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Downward HO!

Saint Moritz's Cresta Run, the most famous toboggan track in the world, has been an old boys' club for more than a century. Lee Marshall finds the way in.

Wearing a green cricket sweater and tweed knickers, Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Moss could appear more retired Eton headmaster than retired British army man. But when he begins to lecture a roomful of terrified beginners about to attempt the Cresta Run—the world's only amateur ice toboggan course—his barbed military irony kicks in with a vengeance.

"Take off all rings," he instructs. "If your hands get caught beneath your toboggan they can act as a guillotine—and severed fingers make a terrible mess on the ice." Moss, 63, then proceeds to unroll a poster of a human skeleton made up of patched-together X-rays of broken bones, spinal injuries, punctured organs, and other inconveniences previously suffered by members of the Saint Moritz Tobogganing Club, which operates the Cresta Run.

That X-ray ghoulish flashes through my mind about 20 minutes later. I am flat on a toboggan, having made a final check of my knee, elbow, and glove guards, my helmet strap, my boots and their projecting metal rakes, and the mechanism that slides the seat of the sled forward into the "fast" position. Fast? I'll settle for getting down in one piece.

The 120-year-old Cresta Run is an Alpine legend, a three-quarter-mile thrill ride that is one of those things to do before you die (or die doing). Though the SMTC is a members-only club—it reviews some 50 applications for full membership every year, about half of which are granted—anyone, as long as he is over 18 and male, can ride the course by joining the Supplementary List. SL membership is granted to every man who applies—provided he's physically fit—and entitles him to five rides during a single season, from just before Christmas until the end of February. Complete beginners are given a pep talk beforehand and assigned an instructor. And like every SL member, they are outfitted with all the necessary equipment, except ski gloves and goggles.

Novices do the run at Junction, a point that is about a quarter of a mile down the course, right outside the delightful 1964 clubhouse. The more accomplished tobogganers start at Top, and many members say you aren't a true Cresta rider until you've set off from there.

But here I am at Junction. And as I prepare for my plunge, Giancarlo Cattaneo, my 57-year-old instructor—and one of the few ever to have completed the run from Top in under 51 seconds—gives me a final tap on the back and tells me once more not to be a sack of potatoes. The starter's assistant lifts the foot that has been holding my toboggan back, and slowly I begin to slide, my chin forward about six inches above the ice. In about three seconds I've picked up speed. In about six I'm going as fast as I want to be. In about nine I'm going a lot faster than that.

And here, way before I'm ready for it, comes Rise, the first bank on the course. Now what was I

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supposed to do on the first bank?

The Cresta Run is famous not only as a toboggan course but also for the air of kooky British derring-do that hangs about the club and its members. Saint Moritz may be in the heart of the Swiss Alps, but the Cresta Run is, as poet Rupert Brooke once wrote in quite another context, a "corner of a foreign field that is forever England." Though much of the membership list of 1,300 reads like a roll call of the European aristocracy, English is the common language in the clubhouse and bar, and all the club's presidents—aside from one long-serving American, Harry Hays Morgan, and Canadian Doug Connor—have been British.

Tobogganing took off in the Alps in the 1870s, well before skiing. It was in Davos, 40 miles from Saint Moritz, that the British writer John Addington Symonds popularized the sport as both a hair-raising new pastime and a way for rather aloof English travelers to meet the locals. The fad soon spread to Saint Moritz, and in the 1884–85 season five regular winter visitors—four English, one Australian—built the first version of the Cresta Run by linking arms and tramping down the snow along the course they had laid out. In 1887 a group of riders, with the help of hotelier Peter Badrutt, formed the Saint Moritz Tobogganing Club. In an odd reversal of the trend for female emancipation in sports, women were banned from riding the run in 1929, after posting some very respectable times in SMTC's early years. Today just one race a year—on the last weekend of the season—is set aside for the wives and daughters of club members, though there are stories of intrepid women sledders doing the run at night. Other than this hard-and-fast rule, the club welcomes one and all; membership is not an exclusive preserve of American tycoons and European aristocracy. "One of our most valued members, and one of the best Cresta riders ever, is Nino Bibbia, who is a retired greengrocer in Saint Moritz," says Moss, who also serves as the club's secretary. "It's not just about how fast you can do the run. It's about the fun and enjoyment that you can contribute."

Every year the Cresta Run has been created more or less the same way it was in 1885. The design, however, has grown gradually safer and more refined as riders have become faster. In the last week of November, an Italian builder named Natalino Bera and his crew dump bulldozersful of snow along the course, then set about molding the run, using only shovels, brushes, and a metal form resembling an upturned bedstead to shape the steep-walled straights. "It's all done by eye," Moss says, "following a method that has been handed down from generation to generation for more than a century." Bera has a personal interest in getting the course right: He's a keen Cresta rider himself.

The technique employed on the Cresta Run is something like the one known as bob skeleton, which is done at the Winter Olympics. In both, riders lie facedown and headfirst on a small racing toboggan. In tobogganing, the boots have rakes; in skeleton, they don't. The main difference is in the course itself. Skeleton races take place on bobsled tracks, with their great banked curves. If you were to throw a curling stone down a bob run, it would stay on, kept in by those up-and-over edges; if you threw the stone down the Cresta Run, it would fly off at the first or second bend. When the Cresta Run is carved out of the snow every year, the banks are cut deliberately (some would say

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sadistically) short.

"You need to put a lot more energy into riding the Cresta than the bob skeleton," says Lord Clifton Wrottesley, 37, currently one of the top three Cresta riders and an Olympic skeleton competitor for Ireland. Wrottesley first did the run when he was 22 and became totally hooked.

The most notorious section of the run is Shuttlecock. Tumbles are common; there have even been four deaths (the last was in 1973). Those who wipe out here become automatic members of the Shuttlecock Club, a fraternity with its very own club tie.

As I came into Shuttlecock, I tried to remember a diagram in the little red guide book Moss had given me ("Chairman Mao's hints for beginners," he called it). It showed the perfect line to take on the bank. But everything looked different from this angle: All I could do was hold on for dear life and remind myself that if I raked hard with my left foot, it would take me down off the lip of the curve, avoiding a collision with the piles of straw waiting to catch those who crash here.

Amazingly it worked. I dropped out of the bank, shifted my weight forward on the sliding seat as Cattaneo had instructed, and trusted blindly in his advice that from this point on I should just "go for it." The ice walls sped past on Bledisloe Straight; I have only the vaguest memory of hurtling under the road and railway bridges and tackling the final, gentle curves of Scylla and Charybdis.

What I do remember, very clearly, is getting woozily to my feet after piling into the rolls of orange foam at the end of the course, turning to the rider who had gone down before me, and saying in a shaky voice, "Again! Again!"

A seasonal membership to the Saint Moritz Tobogganing Club (December–February) costs \$415. For details, log on to cresta-run.com.

LEE MARSHALL, DEPARTURES contributing editor, wrote about Diego Della Valle of Tod's in the March/April issue.

The Thrills and Spills of the Cresta Run

TOP

From this starting position, which is reserved for experienced riders, the course is three quarters of a mile long. First-timers who do the run from Top are often told "Congratulations, you are now a Cresta rider."

JUNCTION

By taking off here, beginners shave off a quarter of a mile from the run's total distance.

SHUTTLECOCK

By far Cresta's most dangerous turn, Shuttlecock has caused countless broken bones and has even claimed four lives. The most recent death was of British naval officer Lieutenant Rory Neilson in

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1973.

BATTLEDORE

Michael DiGiacomo, in his Cresta Run book, *Apparently Unharmmed*, quotes club vice president Arnold von Bohlen und Halbach: "[In 1946] I saw a rider fall at Battledore. He got up, spit into his hands. There were three teeth."

CHARYBDIS

Art dealer Bruno Bischofberger pioneered the kamikaze position—arms to the side instead of in front—in the 1970s. The technique led to three falls by Bischofberger at Charybdis, one breaking several ribs.