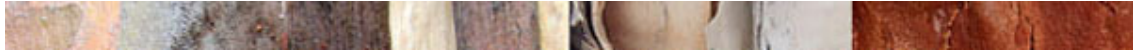


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Oxford Word of the Month – May: stack hat

noun: a bicycle helmet; a safety helmet for sporting activities.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

For many Australian children, owning a bike is a ticket to freedom. Older generations will recall the days when it was normal for kids to tear around the neighbourhood on bikes, unsupervised and bare-headed. Today attitudes have changed, along with regulations that require cyclists to wear bicycle helmets.

Bicycle helmets are also known as **stack hats** in Australia. The term is based on the word *stack* meaning ‘to crash; to fall off (a bicycle etc.)’. Early evidence for **stack hat** can be found in the media dating back to the 1950s. A news item about an upcoming cycling event gave competitors some advice on race preparation:

Don't forget to turn up next Saturday—and have corks in the handlebars for safety. Remember your track shirts and stack hats. (Dandenong Journal, 2 April 1952)

Later evidence shows the term used in the context of other sporting activities with a risk of head injury, such as harness racing:

*Barry 'Tickler' Scott received a new hat the other day for his 38th birthday. It wasn't your usual trilby or topper, but rather a **stack-hat** and pair of goggles. He has applied for a driver's licence to drive pacers in horse racing. (Tasmanian Western Tiers, 1 November 1981)*

Stack hat as a term became well-known to children growing up in the 1980s, since one very popular brand of helmet was marketed with this name ('Stackhat'). These were hard plastic shells, bright orange-yellow, used for cycling, skateboarding, and other activities. The brand name may have influenced the popularity of the generic term.

Bike helmets became mandatory for cyclists in Australian states and territories in the early 1990s. Although many cyclists objected at first, a majority are now compliant, even when flouting other conventions:

Noticed cycling along the front at Brighton last Saturday was a bloke clad in only a

bright blue g-string. He was, however, wearing his stack hat. (Brisbane Sunday Mail, 24 March 2013)

The modern bicycle helmet is a light shell with expanded polystyrene beneath a plastic casing, has an aerodynamic design, and slits for ventilation. Stack hat is a general term in Australia for this and similar types of protective headgear; the variant *stack helmet* is occasionally used. Stack hats are worn by cyclists, cavers, rock-climbers, in-line skaters, bungee-jumpers, snowboarders—and those riding scooters on city footpaths:

Proving that not all Hollywood hunks ride a Harley, Russell Crowe donned stack hat and fingerless gloves to scoot discreetly around Eastern Sydney on the weekend. (Sydney Daily Telegraph, 2 November 2004)

Stack hat will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of *The Australian National Dictionary*.

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