



— A SLIPPERY SLOPE —

NICK SCOTT visits the Cresta Run, the fabled ice toboggan track in Switzerland that's been scaring the tweed breeches off those who have risked its lethal twists and turns for 130 years.



Clockwise from top left: Italian tobogganist Nino Bibbia during the St. Moritz Winter Olympics in 1948, when he won gold; Britain's bobsleigh team training for the Winter Olympics of 1948; and spectators watching an Englishwoman on the run in 1908.

Clement Freud called it “the most reliable laxative imaginable”. Errol Flynn tried it once and once only. In 2011, having survived unscathed a six-month tour of Iraq, a British army captain parted company with his foot during one hapless ride on its corkscrew curves, which have taken the lives of four men and broken more bones than an abattoir’s crusher. We’re talking, of course, about the Cresta Run, the ribbon of packed and polished ice that has been adrenalin-dosing the more phobophilic denizens of St. Moritz every peacetime winter since 1884.

It’s impossible to overstate what a soul-stirringly horrifying experience the Cresta Run is. The course’s treacherous corkscrew twists fall 514 feet (157 metres) over its three-quarters-of-a-mile-stretch from St. Moritz to the neighbouring village of Celerina, giving it an average gradient of 13 per cent. Skilled tobogganists can reach speeds close to 80m.p.h. The crafts on which riders hurtle down this winding trough, manufactured in a metalworking shop in a sleepy valley between Zürich and Chur, resemble a stripped-down Corby trouser press.

With their eyes poised just four inches above the surface, splinters of ice pelting their cheeks, riders descend to a deafening soundtrack of steel on ice that they are biologically hardwired to associate with our primate former selves’ warning calls. They control their direction, braking and speed — the latter to only a very loose extent — using toe cleats. It’s no surprise that the dreaded ‘Cresta kiss’ — the removal of several layers of skin from the face as it scrapes against the abrasive track — is a common enough event to put scars on many of the regular faces at the Cresta Club bar, a cosy drinking den near the starting point that houses a patchwork of injury X-rays compiled to make up a full human skeleton.

“People do get hurt,” says Rupert Wieloch, a softly spoken, elegant, retired former British army colonel who, as Cresta Club secretary, is on duty in St. Moritz every day from a month before the run opens, shortly before Christmas, until it closes, at the beginning of March. “The key job I have is to balance the desire club members have to enjoy an exhilarating, fast ride, and go as close as possible to the edge to achieve the best time possible, and the requirement for it to be safe,” he says. “It’s not like sending soldiers into Sangin, Afghanistan, but I do treat it in the same way as I would deploying troops to patrol a hostile environment. I have to understand that risk impeccably, and make the right checks and balances, understanding the conditions on any given day, in terms of building the run ... One Cresta Run truism is that members will always find new ways of hurting themselves on a regular basis. The good news is, we haven’t had anyone die on the run since the early 1970s.”

Whatever you do when chatting to Wieloch, don’t refer to

what Cresta runners do as ‘sledding’. “‘Toboggans’ is the correct term,” he says. “On ice tracks around the world they have sleds — but sleds slide. We don’t slide, we ride the Cresta Run.” Is there a vast difference? “Put it this way: on an ice track, drop a curling stone at the top and it will reach the bottom. If you dropped a curling stone at the top of the Cresta Run, it would fly out at the first bank. You have to steer, control, slow down as you go — and the upper banks are even more challenging.”

‘Challenging’ is a bit of a euphemism here — he means ‘life-threatening’, unless you’re extremely experienced and accomplished. Those who undertake the run from its loftiest position, under the remains of a 12th-century church, set off unable to see what’s beyond the first bend. It turns out to be the vast bank of Curzon Corner, which is followed by Brabazon Corner — named after his Lordship of Tara, a regular Cresta gong-winner in the forties who flew half of Fleet Street to Switzerland to witness his 100th and final run on his 50th birthday. This is worth mentioning mainly for what he said once he had finished dallying with the Grim Reaper: “I was frightened to death on every single run. When exhilaration conquers fright, however, real men are compelled to continue. Only now, gentlemen, when terror totally overcomes rapture, can I contentedly give up the Cresta.” If only

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His Lordship were around today to media-prime Premier League footballers.

After Brabazon comes the equally hairy Thoma, finishing a trio of bends that would be lethal to all but the most accomplished rider. “You have to get a licence to go from the top, and if riders are showing signs of not being up to it, I can ban them from it,” says Wieloch. “I banned a couple of people last season because their riding wasn’t safe — they needed to go back to junction two, remind themselves of the basics, and demonstrate to me that their minds were back in the right frame.”

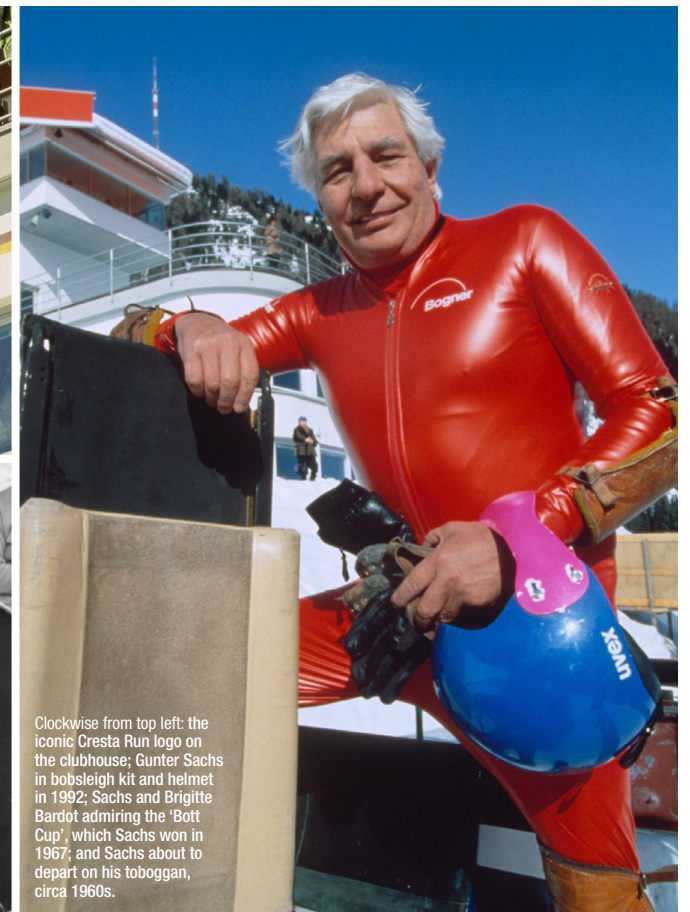
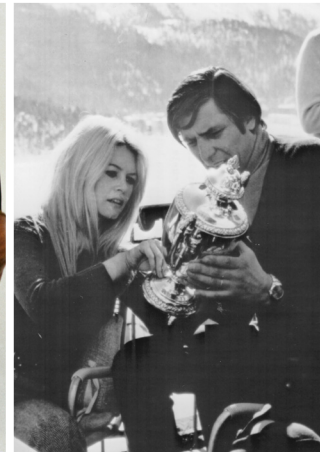
Paradoxically, though, the most notorious corner is on the lower part of the course. Shuttlecock Corner — named after the way female riders’ attire would fan out as they hurtled down the slopes — is an almost 180-degree, six-foot-high ice wall/turn that serves as a kind of safety valve by dumping riders not competent enough to continue. “Below that, you really pick up speed quickly,” says Wieloch. “Even beginners might hit 60m.p.h. there — come off at that speed and hit something, and it could be



Clockwise from top: a dedicated skeleton tobogganist, circa 1925; controller of the Cresta Run, Lt-col Digby Willoughby, in 1987; the starting point of the run in 1908; a tobogganist, circa 1904; the Royal Navy bobsleigh team in 1955; and a four-man bobsled on a banked corner, 1947.



Wintersport. 1908



Clockwise from top left: the iconic Cresta Run logo on the clubhouse; Gunter Sachs in bobsleigh kit and helmet in 1992; Sachs and Brigitte Bardot admiring the 'Bott Cup', which Sachs won in 1967; and Sachs about to depart on his toboggan, circa 1960s.

terminal. So Shuttlecock Corner means that those not up to it get dumped if they can't control it. If they steer skilfully enough to get round that corner, de facto, they're safe to continue down to the finish." English rugby player Matt Dawson is among those to have nursed his pride and limbs in the soft snow and straw into which Shuttlecock Corner tosses its victims.

The story of what is now the world's most fabled tobogganing track arguably goes back a thousand years or so, when people in the Alps started making health pilgrimages to the Engadine Valley because of its 322 days of sunshine a year, a dry climate and restorative mineral springs. "Brits have been coming out for summer for a long time," says Wieloch, "but they started coming out in the winter around 150 years ago. What brought the run's founders out was their being invalidated — being in England gave them health problems in the winter. The cold, dry air was better than London's damp, foggy pea soup."

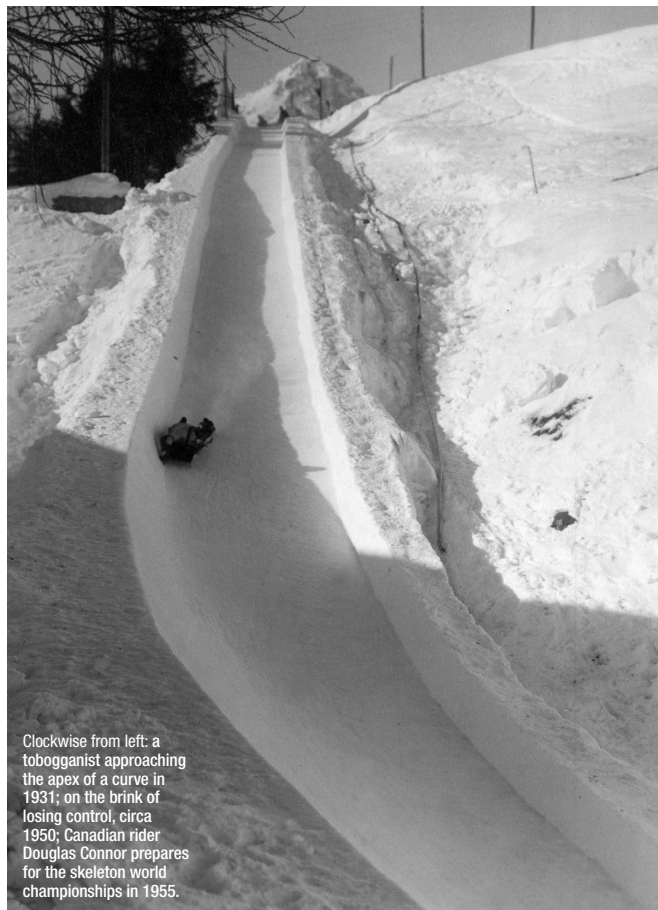
It was around this time that Johannes Badrutt, founder and owner of the famous Kulm Hotel, made a bet with some people staying in his hotel that if they came out in the winter they'd have a better time; if they didn't, the bet went, he'd refund their staying fee. The people who accepted the wager were four members of the English gentry — think lavishly moustachioed coves with chronic gout and the kind of jovial camaraderie that used to get people through the horrors of war — and their Australian friend. A winter of skating on the lake, wallowing in the natural springs,

and hurtling down the winding streets of St. Moritz, Davos, Aros and Chamonix on tea-trays followed, and the men were very happy to have lost their bet.

Word caught on among the British upper classes, as well as Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II (who was overthrown before ever setting eyes on the palace he commissioned beside Lake St. Moritz). Friedrich Nietzsche, the Shah of Iran and later a host of post-war celebrities — Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin, Brigitte Bardot — followed, and St. Moritz gradually became the Alpine playground for the wealthy and famous that it is today.

Rewinding back to 1884, our Anglo-Aussie quintet may or may not have been involved when well-heeled visitors decided to build a proper bob run (much to the relief of the region's street pedestrians), snaking from above the Hotel Kulm to the outskirts of Celerina. We know that it was George Robertson and Charles Digby-Jones, of the British winter residents' Outdoor Sports Committee, who staked out the first course. "With their boots swathed in coarse bandages they linked arms and trudged their way time and again along the line that had been staked out until the snow was trampled down for the frost to harden," writes Roger Gibbs in *The Cresta Run 1885-1985*. A couple of years later the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club, under whose auspices it still operates today, was formed.

In the 130 years that have elapsed since, this channel of ice,



Clockwise from left: a tobogganist approaching the apex of a curve in 1931; on the brink of losing control, circa 1950; Canadian rider Douglas Connor prepares for the skeleton world championships in 1955.



man-made early each winter, has served as host of the skeleton event for two Winter Olympics (1928 and 1948). A strong cultural ethos has emerged in the club, heavily influenced by public school and the military (whinging, whining, strutting and vanity are all anathema). Etiquette is strict: it is considered poor form, if dumped at Shuttlecock, not to stand up instantly and wave both hands in the air to signal that the next rider can start (wave just one arm if one is broken, the rules say in jest). Shooting clobber and helmets are de rigeur, although Lycra is creeping into the sartorial remit.

Inevitably, the famous as well as the rich have come to play, with British cricketers generally fairing very poorly on the run: in 1985 the cricketer Allan Lamb completed the run in under a minute, to win a Champagne wager with his England team-mate and friend David Gower, only to be disqualified for allegedly heating his craft's runners to gain extra speed, leaving Gower the victor; the bowler Simon Hughes, meanwhile, wrecked an impressive full-pelt run by shattering his collarbone. It was Flynn who endured the run's most inglorious ride: around 65 years ago, the Australian-born actor dug his cleats into the run and slithered down, achieving such a woeful time (180.49 seconds) that he told the marshals he'd stopped off for a cheeky snuggle with a comely blond at Shuttlecock Corner (fellow Alpha males Gianni Agnelli and John F. Kennedy were also regulars at the Cresta Club, so it's not surprising the camaraderie was ultra-competitive).

Readers will note that only male participants have been mentioned so far, and the issue of women's involvement is a mildly

controversial one — although the club bar, on the day *The Rake* visits, is filled with well-heeled, improbably attractive members of both sexes. "From when it was first built until the end of the 1920s, ladies often rode and, at the risk of sounding patronising, many were better than many of the male riders," says Wieloch, adding that there is a rumour women were banned because riding involves heavy vibrations on the chest, and concerns were mounting about a link to breast cancer. Whatever the truth of that, the situation now is that there's simply not enough interest from women to change the set-up, and the demand that does exist is accommodated by special women's races that take place at the end of each season.

These days it's a blend of crude simplicity that keeps things exhilarating and a certain degree of sophistication — in the way the club handles the perversity of the elements, for example. "We can suddenly pull out our American toboggans, which were made at the end of the 19th century and are much lighter, so they won't harm the run so much," says Wieloch.

Early each winter, a team of 12 people manually packs the run into shape. It takes two-and-a-half weeks to build from the junction, where the clubhouse is, to the finish, then another month building the section up to the top while running the existing track. "Everyone works seven days a week, except Christmas Day," says Wieloch.

Somehow, this comes as no surprise, given the sheer dash, vim and dogged eccentricity of the participants in this inanely wonderful endeavour. ■



Top: the German bobsleigh team in 1928. Bottom: the late chief executive of Ulysse Nardin, Rolf W. Schnyder, circa 1990s.

