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The Cresta Run: 'a man ought to know better'

Switzerland is the playground of the world and St. Moritz has to be the mecca, and I've tried just about everything they offer. This winter I added one more "notch" to my gun, and it was wild -- it's called the Cresta Run. Now, I've skied the best the country can offer, and it is the best anywhere . . . climbed to the top of the Alps, a wonderment of achievement in anyone's book . . . and taken a spectacular glider flight, soaring at 14,000 feet around the summit of the Matterhorn . . . a balloon flight across the Alps, landing down in a scenic marvel in Italy . . . a breathtaking bobsled run at St. Moritz. But put them aside . . . the Cresta Run beats them all.

This crazy run was designed and built in 1884 by a bunch of Englishmen who were supposedly convalescing in the pure mountain air. The run starts near the Kulm Hotel, where they were staying, and drops down the mountain to the village of Celerina in the valley. The three-quarter-mile ice track runs through a place that used to sit on the side of the mountain called Cresta, thus the name. There are 12 turns, and the 3 worst are in Cresta. The run drops over 500 feet, and speeds are faster than on the bobsled run.

Why did I decided to try this craziness? Ask my grandchildren why they jump all over the furniture and then dive off head first. Their answer is going to be as good as mine. As Paul Gallico, the famous sportswriter, said when he did the Cresta Run, "A man ought to know better," but he kept doing it. There is an attraction to this amateur sport that can only be understood after the first run. The exhilaration is tremendous. Today it's one of the big attractions in St. Moritz. The spectators get almost as much of a thrill as the riders. The big turn is called Shuttlecock, and rightly so. Riders fling out of it with the ease of a winged bird.

Overanxious people describe the Cresta in ominous terms, and it does look scary. It's claimed to be the fastest nonpowered sport. The rider belly-whops, head first, with his nose about six inches from the ice track. Experts attain speeds of 90 miles per hour, but it's a lot safer than bobsledding or skiing. There are very few serious injuries. Most of the "accidents" happen at Shuttlecock, but once in the air, when the 60-pound sled goes one way, the "dead duck" flops the other into four feet of snow and hay . . . pride is hurt, seriously.

The toboggan, unfortunately called a skeleton, is a rather ingenious device. It is about the size of a child's sled, with two runners of tubular steel. The back six inches are sharp knives. Although you belly-whop on the sled, it has a seat. The seat moves forward and back like the kind on a rowing machine. When the rider pushes his weight forward, the seat slides up and the sled rides on the runners. When the seat is pushed back, the knives dig into the ice and control the sled in the turns. It keeps the sled from skidding sideways.

After that simple explanation, I plunked down my 150 Swiss francs . . . about entitles me to take five runs. The English, who run this club, have learned a lot from the Swiss. This payment, of

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course, included the use of all the equipment and the clubhouse. The latter itself was worth a good part of the 150 SF . . . there in the clubhouse sit some of Europe's most elegant women in their furs, as they watch their menfolk slide down the mountain like a bunch of kids. I was ushered off to the dressing room where I was rigged for the event.

Like a knight in shining armor, the only thing I was not provided with was a horse. On my head they processed, via a screwdriver, a helmet. That seemed like a good idea, since that was the part of me that was to be heading down the mountain first. Then came goggles. On each arm were strapped heavy leather pads from bicep to wrist. My knees were given the same care by an official dresser.

I don't believe anyone could put on this paraphernalia by himself. Dressing was included in the package. On my feet were placed the strangest shoes I ever saw. The toes had steel rakes pointing forward. That was when I knew I wasn't getting a horse; stirrups point backward. I was told that the rakes were to help steer around the curves. I was also informed that they wouldn't stop me once I was headed down . . . just in case I had any such idea. The only way to stop was over Shuttlecock! The last part of the costume was a pair of aluminum gloves to protect my skin if I touched the ice walls of the run.

With all that explanation, the room seemed to be getting very hot. I stood stiff, upright in my mechanism, then was turned gently toward the door. I hobbled off to the starting line. If I could have run, I would have headed for my bed in the Alban Hotel!

My National Airlines DC-10 couldn't have gone any faster on takeoff to Zurich , and I was only going to Celerina. I was off!! My only thought was that if I made it to the bottom I'd try to be a good citizen the rest of my life. I dug in my rakes . . . hard. As the first turn, called Rice, arose, I decided i'd give more to charity . . . then I zommed at Shuttlecock. I dug my "stirrups" into that "horse" and we swooped around in one piece. I think I groaned with delight. The acceleration in the straightaway was breathtaking. Literally my speed was so fast that I couldn't get my breath. Flashing under the two bridges , I flew into the last dropoff, called Cresta Leap. What excitement! Then it all ended uphill. I climbed off my sled as proud as punch, but then said a very stupid thing: "Next time I think I'll try it faster."