



Concussions Aren't Just a Risk for NFL Players: Hardhats versus Safety Helmets.

Insights

8.25.18

While recently meeting with a group of contractors, I noticed that three large general contractors were requiring their employees to wear safety helmets instead of traditional hardhats, despite the approximately \$120 cost per helmet. Futuristic Kask helmets were the helmet of choice. Kask states that the helmets satisfy ANSI Z89.1-2014. Technical specs. Arguably the most important aspect of the helmet was the chin straps.

I also had recently noticed a LinkedIn post by Flintco's Flint Howard, championing helmets versus traditional hard hats:

In the spirit of the Flintco Ethos: "I believe that mediocrity is unacceptable", Flintco is launching a pilot program that will introduce the use of helmets to help champion positive changes in our industry.

A week later I was teaching a masters class at Georgia Tech and learned from an attendee that his large specialty contractor had switched to helmets because a number of their large GCs demanded them.

While this seemingly sudden surge in helmet usage may seem abrupt, interest in helmets has been steadily growing since NIOSH posted on March 21, 2016 that 25% of Construction injuries between 2003 and 2010 resulted from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). (The full study was published in the March 2016 issue of the American Journal of Industrial Medicine.)

United Rental described in a November 15, 2017 article why some contractors are moving away from traditional hardhats, and quoted Jason Timmerman, EHS director for Skanska Commercial Development:

[A traditional hardhat] is only good for something being dropped and hitting you directly on top of your head. It has nothing to do with slips, trip and falls on the same level, where your head snaps backs, or falling off ladder, falling off a wall form. With any type of fall you have, the traditional hard hat will more likely than not fall off."

While adding a chin strap to a hard hat could help it stay put, helmets being tested and used by Skanska and other construction companies, which come with straps, also offer frontal, rear and side

impact protection thanks to foam padding.

The article also quoted Seth Randall, a division safety director for Clark Construction on why their self-perform group was rolling out approximately 3500 helmets:

"We've already seen positive results in a couple of incidents that have occurred, that the helmets have potentially saved an employee from any type of head trauma,"

In talking with contractors who have started using such helmets, they said that construction workers are a conservative lot and some employees carped about the new helmets, claiming they were too hot or that the strap annoyed them. One employee said that workers at another contractor teasingly said they looked like bicycle couriers, although there may have been a few more adjectives thrown in.

As Randall acknowledged,

"for some employees, the helmets, which are larger than hard hats, took some getting used to. "It's a different type of fit, and some people prefer one or the other, but we are getting positive feedback about the fit,"

Randall explained that Clark educated employees on the importance of wearing the helmets for their safety and advised that as *"they wear it, they're finally realizing that it's also a lot more comfortable as well."*

Bruce Rolfsen's July 2017 article, Safety Helmets are replacing Hardhats on Construction Sites explained that helmet purchase costs could be an issue for small builders and subcontractors.

For head protection, an OSHA rule (29 C.F.R. 1926.100) requires employers to provide head protection equipment that meets or exceeds the industry consensus standard ANSI Z89.1 issued 2009. The agency also requires employers to provide safety equipment free to workers.

Hard hats meeting the consensus standard can be bought for less than \$20 each.

Advertised prices for most helmets meeting the standard start at around \$110, depending on the specific model. Adding a flip-up visor could be an additional \$50. Bulk discounts would reduce costs, but competition also has the potential to lower costs. Kask and the French-based Petzl are among the few companies offering helmets meeting the ANSI Z89.1 requirements.

The cost is an understandable issue for contractors, but to some specialty contractors, they regard the cost as inevitable because most of the GCs to whom I talked are requiring subs to use helmets at their sites.

As to the price, one assumes that other manufacturers will ramp up their own helmets and challenge Kask, who seems to be the gold standard by which the others are being judged.

Howard

Industry Focus

Construction