



SUSAN SCHWARTZ

Hitting the slopes

A helmet helps

Twelve-year-olds don't often get a platform to air their views.

Today we're giving one to Michael Bowey. And he's using it to say that if you're snowboarding, you should wear a helmet.

"I think everyone should wear a helmet ... even if you are the greatest snowboarder of all time, it doesn't mean you can't catch an edge and wipe it," said the Grade 7 student, who sustained a concussion when he did just at earlier this month.

"One can only imagine what would have happened without the helmet," said his father, Jim Bowey.

Michael, an athletic youth, was new snowboarding - his board was a Christmas gift - and although he'd had a few lessons, his first time on a major mountain was the last Saturday in January. He wasn't wearing a helmet. But as his father, a longtime skier, watched snowboarders whizzing by, sometimes recklessly, he observed: "his looks pretty dangerous."

"And on a snowboard you go down fast and hard," Jim Bowey said. "Both your head and body go in the same direction and your feet are locked in your bindings - unlike ski bindings, which release so that you've got more possibility your legs will break your fall.

WIPED OUT

"My fiancée said: 'Mike should have a helmet.' And I said to Mike: 'You've got to wear a helmet.' And he said: 'OK, Dad.'" And the next morning they went out and bought a helmet.

The following Friday, Michael was on a school trip to Mont Tremblant, wearing his helmet for the first time, when he wiped out snowboarding and momentarily lost consciousness.

"All I remember is at the last second I saw a lump of snow and my edge must have caught it," he said. "I remember getting up, my head really hurting." Soon after, he started to feel nauseated. A friend took him back to the bus and gave him an icepack. By the time he got home, his headache was worse.

His mother, Anita Ernesaks, took him to the Montreal Children's Hospital; he was admitted and awakened every hour to have his neurological status checked.

By morning, he felt better. He was evaluated again and sent home with instructions not to do any sports or gym for a month. The forced rest is intended to let Michael recover, and to avoid a repeat injury during the recovery period, explained Debbie Friedman, program head of neurotrauma at the Children's.

Michael's doing fine, although occasionally he gets a slight headache. "When I get a headache, I remember that I was really lucky."

His parents are deeply thankful. "I can't imagine as a father having put it off another week," said Jim. "I've been telling everyone this story. You know how guys have a tendency to say: 'We don't need a helmet ...'"

They do. In a study made public last winter, the American Consumer Product Safety Commission concluded that wearing helmets could prevent or reduce the severity of half the head injuries sustained in falls and collisions while snowboarding or skiing.

ROUGH GOING

Friedman explained how even a seemingly minor head injury can be debilitating for weeks or months, causing headaches, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, leading to problems at school and at home.

There are about 2.5 million North American snowboarders, up by 50 per cent since 1993. In the same period, the number of head injuries has increased *fivefold*.

Laval 15-year-old Rémi Tétreault wasn't wearing a helmet when he wiped out in a fall while skiing over the Christmas holidays and sustained a concussion. "I saw my son fall and I could see that when he got up that he was shaken up," Normand Tétreault, a former ski coach, recalled. "He asked: 'What day is it?' He was dizzy and nauseated."

Rémi's month-long rest has ended and he's back skiing and snowboarding - with a helmet. His father is thinking he might get one, too.

"Although snowboarding is an extreme activity, kids seem to have taken to it. If they are going to do it, they should do it the safest way possible," Friedman said. "We want to alert people to the fact that head injuries can be very serious. We want kids to be active and to play, but we want them to use what we know are sound recommendations for safety, which includes wearing the proper helmet for skiing and snowboarding."

Winter break's around the corner. Think about it.