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Blade Runners

Since 1887, fearless men have barreled headlong down the Cresta Run in St. Moritz to a crescendo of busted sleds and broken bones. It's still all downhill this winter—if you've got what it takes.

The dream begins like this:

Helmeted and leather-padded, I lie prone on a cold steel toboggan with sharp runners, hurtling down a chute of solid ice at 40 miles per hour. I seem to be a paralyzed bodysurfer traversing a frozen wave, which rolls me into another wave rising to the right. Now I'm racing toward Shuttlecock, the most treacherous turn of the Cresta Run, and becoming an athletic version of Munch's painting *The Scream*.

I awaken, but the ice is still a blue-gray blur inches from my startled eyes. It is an hour after dawn, and I'm no longer tucked into my extremely comfortable bed of dreams at the elegant Kulm Hotel in St. Moritz. I am, indeed, clinging to an 80-pound sled that is skidding out of control at Shuttlecock, where dozens of other speed-dreamers have broken femurs, tibias, ribs, ankles, pelvises and necks over the last century. A few days before, a young man flew out here, tumbling with his sled in a nasty collision that ruptured his spleen. I have already flown out once myself, rocketing 15 feet into a pile of hay and snow; the impact left me barely able to stand and wave my bruised arms as instructed. From the tower came the crisp English voice of Lt. Col. Johnny Moss, Secretary of the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club: "He's up and apparently unharmed."

Now I am in harm's way again, battling the centrifugal pull of Shuttlecock, digging my metal toe spikes into the ice while my left hand presses the toboggan's left runner blade downward. The toboggan veers back down into the run. My left shoulder and elbow smash the opposite wall hard. I careen to the right, then ricochet to the left like a pinball. The dream gets good again as I head into a section known as The Bledisloe Straight (named for the Bledisloe family, two members of whom were SMTC presidents) and whiz under two bridges. I remember what my instructor told me: Slide your body forward on the seat to speed up. I roll through the remaining curves of Scylla and Charybdis at 50 miles an hour, and cross the finish line in 61.75 seconds.

Someone once asked RAF pilot Andrew Green, who set the Supersonic Land Speed Record (763 mph) in the Nevada desert, what it was like. He replied, "Like the finish of a really quick run down the Cresta." It was only my fifth descent—and a really slow one at that—but I was already hooked on St. Moritz's most iconic sport.

Back at the clubhouse, I shed my metal and leather hand guards, and, though it was barely 9 a.m., shivering with joy, I downed a shot at the bar. For years I'd heard how sports such as the skeleton, the luge and the bobsled derived from this heart-racing pastime created by Englishmen. Now I had actually done it. My bones, spleen and pride were intact. At 53, I was feeling pretty damn macho.

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While I've ridden saddle broncs, fed sharks underwater and run with the bulls at Pamplona, I'd never done anything as exhilarating as this. The dividends of conquered fear are mysterious indeed.

The St. Moritz Tobogganing Club's membership includes English lords, Italian counts and German princes, yet it's an oddly democratic and friendly group. Without introduction, any visitor who wishes to try the Cresta Run may simply appear at the clubhouse, pay 500 Swiss francs (\$400), sign a waiver and take a beginner's lesson, which includes five rides from Junction, the two-thirds point of the course. (Only the better riders are allowed to ride from Top, the highest point of the 3/4 mile run.)

My instructor on the run was 67-year-old Arnold von Bohlen und Halbach, a German adventurer who began riding in 1959. Since then, he's broken both his femurs, his collarbone, many ribs, a few fingers and one arm. (During the previous day's beginner's class, Lt. Col. Moss had displayed x-rays of Arnold's broken bones and advised us to take out short-term casualty insurance.) Arnold gave me some advice. "Use your rakes to control the speed of your descent," he advised. "And on Shuttlecock, dig in your left rakes to swivel into the turn. You must resist the ascending tendency. You cannot just lie on the toboggan. You must think and you must ride it."

The Club provides you with gear that looks fit for a gladiator: full-face crash helmet; leather knee and elbow pads; hand guards covered with five-inch metal saucers to keep the ice from smashing your knuckles; and boots with metal spikes on the soles and what are known as "rakes" protruding from the toes. Some riders wear traditional tweed plus fours with wool socks and sweaters as if they are on their way to a grouse hunt. The younger racers sport the sleek Lycra "condom suits" popular with speed skaters. Motocross suits and jockey's vests prevent broken vertebrae. Excellent idea, old cock!

Over the next two hours, 30 of the club's top racers competed for the annual Claude Cartier Challenge Cup. Tyler Botha, a then 25-year-old South African just back from placing 21st in the skeleton race at the Turin Olympics, easily did the Cresta Run in a blistering 41.32 seconds. But just five seconds behind him was my instructor, Arnold von Bohlen, 43 years his senior—and no bones were broken.

At noon, we all retired to the Kulm Hotel for lunch, Champagne and prize-giving in the Sunny Bar, the club's official canteen. Here I met Lt. Col. Digby J. Willoughby, M.C. (ret.), an Urdu-fluent ex-Ghurkha in his early 70s who said that he'd flown out at Shuttlecock more than 50 times, the record for a club member. "A few years ago I broke my neck on that turn," he said, clutching his throat. "They had to put in four metal screws to hold my head on." It brought to mind one of the lessons in the 1933 handbook *Hints to Beginners on the Cresta*, which is still required reading for neophytes: "All attempts at shortcuts lead to the hospital."

The St. Moritz Tobogganing Club (SMTC) was founded in 1887 by a group of English sledding buffs who plotted a splendidly dangerous course from St. Moritz down to the ancient village of

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Cresta (later absorbed by the present town of Celerina). After icing-down the course and introducing steel-bladed sleds, the sport sped up dramatically. Before the advent of motorcars and aeroplanes, the Cresta riders were the fastest men on earth. Four fatalities have occurred on this run (the last in 1973), but it was all jolly good fun.

The Cresta Run itself is not a permanent structure. Every winter it is built from snow and watered until it becomes an icy snake. The altitude from top to bottom is 514 feet, the equivalent of a 50-story building, while the 3,977-foot course has a 13 percent average gradient. Speeds of up to 90 miles an hour have been recorded at the finish line. Nearby lies the St. Moritz Bobsleigh Run, which was started in the winter of 1896, by the English, of course. The main difference from the Cresta Run is that you can't fly out of the bobsled course. Bobbers ride sitting up and lugers lie on their backs, but Cresta Riders are prone—until they fly out at Shuttlecock.

Americans became active participants in the Cresta Run well before the turn of the century. Possibly the greatest rider ever was William “Billy” Fiske. From a New York banking family, Fiske was just 16 when he captained the victorious American bobsled team in the 1928 Olympics in St. Moritz. (He also led the American team to gold in 1932 at Lake Placid.) But his real passion was the Cresta Run, where he rarely lost a race, and, more extraordinarily, *never ever* flew out at Shuttlecock. Fiske enlisted as a pilot in the RAF and died in the Battle of Britain in August 1940. At the time, Lord Brabazon, a fellow Cresta rider (and Churchill's cabinet minister for aircraft production), penned an elegy in *The Times* of London: “We thank America for sending us the perfect sportsman. Many of us would have given our lives for Billy, instead he has given his for us.”

Sixty-six years later, I was led into a bar at the Kulm by the elegist's grandson, the current Lord Brabazon, known as “Brab,” who showed me the wall bearing Fiske's scratched red metal toboggan and a brass plaque. The bartender poured us several glasses of kümmel, and with tears in his eyes, Lord Brabazon reverently toasted Billy Fiske. “He was the first American to die in World War II—if not for people like him, we'd all be speaking German.” Though the club's roster is decidedly international, one original characteristic remains: All club business is conducted in English, and 16 of the 18 club presidents over the last century were British subjects. This is fitting, as without the early British visitors, St. Moritz would never have become the winter feast it is today. Situated at 5,600 feet, it has 20 rinks for skating and curling, innumerable ski runs and gondolas, luxury hotels by the dozen and an elegant nightlife. Beside the Cresta, St. Moritz boasts horse racing, polo and equestrian jumping on a snow-covered frozen lake directly below the Kulm Hotel.

Though the Wright Brothers flew a plane on that frozen lake in 1910, they don't seem to have tried the Cresta Run. Jack Kennedy and his brother Joe, Jr., made the run, as did Errol Flynn, Gianni Agnelli and former NATO secretary general Manfred Wörner. Arnold von Bohlen has coached former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau and Prince Edward on the fine points of raking. It is a sign of the SMTC's conviviality that its current membership includes two grandsons of Hitler's

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foreign secretary, Von Ribbentrop, as well as Allied veterans from World War II .

The Cresta Run was an official event in the 1928 Olympic Games held in St. Moritz. American brothers Jennison and Jack Heaton, both SMTC members, took first and second, with the English Lord Northesk in third. The Winter Games returned to St. Moritz in 1948, and a local greengrocer, an Italian named Nino Bibbia, took the gold (second was Jack Heaton, 20 years after his first Olympic performance). Bibbia was an extraordinary rider, achieving hundreds of first-place wins in races over the years.

Even as the Olympics themselves have become overly commercialized, the Cresta Run remains keenly, refreshingly amateur in spirit. There are about 30 races every year, each with a trophy. Some are open races, some with a handicap, so that older riders have a chance of winning. Among the top Cresta riders today is 38-year-old Clifton Wrottesley, the 6th Baron Wrottesley, who rode for the Irish Olympic skeleton team to take fourth place at the 2002 Salt Lake games.

The Swiss are enthusiastic riders, including Giancarlo Pitsch and Franco Gannser, who has won the Grand National race eight times. A club fixture is Adolf Haeberli, a retired hairdresser from St. Moritz, who wears a ZZ Top–like beard and occasionally descends the run in a protective suit with fireworks sparking off his back.

There are currently about 75 Americans out of 1,400 members in the club. New Yorkers Michael DiGiacomo and John Beinecke were Yale-educated friends who found their way to the Cresta Run in the mid-'80s and became hooked. Over lunch at the Sunny Bar, DiGiacomo said, “It gets in your blood. For many years, being a Cresta rider had a major effect on defining who I was.” In 2000 he published *Apparently Unharmd: Riders of The Cresta Run*. “Beinecke’s mother has never really forgiven me for introducing him to the sport,” confessed DiGiacomo, noting that Beinecke had suffered a concussion on the Run that winter.

Also at our table was Alessandro Gatti, a Milan-born executive living in San Francisco, who had been riding the Cresta for 25 years. Gatti had flown out at Shuttlecock that morning and was stoically holding a bag of ice over a swelling hematoma above his right knee. The night before, Gatti had been dancing into the wee hours at the SMTC’s unofficial nighttime clubhouse, the Dracula Club, which was founded in 1974 by playboy-industrialist Gunter Sachs, who was once married to Brigitte Bardot. His son Rolf, also a Cresta rider, has brought new life to this stylish nightclub that so pleasantly interferes with prerace sleep patterns. Gatti reminisced, “One New Year’s Eve I went straight from Drac’s down to the Cresta Run and got on my sled still wearing my tuxedo. It was a great way to start the New Year.”

Few women have ridden the Cresta, and the club has not allowed women since 1929. “Too distracting,” said one male member. To that point, a sign in the all-male locker room reads: where women cease from troubling and the wicked are at rest.–smtc. But wives and girlfriends are always on hand.

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In the week I spent flying down the Cresta at breakneck speed, I began to see the run as a crucible of fear, a kind of wine press of the human spirit that unites riders of different ages and nationalities. It was intoxicating. One of the SMTC's founding fathers, the first Lord Brabazon of Tara, wrote: "The Cresta is like a woman with this cynical difference—to love her once is to love her always."

Ah, but to love is to suffer. I flew out at Shuttlecock three more times that week, banging my leg and shoulder. It earned me the right to wear a special tie emblazoned with shuttlecocks and to attend the hilarious Shuttlecock Club Dinner at the Hotel Steffani. In the morning, bruised and limping, I left St. Moritz by train, knowing I'd be back next winter for more cruel love on ice.

Sidebars:

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