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## Terror and exhilaration on the Cresta Run

I want to scream but I can hardly draw breath. I am careering down a gulley of solid ice, my head poised above the fleeting blue surface as the steel runners of my toboggan shear and rasp beneath me.

A bend ahead forces me up a left-hand bank, then I crash back down on the other side, smashing my hand against the vertical wall before righting myself. As the run straightens up, the toboggan quickly gathers pace, but then I begin ricocheting against the sides like a human pinball. My head judders, making it hard to keep my eyes fixed on the path ahead.

After an apparent eternity – in fact a mere 66 seconds – I fly past the finish line, and the slope rises, bringing me to a gradual stop. I marvel at the miracle of my survival, and remember to inhale once again.

This is my first attempt at the terrifying, exhilarating and highly addictive Cresta Run. Since 1885, when English tourists staying at the Kulm Hotel in St Moritz built an icy tobogganing trough to amuse themselves during the winter season, Cresta riders have risked life and limb by hurling themselves down the course and negotiating its 10 corners at speeds of up to 80mph.

Created by hand every year – these days using artificial snow – the run is open for just nine weeks, from late December until the end of February. Starting at St Moritz, it follows the contours of the landscape, dropping 157m over a distance of 1.2km through the hamlet of Cresta to the town of Celerina. There are two starting points: Top, which is reserved for skilled riders, and Junction, lower down beside the clubhouse, where beginners cut their teeth and sundry other body parts.

The St Moritz Tobogganing Club, which builds the Cresta and organises the races, is run on an entirely amateur basis – an astounding fact given the dangers involved. None of the office-holders receives payment, not even the club “gurus” who rise before dawn to initiate beginners in the mysteries of the ice. In a world of increasingly professionalised sport, the Cresta is a last redoubt of the British amateur – a key part of its attraction for the 1,300 mainly British, Swiss, German and Italian members.

In the late 1960s the Cresta also attracted my father, whose abiding memory of his day as a beginner is of crashing out at Shuttlecock corner – “apparently unharmed”, in the Cresta phraseology – and witnessing Brigitte Bardot handing out the race prizes at the Kulm Hotel.

Nowadays novices are asked to present themselves at the clubhouse at 7am, bringing goggles, gloves and tough, warm clothes. The morning starts with the “Death Talk”, in which David Payne, club secretary, sets out the risks we are about to run. “It is inevitable that practised riders will end up in hospital at some time,” he warns.

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To illustrate the point, he unveils a life-sized X-ray of a body, a composite of injuries sustained by venerable members over the years. Resembling some ghastly cyborg full of pins, plates and screws, it has the rapt attention of our group. "I don't want you to come back and say: 'I never realised it was dangerous,'" Payne adds. He need not worry.

Next to speak is our guru, Nigel Broadhead, a 66-year-old retired farmer with 42 years' experience on the run. He gives a short talk on the principles of Cresta tobogganing before leading us to the changing room, where we are kitted out with helmets, thick leather knee and elbow pads, hand protectors and heavy boots fitted with vicious toothed spikes on the toes.

Broadhead takes us outside for hands-on instruction, where we stand shivering. Our group consists of myself and six Swiss men – a banker, lawyers and architects – who wanted to give this "crazy" British pursuit a try.

First we are shown a Cresta toboggan, a fearsome-looking structure weighing 30kg, with steel runners on either side and a sliding padded seat. Dented, scratched and beaten about, with strips of duct tape reinforcing the padding, it presents an impression of great age.

"Yes, many of them are 80 years old," Poldi Berchtold, a 73-year-old Swiss member and former champion, tells me later. "But the steel is good and strong."

We are shown how to lie on the seat, where to place the hands and, most importantly, the correct positioning of the feet so that we can choose to "rake" the surface of the ice to control our descent. If the feet are too close together, or at right angles to the run, the spiked tips will bounce off the ice, giving no traction.

Broadhead then introduces us to the chief obstacle of the course: the infamous Shuttlecock corner, a sharp left-hand bend responsible for the great majority of Cresta falls. If riders approach too low, too high or too fast, they will rise up the bank and burst over its lip, crash-landing into soft snow and straw.

This being a very British affair, those who fall here automatically become members of the Shuttlecock Club, earning them the right to wear the Shuttlecock tie.

The first run is so laced with fear that merely to finish feels like a crowning achievement. On the second, Broadhead wants us to ease out the throttle by sliding forward on the seat after Shuttlecock. The effect is amazing: the toboggan takes off like a jet engine.

On the third attempt, I am surprised to find myself relaxing at high speed, and I start to get an inkling that this absurd sport could be great fun.

When the racers and other riders gather in the clubhouse afterwards, the same sentiment is etched across their grinning faces. The Cresta is a test of nerve, physical co-ordination and quick thinking that, combined with the adrenaline rush, sets your senses alight.

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These qualities seem to appeal strongly to self-made businessmen and military types, who are well represented in the membership rolls. And it is very much a man's club: women are not permitted on the track, though there is one ladies' race a year. Like the resort of St Moritz, the club has more than a whiff of wealth and glamour. Fierce debates on the perfect line take place at the bar while a white-jacketed barman prepares Bloody Marys. Cigar smoke occasionally drifts through the air (there is no federal smoking ban in Switzerland), completing the period tableau.

On my final run, I decide to throw caution to the wind. Lifting my legs up from the start, I rapidly gain speed heading into the first two corners, but steer through them cleanly. As I approach Shuttlecock, though, things begin to go awry. I start the bend too low and come in too fast. My toboggan climbs up the bank and, as the bend sharpens, I shoot over the top like a cork out of a champagne bottle.

My toboggan flies off ahead of me and I take a tumble. Clambering to my feet, I wave both arms towards the clubhouse to show I am fine, and hear Payne, the club secretary, intone over the tannoy system: "Pickford is up... and apparently unharmed".