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The Cresta Run: Rugby's Matt Dawson tackles St Moritz's legendary toboggan track

Get Shuttlecock wrong and you'll wipe out. I couldn't get the warning out of my head as I perched on my ancient toboggan waiting for the start signal. I felt my pulse begin to quicken. My body was just inches above the sheer ice, my hands --inside special thick protective gloves - were damp with sweat.

Success or failure would come down to how well I could control a rapidly hurtling sledge at one key moment.

At the clubhouse we had been given terrifying evidence of just how seriously you could injure yourself if things went badly wrong. What was the name of the man who had broken his neck?

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Dismal thoughts were interrupted by the signal to go. Suddenly, I was off, plunging downhill at a speed that felt uncomfortably . . . breakneck.

In my rugby career I've been lucky enough to pick up some of sport's glittering prizes - but completing my third and final run on a toboggan down the Cresta Run, I enjoyed an adrenalin rush every bit as intense as the day we lifted the rugby World Cup in Australia.

My travelling companion - Olympic rowing gold medallist James Cracknell - had set me a time to beat of 59.41 seconds. As I launched myself down the helter-skelter run, painfully ricocheting off the Cresta's concrete-hard frozen walls, I knew success or failure would come down to the infamous Shuttlecock turn.

Get it right and I might overtake the time set by Crackers. Get it wrong and I would fly off the track, risking serious injury. All Shuttlecock casualties, however, can count on one thing: hoots of laughter from the discerning crowd watching from the members' balcony of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club.

This month this highly distinguished organisation - which has served generations of Alpine thrill-seekers - celebrates the Cresta Run's 125th anniversary.

A visit to the club provides a vivid reminder that while in recent years winter sports have become the Olympic gold medal preserve of other nations, it was we British who pioneered them.

When I entered the clubhouse, my first impression was that it was like a rowing club or a traditional golf club such as the R&A in St Andrews. The heritage and style of the club reveals a mixture of influences: there is a strong Armed Forces background to it. It also feels like an Oxbridge members'

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club.

There is that distinctive feel of tradition and history: on the wall is an honours board and you can't help being impressed by the extraordinary displays of historic photos.

When Crackers invited me to join him in St Moritz to test our mettle on the Cresta Run, I accepted in a flash. I used to ski quite a bit until I was 19 when I started playing rugby. James had done some cross-country skiing but no real downhill skiing, so we were both a little sceptical about how we would get on in the snow.

James told me that tackling the Cresta Run was something he'd always wanted to do --high on his wish list of Top 20 Winter Thrills. Asked if he knew of any other lunatics who might like to give it a go with him, naturally he thought of me.

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I should confess I have been tobogganing before - I was about eight years old, and I fell off and ended up having 16 stitches down the front of my nose. I'd never tackled anything like the Cresta Run, though, and I loved the buzz and thrill of it.

Until I arrived at the St Moritz Tobogganing Club, I really had no idea what to expect. It's a private club founded in 1888, three years after the creation of the Cresta Run, which is built from scratch every year with snow which is then iced.

The run starts in St Moritz, winds its way through the hamlet of Cresta and ends in Celerina. It is approximately three-quarters of a mile long with a drop of 514ft. The run has ten corners, all of them named. The most famous - or infamous - is Shuttlecock: a long, low, raking, left-hand bank about halfway down the run, designed as a sort of safety valve.

The club's official blurb says: 'If riders are out of control, they are certain to go out of Shuttlecock into a carefully prepared falling area of snow and straw.'

It's estimated that about one in 12 tobogganers wipe out at Shuttlecock (though the average is higher for beginners like me). Fallers at Shuttlecock automatically become members of the Shuttlecock Club and are entitled to wear a Shuttlecock tie. I wasn't planning on joining this particular club.

Before James and I were let loose on the run, we had to attend a briefing. Club secretary David Payne showed us a composite X-ray of a skeleton which illustrated all the different broken bones acquired over the years by those attempting the Cresta Run. The idea is to scare you into realising how dangerous this is and show you how you should use your boots to rake - or brake.

Fascinated, I was busy making notes into my iPhone - 'Lord Bledisloe, shattered foot' - when suddenly Mr Payne spun around and glared at me: 'Dawson, would you mind concentrating on what

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I'm saying?'

I went puce with embarrassment. It was as if I was back in the fourth form at school. I looked at Mr Payne with puppy-dog eyes. 'But I'm only making notes on what you're saying,' I whimpered.

'I'll take questions afterwards,' he snapped. It seems I had transgressed by having a mobile phone in my hand. New technology is frowned upon here: perhaps I should have been jotting in a leather-bound journal.

During the scary parts of the briefing, James and I were looking at each other as if to say: 'What on earth have we got ourselves into here?' But assurance was at hand when we looked at the members at the back of the room. They were mostly over 40, with some over 60. I was thinking to myself, it can't be that dangerous if these guys are going down the run several times a year.

My feeling was that there are certainly risks - common injuries include broken fingers - but if you follow the briefing and do things in the order you're supposed to, you minimise them.

My 'guru' - Cresta-speak for tobogganing tutor - was Arnold von Bohlen und Halbach, who has also coached former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau and Prince Edward. German nobility is well represented here. I was slightly startled to discover that current membership of the club includes two grandsons of Hitler's foreign minister, Von Ribbentrop.

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While speed is of the essence, the Cresta Run's twists and turns needed to be treated with respect. Guru Arnold offered sage advice on the need to 'rake' --digging in the metal points on the toes of your boots in order to slow down.

My first two runs down the Cresta, however, were completed without great alarm. The mark of success is a time under one minute. My first time was 65 seconds: not bad.

After my second run I waited at the bottom of the course for David Payne's announcement. He sits at the top of the Cresta tower combining the twin roles of adjudicator and commentator.

'Dawson - 59.91 seconds, well done!' he barked. Terse - but in the stiff-upper-lip world of Cresta, this counts as the heartiest of congratulations.

As I climbed back up for my third and final run, I was slightly dizzy with adrenaline and woozy with self-congratulation.

I had a ten Swiss franc (£6) bet with Crackers as to who could record the fastest time. I felt the money was safe after my subone minute performance.

James Cracknell is not an Olympic double gold medallist for nothing, however. He completed his third descent ahead of me. As I was waiting to go, I could see the clock. It flashed up 59.41 seconds.

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He had absolutely gunned it.

Guru Arnold must have seen what was going through my mind. 'Take it easy on Shuttlecock - remember to rake,' he said.

Determined to beat Crackers, I kept the brakes off and headed to Shuttlecock with the feeling that I was firmly in the groove: surely nothing could go wrong.

Of course, plenty could go wrong. Perhaps I was too fast, maybe I got my entry into the turn slightly wrong. Suddenly my toboggan grew wings and I found myself flying through the air with the greatest of ease.

Conscious of the dangers of bashing myself on the toboggan, I had the presence of mind to make sure we were well separated before I crashed in an ungainly heap in the snow and straw. How they chortled on the balcony.

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I was shaken but stirred. That one minute while you're racing downhill is one of the greatest buzzes you can get in sport. I can easily see why people come back here again and again - the Cresta Run is addictive.

It had been a fabulous day. We had been up at dawn for Krug champagne and a bacon sandwich and we followed the Cresta Run with hot chocolate at the luxury Badrutts Palace hotel.

James and I then hit the ski slopes. We toyed with the idea of flapping about on blue slopes and embarrassing ourselves. But we decided we would go right to the top and go straight into all the red runs. We had the time of our lives.

It was a thoroughly wonderful day. I'll be back - and next time I'll be ready for Shuttlecock.

Travel Facts

The Cresta Run (www.thecresta125.com) offers beginners tuition, equipment and up to five rides for £350. With the run open for just another four weeks, anyone keen to have a go this season should make arrangements immediately, says the SMTC.

SWISS (0845 601 0956, www.swiss.com) offers flights to Zurich from Heathrow, London City, Birmingham and Manchester, with return fares starting at £89.

The Swiss Transfer Ticket offers round-trip rail transfers from the airport to St Moritz from £75. Visit www.swisstravelsystem.co.uk or call 00800 10020030.

Double rooms at the Hotel Steffani (www.steffani.ch) during the Cresta season in February start at £330 per night.

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