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The Cresta Run

This winter marks the [125th anniversary](#) of the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club, known more commonly as The Cresta Run. I cannot be there to celebrate, but some good friends of mine will make up for it. I was never a member of the Club, but I have been an SL ("supplementary member") rider for several Februarys in the late 1980s and then off and on in the 1990s. I was the unofficial photographer at the Grand National in February 1998 under the direction of the legendary Club Secretary, Lt.-Colonel Digby Willoughby. Click [here](#) to see a few photos. Perhaps my impressions as an outsider will be of interest.

There are a number of problems with getting involved in this sport. The first is its uniqueness. There is only one Cresta Run, and it is open barely two months of the year. There is nowhere in the world that you ride head-first in a toboggan or a luge, except at the Cresta. In the luge, which is an Olympic event, you are lying flat on your back, feet first. In an old-fashioned wooden toboggan, one is usually sitting up.

At the Cresta, you are lying flat on your stomach on a steel toboggan - here called [the skeleton](#) - helmeted and padded, holding onto the sides of the vehicle, as your specially-equipped boots rake the ice behind, controlling the speed and direction. The boots are steel-tipped, with several points sticking out, like an erratic stock market chart. In this way, you have the feeling of being at the controls of something, at least while stationary. With experienced riders, the boots are smoothly tipped so as not to inhibit speed.

The Run commences at "Top", which is up the hill from the concrete bunker of a clubhouse. But only the experienced riders are allowed to start there. It gets steep rather quickly, with some bone-chilling banks or turns - especially "Thoma" - prior to passing the Clubhouse. I witnessed some spectacular crackups at Thoma. Almost all the SLs commenced their ride at "Junction" which is right in front of the Clubhouse. Every newcomer must start at Junction, after a makeshift lecture on the spot by a veteran. Junction is less dangerous, and the slope is reasonable.

Soon after starting from Junction the first time my mind went racing, "This cannot be happening. I am going way too fast and there is no control. Why didn't somebody warn me?" Somehow I made it safely to the end, which was in Celerina, the next village over. Sheer luck. I was simply holding on for dear life. Of course, they - Colonel Digby and my Swiss mentor, Freddie Weissmann - had warned me, but nothing can quite prepare you for the experience. Your nose is approximately 4 inches from the ice; due to that proximity, you seem to be traveling a hundred miles an hour, even though you are going less than half that. (The riders from Top do reach 85 mph.) Unlike skiing, there is no way to stop and regroup.

A past president of the SMTC, Roger Gibbs, has written: "To go down the Cresta Run for the first

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time is an awe-inspiring experience, and even for a skilled and seasoned performer of the highest class nothing can be taken for granted." That was in a booklet published in 1985 to celebrate the centenary of the SMTC.

As a sort of safety-valve to keep the unwise and reckless from going too fast into the lower banks, there is a wide turn called "Shuttlecock" which is the third turn down from Junction. You must negotiate Shuttlecock carefully and be in control or you will fly out of the Run, landing in an area of snow and scattered hay. The fall can be ugly and dangerous, depending upon all sorts of factors, some of which you cannot measure. It happened several times each morning, and Colonel Digby would ring a bell when it did. Then everybody in the Clubhouse stopped for a moment to see if the rider was going to stand up and signal that he was alive and functioning. Digby was located in "Tower", atop the Clubhouse, from where he controlled the day's events via a loudspeaker which reverberated down the valley.

Sometimes a rider did not get up right away. Sometimes very slowly. Once he did, Digby would say something optimistic but noncommittal like "So-and-so appears to be unharmed." (In rare cases a helicopter would be called to transport the fallen. A crackup was possible anywhere en route.) If the skeleton stayed in the Run without its rider, the Colonel would repeat "Achtung Schlitten! Achtung Schlitten!" to warn everybody further on to stay clear. It was a heavy device, and would not stop until it had reached Celerina.

Digby was concerned for the wellbeing of each and every rider, member or SL. He did not discriminate and was not impressed by anyone. Everybody appreciated that and looked up to him. I saw Digby admonish more than one self-satisfied fellow after what seemed like a great ride: "Slow down dear boy! Please slow down!" On another occasion, he spotted a lady and child wandering too close to the Run down the line past Junction. His response: "Take that child away from the Run for God's sake...it might hurt one of my riders!"

I went out a couple times at Shuttlecock and saw stars, nothing more. But my last fall was complicated and had long-range consequences. I did what I had been instructed to do--throw the skeleton one way and myself another--while going over the edge. Nonetheless, when I landed I glanced up to see the sled, the skeleton, right behind me, closing fast. I had run out of time. It hit me in the leg and in the upper, inner thigh. A close call. I still have the indentation. I landed in the Badrutt's Palace Hotel infirmary where an old Cresta hand, Dr. Berry, taped me up. I was limping for a week, which meant I could not ski.

Right then, I knew a career in the Cresta was not in the cards. I loved skiing, and I saw no reason to jeopardize that by doing the Cresta. I just wasn't talented enough to do both. To get to the point where the Cresta was not actually dangerous, it seemed to me, would require a lot of practice. I would need to buy a decent, modern skeleton, instead of the old-fashioned ones which were set aside for the SLs. And a good pair of boots and a padded suit.

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Then there was the matter of getting up in the morning. An SL rider must rise and shine early to put his name on the list, say, by seven or so. The full-fledged members take precedence. This meant getting out of bed at 6:00. That meant not going fantee the night before. It is a nightmare doing the Cresta with a hangover. By the way, everything happens in the morning. The rides and races would end around noon. Afterwards, the ice becomes too soft in the sun, at least for the aficionados who are interested in speed. The Run needs to repair itself for the next day. The more solid the ice, the faster the ride.

Depending upon the number of members who showed up, and if there were a race that day--with names like "The Curzon Cup", "The Gunter Sachs Challenge Cup", "The Cartier Challenge Trophy", "The Coppa D'Italia", "The Grand National"--an SL might get just one or two rides, if that. The rest of the time, you watched for someone to go out at Shuttlecock and socialized in the Clubhouse. The SMTC is very clubby, the English being the founders of the Club when the British Empire was at high tide. They remain in charge of this little remnant of the empire. There is also a genuine camaraderie among all participants, owing to the fact that you are doing something special which few others can or will do.

Women have been banned from going down the Cresta since 1929, except on one day at the end of the season. The reason given was that the sport is too dangerous and that, in addition, lying on one's chest during the ordeal would be contra-indicated for the female anatomy. That may be true, or it may be just a fanciful yet plausible-sounding excuse given by the Committee. In any event, there were plenty of women in the Clubhouse, wives and girlfriends and sisters. None seemed interested in taking up the sport. They were happy to play a supporting role.

Midday, Colonel Digby would call out "Terminato! Terminato!" Everybody would adjourn to [the Sunny Bar](#) at the nearby Kulm Hotel for lunch, more socializing, and more drinks. (There was, of course, a well-stocked bar in the Clubhouse.) By the time you had lunch on the terrace, overlooking the frozen lake, and especially if there had been a race and a prize presentation, and if you were inclined to have a few more drinks in the bright sunshine, well by then, the day was shot. By the time I changed into a ski outfit and made it up to Corviglia, it might be 4 o'clock. Which is to say, tea time. How could I pass up the [incredible desserts](#) at Mathis? Impossible. Afterwards, I was barely able to ski to Chantarella, half way to town, before the sun disappeared behind a mountain. It was time for a nap before dinner.

To be a successful Cresta rider requires dedication, talent, luck plus more time in the day than some can manage. Most importantly from my perspective, [Colonel Digby](#) has retired. He passed away in February 2007 in St. Moritz, a day before he was to watch the Willoughby Cub. Terminato! Digby smoked incessantly and with utter abandon, like only an English gentleman can. Everybody assumed that he would live forever. They were wrong. He is irreplaceable. Happy Anniversary.

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An abbreviated version of this article can be found on [Taki's Magazine](#).