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The Cresta Run

Soon after starting from “Junction” the first time on the Cresta Run, 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 from St. Moritz. Sheer luck. I was simply holding on for dear life. 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 best riders *do* reach 85 mph.) Unlike skiing, there is no way to stop and regroup.

A past president of the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club, Roger Gibbs, has written: “To go down the Cresta Run for the first 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. This winter marks the [125th anniversary](#) of the Club, known more commonly as The Cresta Run. I was never a member, but I have been an SL (“supplementary member”) rider for several Februarys in the late 1980s and then off and on in the 1990s. Under the direction of the legendary Club Secretary, Lt.-Colonel Digby Willoughby, I was the unofficial photographer at the Grand National race in February 1998.

“Colonel Digby spotted a lady and child wandering too close to the Run somewhere past Junction. His response: ‘Take that child away from the Run for God’s sake...it might hurt one of my riders!’”

The Cresta Run is open barely two months of the year. There is nowhere in the world where you ride head-first in a toboggan or a luge, except at the Cresta. You lie 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 a stock market chart.



The Run commences at “Top”, which is up the hill from the concrete bunker of a clubhouse. Only the experienced riders are allowed to start there. It gets steep quickly, with some bone-chilling banks prior to passing the Clubhouse. As a sort of safety-valve to keep the unwise 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 or you will fly out of the Run, landing in an area of snow and scattered hay.

It happened several times each morning, and Colonel Digby would ring a bell when it did. Then

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everybody in the Clubhouse stopped for a moment to see if the rider was going to stand up and signal to Digby that he was alive and functioning. Digby was located in the “Tower”, atop the Clubhouse, from where he controlled the day’s events via a loudspeaker which reverberated down the valley. If the skeleton stayed in the Run without its rider, the Colonel would bellow: “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. I saw him 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 somewhere past Junction. His response: “*Take that child away from the Run for God’s sake...it might hurt one of my riders!*”

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 like myself might get just one or two rides. 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.

Women have been banned from going down the Cresta since 1929, except on one day at the end of the season. The excuse given is 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.



Midday, Colonel Digby would call out “Terminato! Terminato!” and 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. Time for a nap.

To be a successful Cresta rider requires dedication, talent, 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.