless. Barren as a pond without tadpoles.

The few kids I see are—like me—riding bikes. Probably on their way to visit a lucky friend with a wall-size TV lovingly provided by misguided parents. And you wouldn't believe the headgear on the few young bikers. *They are wearing helmets*—like a fullback, like an infantryman, like an M-60 tank commander, like a construction worker beneath a scaffolding of hot rivets and steel girders. And the helmets are only plastic. A falling tree limb could still dent the youthful skull.

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Now don't get me wrong, I love kids and I would rain salty tears over a head-damaged child. But life is full of cautions, each bearing a price tag. Remember, that old chestnut "There's no free lunch" applies to helmets as well as lunchrooms. A glass of beer at the Free Lunch Saloon (with spicy pastrami, roast beef, bologna, and pickles) costs a dime. Across the street at the saloon with no sandwich fixings, a schooner of their best was a nickel. Or maybe the bar with the free lunch was also a nickel, but it was only near beer (half tap water). One way or another, you are going to pay for that lunch.

Obviously, as we've learned since, the concept applies universally, even to bicycle helmets. So, consider the price of that plastic helmet:

- The chances of damage to the child's frame on the trip to the helmet emporium is as real as the tumble off the bike. The longer the trip the better the odds you'll be rammed by a large, smelly garbage truck. (Of course, you could leave him at home where he'd be perfectly safe—unless a mischievous ceiling came down on his head.)
- Even worse than the above is the wordless statement you make to the kid when you insist on the cranial armor and other defenses recommended by a safety-crazy culture. The world's an abattoir, you implicitly say. You could get killed out there; better protect yourself. He or she growing up will face many trials of courage with you at his side spouting reassuring speeches dispelling fear. But the helmeted apple of your eye will forget your inspiring words and remember your fearfulness when you strapped that plastic hat on him. They do as you do, not as you say.
- Significant head injuries to nonprofessional, youthful bike riders are so rare

that I never encountered such an injury among acquaintances, family, or friends. Yes, of course it happens, but I cannot recall one incident in many decades of observation. Unscientific, anecdotal, I know, but remember that's the only kind of data that is totally unslanted. The well-meaning, but expansive CDC (the Centers for Disease Control, our government's keeper of statistics on bike injuries) sometimes just can't brake for large, but meaningless numbers. And don't you wonder how bike injuries fall under the heading of "communicable diseases"?

- And let's not forget the dollar cost: 40 to 120 bucks depending how insecure you feel at the moment of purchase. That kind of money will buy at least three annual subscriptions to personal safety and health magazines. A great crutch for the caring parent.

Wind Massage

But the best of the anti-helmet arguments is the wondrous feel of the wind massaging head and scalp, and the incentive it provides for hoisting the youthful rump off the couch and mounting up.

Our old friend, Fred Bastiat would say, Aha, the tangible positive "seen" is that protective helmet. The "unseen" price is (a) 120 American dollars, the world's finest, (b) the joy of the wind tousling your hair, and (c) the sense of security necessary to a healthy child.

One more consideration on the scales of judgment. If you believe your child needs a helmet to pedal his bike at 10 mph in a neighborhood park, you ought to have nervous palpitations over any car trip longer than the length of your driveway. Just guess where most injuries occur? Maybe, better yet, you should be checking out the price of full body armor. □