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# Skiing in St Moritz: head first down the Cresta Run

There are two words that can turn even the most pragmatic of men into a quivering wreck: Cresta Run. Having conquered the fearsome ice toboggan run in the Seventies, Clement Freud called it "the most reliable laxative imaginable". It hurled English rugby player Matt Dawson off its most terrifying bend – a six-foot-high curved ice wall called Shuttlecock – into a pile of snow and hay.

It has killed four men, broken the bones of hundreds of others, and last year relieved a British army captain of his foot. Even the dashing Errol Flynn went down it only once, never to return. So why, friends kept on asking me, did I want to do it? Other than the obvious thrill – that of seeing the world hurtle by at 80 miles an hour – it was a sentence in Cresta membership rules that spurred me on: "Women are not permitted to ride the Cresta Run."

Women were allowed to try and defy death in the same way as men until 1929, rather gamely hurtling down the 514-metre slope in gaily decorated hats and long dresses. Why they were banned depends on whom one talks to.

At the press conference to launch the Cresta Run's 125th anniversary in 2010, held in the Swiss Embassy in London, club secretary David Payne explained that although women had been allowed to toboggan since the club's inception in 1885, at an AGM in the 1920s, the committee decided that, for women's own good, they should be banned. (A couple of women riders, I'm discreetly informed by riders at the event, got breast cancer; the view was taken by the men perhaps women banging their chests on toboggans might have contributory factor.)

But inside the clubhouse at [St Moritz](#), where male members and their families converge to watch the start of the race, then soothe their bruises with jugs of gin fizz, schnapps and monster cigars, former Cresta President Julian Board has another theory.

"The trouble was that women got too bloody good," he explains. "The crunch came when a woman in the Grand National finished higher up than her husband. The ones who did it then were very good, and very determined – they did it in 60 seconds. And that wasn't popular, so the committee had to find an anatomical reason for them not to do it. Now, I think, the course has got so professional, and so dangerous and fast, that most women I know really don't want to do it. Put it this way: they're not lobbying us to change the rules. And we like it that way."

In the clubhouse, most women I talk to agree with Broad; of the couple of hundred women who have converged for the season (an alcohol-fuelled, riot of high-spirited parties, fancy-dress balls, car rallies, and carousing till dawn, which runs from December to the end of February) most seem content at being allowed only to take part in the non-official Ladies Race, on the last day.

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Susie Hill, 57, has ridden every year since 1985; first under her husband's name (the only way then that women could ride, other than to slip up in a disguise of plus-fours and helmets while the secretary wasn't looking), then for the first time under her own name in 1990 (when the rules were amended so that men's handicaps wouldn't be affected by their wives' slower times). In 2009, trying to break her best record of 50.92, she broke her shoulder so badly she's had to have physiotherapy ever since.

"That did bring back to me just how deadly the Run can be," she says. "Although I've been in the RAF and wouldn't say I'm one to get scared, one only has to see someone with an Ice Kiss [where part of the face is shaved off when passing an ice wall to close] or some of the breaks to know that it's not for sissies."

Other women tell me, while they have done it, they wouldn't do it again. Even Barbara Hosch, 29, who in the Swiss women's Bobsleigh team, has done the Cresta four times, and says it is "far, far more terrifying than the Bob. That, you can't fall. This you can – last year I fell badly, so I am pretty nervous."

The most enthusiastic of the women, naturally, are the young 'uns: a dozen or so leggy, coltish, smartly educated 20 and 30-something (mainly British) women, whose fathers, grandfathers, grandfathers and fiancées do the run – and want to give it a bash themselves. Or women in their forties and fifties, who haven't done it yet, and want to try it just so they can say they have.

Women like Lucy Crawford, 26, who is doing it on her grandfather's toboggan; Annabel Hope, who is being kitted out in leather padded knee-pads, elbow-pads and ferocious circular metal knuckle-guards by her fiancée, Tiggy Moore-Brabazon, whose family has been so long involved a corner of the run is named after them. And the only other female outsider (not related to a male member) to have been given a special dispensation, for the first time since 1929, to give it a bash is the first female president and chief executive of Krug, Margareth "Maggie" Henriquez.

To celebrate the 125th anniversary of the run, the men have also agreed – for the first time ever and as a one-off – to have a ladies race within the calendar, and have even had the Ecstasy Trophy made (so named, president Sir Brian Williamson says, "because when you watch girls come out of the run, some squeal, some whoop and some go quiet and smile"). The next official ladies race will probably be in another 125 years, I'm told. If I don't do it now, I never will.

Sitting, listening to secretary David Payne give his "death lecture" before the race, Maggie and I both wonder whether we have taken leave of our senses, as friends have suggested. Although only an hour before, the Men's locker room (with its "STRICTLY NO LADIES" sign) was full of noisy, nervous women being kitted out by their menfolk, at 9am in the Clubhouse bar, everyone is deathly quiet.

First, Payne points to a patchwork of X-rays that have been stuck together to make up a full human

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skeleton, showing injuries sustained by the Cresta committee. As well as showing the brutal-looking plates and bars that have been deployed to mend legs, arms, collar bones and spines (including a back brace inserted into a member's badly damaged back the week before), there is a pretty frightening-looking metal bicycle chain, keeping together a pelvis: "Major Kelly's massive hip injury. He died three times before doctors pulled him through," Payne says matter-of-factly.

Then the 54 of us – 30 British, and 24 American, Hungarian, Swiss, Austrian and French women – are given a lesson in how to ride a toboggan, Cresta-style. In contrast to Bob runs, where two or four people sit (on bobs) or lie on their backs (on luge), on the Cresta, riders lie face forwards on their stomachs, their helmeted heads about four inches above the snow floor of the annually-carved ice Shute.

Feet, fitted with metal spiked "rakes" on the toe that are pointed backwards at 45-degree angles, are the only way to slow down. Shoulders, we're told, act as a steering mechanism: leaning in left to turn left, and right to turn right. "And if you do fall out, make sure you throw yourself well clear of your toboggan," Payne advises. "The last person who died on Cresta was hit by theirs. It weighs about 100lb, so is fairly treacherous."

Outside, having each taken turns to lie on a toboggan, to grip the front handles with elbows tucked in and to slide the padded seat beneath our pelvis backwards (to slow down) and forwards (to fly), we line up beside the run. I have been to the lavatory three times in half an hour. A kind member has bought me a stiff Scotch. I have borrowed good equipment: a pair of traditional plus-fours and tweed jacket (although every rebellious bone in my body wants to be wearing the Victorian dress and bonnets of the last women who officially raced), the former president's crash helmet and the current secretary's toboggan.

As my name heads closer to the top of the list on the official board above the Run, I feel utterly sick. My heart is thundering so hard I can feel the blood pumping in my eyeballs. My hands are sweating beneath my metal knuckle-guards. And I keep having to take my helmet off because my rapid breathing is steaming my visor up. A voice in my head keeps saying: "It's not too late to chicken out".

Then my name is called: "Lisa Grainger to the box" and, almost in a trance, I'm helped down on to the track, where I lie down on my toboggan and quietly survey the ice below my nose. A few last-minute tips are given by my "guru" George Bingham, and then the bell rings – a single loud "ding" – and I'm off to the shouts of "Rake, rake, for god's sake rake!" as I hurtle downhill, feeling totally out of control, white walls flying past me, at me, in front of me, as I smash into hard, compacted edges, soar up ice walls, try and steer left and right, and finally, as promised, seeing a long, straightish white stretch in front, press my body as far forward on the toboggan as I can get it, for what I know will be my final burst of speed at the finishing line. Almost as soon as it's begun, it's over.

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What did I feel like? Like a leaf being hurtled through rapids, I felt totally out of control, yet aware of every sight and sensation: the raking and scraping sounds, the dark bends and curves, and the terrifying G-Force around Shuttlecock, as the toboggan was sucked up onto ice walls and then whisked back down. And afterwards, I have never felt elation like it; I could actually feel the adrenalin coursing through every capillary in my body, as I let out a great hissing "Yesssssssss! I did it!", before my respectable time of 73.25 seconds was announced and I felt kisses of congratulations from all around.

Then, offered a second chance, I did it all again (a rather more terrifying course, thanks to the fact the mist on my visor turned into a sheet of ice, rendering me almost blindfolded.) Every ounce of terror was forgotten half an hour later, when the club gathered to celebrate over Krug, donated by an equally thrilled Maggie: men offering congratulations and kisses, Bardot-lookalikes in full-length minks coming to say how brave/mad we were, and waiters proffering glasses of champagne and suitably fabulous trays of salmon and caviar canapés.

Would I do it again? Having watched on television the horrific crash that killed luge rider Nodar Kumaritashvili at the Winter Olympics, I am more apprehensive. But then again, the combination of danger, speed, eccentricity and partying spirit of the club were so intoxicating that I'm almost tempted next year to cut my hair, don a moustache and plus fours, and head to St Moritz for another go. I certainly wouldn't be the first woman to do so ...

- The Cresta season runs until March 2; for information, and to see a film about the run, log on to [www.cresta-run.com](http://www.cresta-run.com). Non-members (men only) can buy Supplementary List membership for a fee of SFr600 (£365), covering the cost of a guru and the first five rides. British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies daily to Zurich from City Airport; from where two trains (the SBB then the RhB) can be taken to St Moritz Most Cresta guests stay at the Kulm Hotel ([www.kulmhotel-stmoritz.ch](http://www.kulmhotel-stmoritz.ch)), whose Sunny bar is decorated with Cresta memorabilia, trophies and photographs; rooms from SFr325. For packages and more information on St Moritz ([www.engadin.stmoritz.ch](http://www.engadin.stmoritz.ch)).