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## Death or glory: Simon Usborne rides the Cresta Run

[IMAGES]

You wonder if it's not too late to back out when the day starts with the Death Talk.

As David Payne, the man in charge, prepares our group for an assault on the world's oldest and most terrifying toboggan run, a grisly composite of X-rays hangs against a window. "As you can see," Payne says, "it is possible, some would say likely, for you to break every part of your body riding the Cresta Run." The shattered pelvis bound with what looks like a bicycle chain belongs to a man who crashed and "died three times on the operating table". He lived to ride another day, but four men have lost their lives here. Would I soon join them?

The death talk wrapped up, the disclaimer signed, the knee, elbow and gladiator-style knuckle guards strapped on, the crash helmet cranked tight and the steel-spiked shoes laced up, I lie prone on a 40kg tea tray, my chin inches from the ground. Every muscle is tense. A man's boot planted in front of my sled is the only thing stopping me from hurtling, headlong and with limited control, down a steep, winding chute of ice at 50mph. Shivering with cold and fear, I grip my toboggan as if my life depends on it – which it does. And then the man removes his foot.

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The minutes that follow are the closest I will come to experiencing the thrill of one of sport's great spectacles. I've been an armchair fan of the Winter Olympics for as long as I can remember. When else do you get the chance to see men with guns in catsuits, or broom-wielding maniacs guiding large rocks across ice? But what would it be like to have a go? Last month, I swapped my sofa for the Swiss Alps to have a shot at one of the most exhilarating events on the Olympic schedule.

Skeleton, you may remember, is the sport in which riders lie on their fronts on open sleds and descend head-first at brain-rattling speeds of 80mph (luge is the feet-first event, while bobsleigh riders sit in giant bullets). And guess what – we're pretty good at it. Shelley Rudman, who bagged Britain's only medal (silver) at the last Games in Turin, is among four world-class skeleton riders competing for Britain, a country whose hopes of Winter Olympic glory often fall faster than a hapless ski jumper.

And it all began here in St Moritz, where, 125 years ago, a band of bored, barmy toffs with more hyphens and titles than a Bullingdon Club mailing list, began racing through St Moritz on sit-on toboggans. In 1885, a banked course of compacted snow and ice was devised to keep these trailblazing daredevils off the streets. The Cresta Run, which winds for three-quarters of a mile from

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St Moritz to the village of Celerina (via the hamlet of Cresta) was born. Soon, riders adopted the prone position that has become standard, using stripped-down, bare-bones steel sleds that resembled skeletons. Later, toboggans lashed together in line became the first bobsleighs.

What began as a novel pastime snowballed into a serious, albeit resolutely amateur, sport in which men pushed the limits of physics – and their bodies – to reach incredible speeds. "You have to remember that in the 1880s, trains weren't going at 50mph and there were no motor cars," says David Payne, who is secretary of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club. "It's extraordinary to think it now, but these were the fastest people on earth."

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Back on the track, my sled immediately starts accelerating at an alarming rate. I have been instructed to use the steel spikes attached to my boots to control my speed by one of Cresta's "gurus", a 70-year-old German aristocrat called Arnold von Bohlen und Halbach (the Cresta Run still attracts some of the world's greatest names. A Navy rider here today has four first names whose initials spell something more manageable. He is Lieutenant D A S H Hooton).

"We knew you were going too fast," Arnold tells me later. Pinballing back and forth against the rock-hard ice banks, I get round the first two bends OK. But then comes Shuttlecock, the most notorious and feared part of the course. A sweeping left-hander with relatively shallow banking, it acts as the Cresta's safety valve. Approach it too fast, and you're guaranteed to be spat out of the run.

Sure enough, I haven't raked with my feet enough and barely have time to anticipate what is about to happen when my toboggan starts rising up the bank. And then I am airborne – briefly – before I cartwheel and finish in a heap. Winded, shocked but in one piece, I stagger to my feet. "Usborne is up... and apparently unharmed," Payne announces over the Tannoy.

The course record from Top stands at 50.09 seconds. The fastest man from Junction, the point, two thirds up the track, from which Cresta virgins must start, achieved a time of 41.02 seconds.

Beginners are told to aim for 70 seconds. But to do that, they must get to the bottom.

Determined not to bail out again on my second run, I dig my toes in hard and crawl round Shuttlecock. Entering the long straight after the danger zone, I follow Arnold's instruction and drag my body forwards on the sliding seat that supports me at the hips, lift my toes, and let rip. It feels like suicide – most of my body is hanging over the front of the sled – but it works and the next few seconds are a terrifying yet utterly exhilarating blur of diamond-hard ice, gritted teeth and bruising body slams. I cross the line in 73.39 seconds, having topped 50mph. Not fast enough.

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A break in the beginner class gives the Cresta's top riders a chance to train for tomorrow's big event

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– the Morgan Cup. And these guys mean business. They wear skinsuits over motorcycle body armour, topped with specially made, aerodynamic helmets. Whizzing past the clubhouse, arms swept back in the "Kamikaze" position and leaning gently to steer, they are indistinguishable from the riders who'll go for gold in Vancouver. Indeed, the Cresta has a rich Olympic history. When the Olympic caravan rolled into St Moritz in 1928 and 1948, the Cresta hosted the skeleton. Britain placed third on both occasions, with the Earl of Northesk nabbing bronze in 1928.

Skeleton then disappeared from the Olympics. The Cresta prospered in isolation and increasingly resembled a relic of a bygone age. Women are still banned and many riders still sport the unofficial uniform of plus-twos and woolly jumpers.

But then, at the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City, skeleton made a triumphant return to the biggest stage in winter sport. The greatest Cresta rider of the modern era seized an opportunity to show the world that those batty Brits from St Moritz had what it took to mix with the pros.

Clifton Hugh Lancelot de Verdon Wrottesley, also known as Lord Wrottesley (or Clifton) raised eyebrows in Ireland when he rocked up at the Salt Lake track wearing green, white and orange – and sporting a voice honed at Eton and Sandhurst. Unable to get a spot on the British skeleton squad, the very English peer of the realm had used his Irish heritage – his grandmother was from Galway – to find another team.

The "lord of the ice", as the BBC nicknamed him, raised more eyebrows still when he was in third position at the halfway stage. "Everybody looked at me as a bit of an Olympic tourist," Wrottesley says. "Cresta riders are seen on the circuit as a bunch of playboys who don't really take the sport seriously. I wasn't considered a threat." Eventually, Wrottesley narrowly missed out on a bronze, finishing fourth to become the most successful winter Olympian in Irish history.

Wrottesley did not compete at the 2006 games but trained another, and ultimately less successful, Cresta graduate – a South African called Tyler Botha. "The speeds are about the same," says Wrottesley, 41, comparing the "agricultural" Cresta to the polished tracks of the pro circuit. "But the Cresta is harder. It's balls-out, gutsy riding. You come out of it and end up with 35 kilograms of sled tumbling around you. If it hits your head, you're toast." Indeed, the last person to die here, in the 1970s, was killed by his sled at Shuttlecock.

Cresta riders risk limb as well as life. The worst accident of recent times came in 2008, when Captain Bernie Bambury's right foot hit a marker post at 80mph. High on adrenalin at the bottom, he asked a friend, "Is my ankle broken?" before hearing the reply: "It's not broken, it's gone." Surgeons re-attached Bambury's lower leg, which was retrieved hundreds of yards up the course. But when the soldier learned he might never regain full mobility, he requested an amputation.

On my third run, I try a new steering technique at Shuttlecock but for reasons that remain a blur, I lose control. The run spits me out again, as if Cresta herself is irritated by my incompetence. I let

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out an involuntary, gasping growl as, this time, I crunch a shoulder as I tumble. But, thankfully, I'm still "apparently unharmed".

Payne says it's the desire to beat your best time that makes Cresta riders gluttons for punishment. Even Wrottesley admits to being terrified every time he rides. But he's made of sterner stuff. Fear of Shuttlecock means my fourth run is my slowest, at 75.42 seconds.

By now my shoulders are squealing after repeated ice punches and my hands ache with the pressure of gripping the sled. I know that with every run the risk of serious injury rises but perhaps the Cresta spell is beginning to take effect. The urge to beat 70 seconds overcomes my instinct for self-preservation and I take to the track for one more shot.

This time I manage not only to survive Shuttlecock but to carry speed through it. I still lack control, slamming into walls of the remaining bends, but when I slow to a halt on the upward sweep after the finish line, my rib-rocking heart rate tells me this was my quickest run. Payne reads the time over the Tannoy. I have dropped 100 metres, over a distance of half a mile, in 67.59 seconds.

I'm offered the chance to take on the Cresta for a sixth time, but happy with my sub-70 time, and with images of those X-rays in my mind, I decline. I've barely gone halfway to matching the derring-do of Lord Wrottesley or his speed-needy forerunners, but as I return to my armchair to watch the skeleton crews do their thing in Vancouver, it will be with a new-found respect – and the bruises to show for it.

### **Virtual Vancouver: the game**

*You don't have to leave home to be a top skier, discovers Mike Higgins*

I've been skiing once already this season and I'm going again. No, I can't afford it and no, I don't feel guilty about it. So, between ruinously expensive alpine jaunts, what's a snowhead to do stuck in the dank British winter, hundreds of miles from the nearest decent piste? Watching the Winter Olympics will certainly provide entertainment: the skin-tight outfits, the preening egos, the spectacular cock-ups, the dodgy English. And that's just the BBC coverage. But I am desperate to be out there, and this is how desperate: I'm going to play the Winter Olympics' official video game, Vancouver 2010. It comprises 14 of the sportier events (but sadly no ice dancing or curling – where Team GB is rightly feared). An opportunity for me to hone my only slightly less than Olympic standard snowsport skills? Or merely a reminder of why I haven't played a computer game since I lost Lara Croft in a South American jungle a decade ago? Let's take the game through its paces...

### **Alpine Skiing**

'Speed is your friend!' That's what my brother likes to bellow at me if I show the slightest hesitation anywhere on the mountain (or at the hotel buffet). And so it proves with the alpine skiing events. The piste shines convincingly, the game pad rumbles as you rattle along, and there's a pleasing

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schraalp! as you round each gate. The problem is, you'd need the time-rich lifestyle of a 12-year-old truant to master the controls to get you round the slalom, giant slalom and Super G events, in which I slither about horribly. So instead I turn to the downhill – the event of Konrad Bartelski, the Bell Brothers and Chemmy Alcott, names to set a-fluttering the hearts of Sloaney gels and boys everywhere. And, surprisingly, I think I might actually learn something here: pick your line early, stay off your edges, stay in the crouch for as long as possible, and go like the clappers.

*Real mountain rating: 6/10*

### **Snowboarding**

This is better. The fiddly technicalities of skiing never translate to computer games quite as well as the more intuitive feel of boarding. Somehow the body position of the avatar more naturally reflects the reality of snowboarding. Still, my carving skills are not what they might be, so I skip the slalom event for the rough-and-tumble of the snowboard cross, in which four competitors battle against one another and a rolling, steeply banked course. So, even if I don't win, at least I manage to ruin the race for the guy next to me – which is the true spirit of 'boarder-x'. (The Xbox I played on connects to the internet, but I struggled to find online opponents playing the same computer game to race against – maybe they were all watching Newsnight...)

*Real mountain rating: 8/10*

### **Ski Jump and Aerial Skiing**

Edwards. Calgary. '88. What British snowsports fan can look at the dramatic sweep of a ski jump and not swell with national pride? And admiration. I've stood at the top of a ski jump, in Norway, and looked down – and suspect I know why the Eagle had bottle-end glasses: to obscure the sight of the abyss beneath him. And the game does crank up the tension as you wait at the top of the jump for a favourable headwind. But thereafter it is, surely, too easy to put in a respectable jump. How very un-British. Where's the danger?

Aerial skiing is the event in which competitors launch themselves off a huge, near-vertical ramp, spin like a majorette's baton and then, miraculously, land on their feet and pump their fists in the air. The computer version is no different: try as I did to land on my head, and teach the rosy-cheeked 17-year-old I'm in control of a life lesson, all I could do was nail gravity-defying jumps time and again.

*Real mountain rating: 3/10*

### **Skating, Bobsleigh, Skeleton and Luge**

Over on the short-track ice-skating circuit, the spirit of Wilf O'Reilly is with me. This event in the game demands of you the rhythmic capabilities of ice-skating proper; for several laps I hold off the challenge of a big Dutch girl, before capitulating.

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Finally, it's the luge and bobsleigh. This is more like it: a sitting-down event, like cycling and rowing, which bitter, loser Australians say we excel in. And so it proves. Because I've never raced a luge (feet-first tea tray), skeleton (head-first tea tray) or bobsleigh, I can't say how realistic this feels (see Simon Usborne's exploits opposite). But for a video-game novice like me, these are the most enjoyable parts of Vancouver 2010. Point the tea tray/bobsleigh down the track, adjust the steering when your man goes too high up the bank and the game pad judders, and don't fall off. Real mountain rating: 8/10

*Vancouver 2010 for Xbox, Wii and PS3 is in shops now, priced £49.99*

### **Vancouver 2010: What to watch**

#### **Skiing**

Events include the Slalom and Super G, but the Men's Downhill is the 100m sprint of the Winter Games – the blue-riband event, with speeds in excess of 75mph. If you watch only one thing in Vancouver, make it this (and not just for the crashes, which can be spectacular).

British hopes: Slim, though Chemmy Alcott has an outside chance after securing recent top-10 places. US sensation Lindsey Vonn is a hot bet in the Ladies' Downhill.

*Highlights: Men's Downhill: 13 February, 7.45pm; Ladies' Downhill: 17 February, 7pm*

#### **Bobsleigh**

There are 170 Bobsleigh athletes training in Vancouver – though sadly no Jamaicans. The men compete in Fours and Pairs, while the women go down in Twos. Athletes start with a sprint before clambering into their sleds and reaching speeds of up to 90mph.

British hopes: World champions Nicola Minichiello and Gillian Cooke are tipped for gold. Cooke will be hoping not to repeat a recent wardrobe malfunction that saw her bare bottom broadcast to the world via YouTube.

*Highlights: Women's Bobsleigh: 23-24 February, 1am and 2am*

#### **Curling**

The 500-year-old Scottish sport isn't always the most thrilling event – but don't say that to the broom-wielding athletes who'll vie for the medals at Vancouver. Working in teams, their goal is simple: to get their stones closest to the rings down the ice.

British hopes: An astonishing 5.6 million people stayed up to watch Britain's women take gold in 2002. It could be the men's turn this time – they're world champions.

*Highlights: Women's final: 26 February, 11pm; Men's final: 27 February, 11pm*

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### **Figure skating**

Combining elements of dance, gymnastics and high camp, Figure Skating is, for many viewers, the only reason to watch the Olympics. There are three events – Singles, Pairs and the set-to-music Ice Dance.

British hopes: Ice Dance duo John and Sinead Kerr have an outside chance of becoming Britain's first skating medallists since Torvill and Dean – and who can forget them?

*Highlights: Ice Dance final: 23 February, 12.45am*

### **Freestyle skiing**

The balletic Aerial performers and pneumatic Mogul men are being joined for the first time by the gladiators who do battle in Ski Cross. Athletes ski elbow-to-elbow as they tackle a demanding course of jumps and turns in what could become the most exciting event at the Games.

British hopes: Team GB has a woman competing in each of the Aerial, Moguls and Ski Cross events, but none has a shot at a medal. Canada is hoping for home success in the Ski Cross.

*Highlights: Men's Ski Cross final: 21 February, 9pm approx.*

### **Skeleton**

Conceived by daredevil Britons 125 years ago, Skeleton is one of the most terrifying sports at the Games. Athletes push off down the Bobsleigh run before riding souped-up tea trays, head-first, at speeds of over 80mph.

British hopes: Shelley Rudman, who won a silver medal in 2006, is among four world-beating skeleton riders who will compete in Canada.

*Highlights: Final heats: 20 February, 12.45am (Women's); 3.30am (Men's)*

### **Ski jumping**

Very impressive, though once you've seen one guy do an impression of a flying fox, you've kind of seen them all (unless they crash). Jumpers can make leaps of more than 145 metres.

British hopes: No athletes. In 2002, Glynn Pedersen became Britain's only Olympic ski jumper since Eddie 'The Eagle' Edwards became a global celebrity by finishing last at the 1988 Calgary Games.

*Highlights: Large Hill final: 20 February, 8.30pm approx.*

### **Snowboard**

Once seen as a scruffy upstart by the Olympic establishment, snowboarding has become hugely popular since its 1998 debut. Competitors do battle in Slalom, Cross and Halfpipe events. Red-

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haired American prodigy and world-beating Halfpipe rider Shaun White could emerge as Vancouver's biggest star.

British hopes: A four-strong team. Zoe Gillings is a Cross rider with perhaps Britain's best chance of climbing the podium.

*Highlights: Ladies' Snowboard Cross final: 16 February, 8.40pm; Men's halfpipe final: 18 February, 3.15am*

### **Speed skating**

If you prefer your skating without sequins, the speed events are some of the most thrilling at the Games. Australian no-hoper Steven Bradbury became an instant Olympic legend when a massive pile-up left him the only man standing in the 1,000m Short Track final in 2002.

British hopes: Seven skaters will fly the flag in the Short Track events. Jon Eley is hoping to improve on his fifth place in the 1,500m at the Turin Games, and is part of an in-form Relay team.

*Highlights: Men's Team Pursuit final: 27 February, 8.51pm*

*All times are GMT*