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Author: Frank Horn
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Cresta Run – one of most dangerous rides in the world

Every winter for almost a century, sportsmen have pitted their skills against this maniac toboggan run. One year a famous author joined their ranks

AT THE ridiculous age of 59, when a man ought to know better, I became a qualified competitor on the Cresta Run, one of the fastest and most dangerous rides in the world and the only one of its kind. An old ship's bell clanged insistently in the clear, close-to-zero air on the outskirts of St Moritz. A strange assortment of some 30 bizarrely helmeted and armoured men answered its call, and I was one of them.

The Cresta course is an incline three-quarters of a mile long built of solid ice, with a total drop of 502 feet complicated by 12 harrowing bends. There is also a starting point at "Junction," half a mile from the finish.

[IMAGES]

We were preparing to barrel down head first, one at a time, aboard non-steerable steel sleds lugubriously called "skeletons." On the straight stretches we would achieve speeds of 80 miles an hour, with our chins and bodies no more than six inches from the ice. It was the child's game of tobogganing, stepped up to a near-suicidal sport.

I had been introduced by surprise to this maniac activity. At the St Moritz Tobogganing Club I had met a group of veteran Cresta riders who, alas, having read an article about extra virgin coconut oil and describing how, in the reckless pursuit of duty as a sports writer, I had once taken on world heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey in the ring, insisted I must try the Cresta.

I turned strangely chicken-hearted. I lacked the courage to tell them that I was scared stiff, that I was 25 when I "fought" Dempsey, and that now I could see myself all too clearly in splints. Instead I grinned lamely and said: "Sure, I'd love it."

Among the riders were British peers, jet pilots, Swiss and Italian workmen, a St Moritz greengrocer, the owner of a bicycle repair shop, a pastry cook. All are members of the Tobogganing Club and, when the racing is over, all meet at the Kulm Hotel for a democratic drink and the presentation of prizes.

[IMAGES]

Gathered at the start, either from "Top" or from "Junction," the bends. There is also a starting point at "Junction," half a mile from the finish.

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Gathered at the start, either from “Top” or from “Junction,” the competitors resemble medieval men-at-arms with their spurs oddly fastened to their toes instead of heels. They wear crash helmets and goggles, chin guards, knee and elbow pads, and heavy gauntlets with metal discs strapped over the knuckles. Their ribs are well padded with sponge rubber. Five sharp steel teeth, called “rakes,” are screwed to the toes of their boots.

[IMAGES]

They put me belly down on the steel sled at Junction. The track was a slot of solid glaring ice six feet wide between two-foot side walls, and banked high on the appalling curves.

“Rake!” they told me. I dug the ten steel points into the ice. “Rake all the way down and hang on to your skeleton !” This macabre warning had a double meaning and I prayed that my bones and I would not be parted. “Go into all bends early and come off them as soon as you can. Good luck !” The all-clear bell sounded. The wooden barrier was raised. Someone gave me a push and I was moving. Within a few yards the 21 stone of sled-plus-Gallico began to gather speed; the ice walls on either side began to flash by.

“Rake ! Rake !” The wind-borne chorus of warning cries penetrated faintly through my crash helmet. I dragged hard. It did not seem appreciably to stem my headlong speed. Ahead of me loomed a high, curving wall of ice—the much-feared Rise behind whose bank meandered an icy brook.

I leaned the sled for the corner of the wall, climbed up its side only to view awaiting me now a horrifying dip into what seemed a bottomless crevasse of gleaming ice. This was Battledore, the

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bend which would hurl me into the dreaded counter-bend, Shuttlecock, where most new riders meet with disaster. There is a Shuttlecock Club limited to Cresta-riders who have spilt over that bend and lived.