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## How David Gower got it in the neck on a daredevil descent of Cresta Run

The former England cricketer's tale of crashing on the famous run gives insight into the bravery and skill of the late Nino Bibbia

[IMAGES]

You couldn't hang around the Cresta Run for long, David Gower said this week, without hearing the name of Nino Bibbia. The Cresta may have been an English invention, created by the Victorian gentlemen who founded the St Moritz Toboggan Club, but Bibbia, an Italian greengrocer, was its hero. *Der Skeletonkönig von St Moritz*, a German newspaper called him: the king of the skeleton bob, the minimalist metal sled on which he zipped down the celebrated run more than 3,000 times in his career, head first at speeds exceeding 80 miles an hour.

Bibbia, whose death at the age of 91 was announced the other day, stood out as the Fangio of the Cresta Run, a modest, unpretentious man whose name, thanks to his victories in getting on for 200 races, was synonymous with the challenge and allure of his chosen discipline.

More glamorous figures flocked to test their nerve and machismo over the 1,200-metre course, from the Marquis Alfonso de Portugal, the Spanish nobleman who dated Hollywood stars and was killed at the wheel of a Ferrari in the 1957 Mille Miglia, to Gunter Sachs, the German heir to an industrial fortune and the third husband of Brigitte Bardot. Among the British stalwarts was the first Viscount Trenchard, who, as a young man, took on the Cresta while partially paralysed from a bullet wound suffered in the Boer War and, upon crashing heavily, found that the impact had miraculously readjusted his spine, allowing him to walk freely again. The first Lord Brabazon of Tara, a pioneer aviator, a member of Churchill's wartime government and a captain of the R&A, was 71 years old when he won the Cresta's Coronation Cup in 1955 at an average speed of 44mph.

Created from natural ice each year, the full run drops 514 vertical feet. Experienced competitors begin their attempts from the imaginatively named Top while beginners and the less expert set out from a point part-way down, called Junction. All of them stand a chance of leaving the course at the famous Shuttlecock bend, where those who lose control at high speed hurtle into a bed of snow and straw – a landing that, at such velocity, is no guarantee against injury. The record for the full run, with its 10 banked curves, is a fraction over 50 seconds and has been held by a Brit, James Sunley, since 1999. Women competed in the early years but the adoption of the prone position was considered anatomically inappropriate and they have been excluded from competition since 1929.

Favoured competitors are invited to join the 1,300-strong membership of the SMTTC, some of whose members attend meetings in old-fashioned knitted cricket sweaters emblazoned with the club's

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crest. Gower is a member, the former England cricket captain having made his Cresta debut almost 30 years ago, on the eve of a tour to the West Indies, although he never tried his luck from Top.

"A week before a Windies tour was probably very good timing to get used to handling fear, expectation and speed," he said at The Oval on Thursday, during a break in England's one-day defeat at the hands of Sri Lanka. "Actually, the Cresta is akin to building up your ability to face fast bowling. When you're a youngster it seems very quick but as you get used to it, sometimes it seems slightly easier. The Cresta is the same. As a beginner the sensation of speed is apparent immediately but then you realise that in fact you weren't going very quickly at all.

"When you get used to having your face a few inches off the ice and leading you down the run, things do start to fall into place. It's an extraordinary thing to do – and, like a lot of sports, you get entranced and hooked and then your ambition is to bring your time down split second by split second."

A couple of years after his initiation, he joined the many to have flown off at Shuttlecock. "I landed cartoon-style on my head, which was not clever. I didn't break anything but technically I had a slight displacement of some facet joints in my upper neck which meant that a month later, when I reported back to Leicestershire for pre-season training, I still couldn't move my neck. So the first week of training was about mobilising this neck, which had locked solid." A sort of reverse Trenchard, you might say.

For the top riders, Gower points out, the Cresta is about subtlety: "You're balancing on an inch of metal and you control it by moving your head or shifting your weight. It's pure timing. The elite riders don't have to be 25 years old and in peak physical condition. People like Nino Bibbia can ride excellent times all their lives."

Gower's relationship with St Moritz came to a spectacular end a few years later, in an incident that would have done credit to any of the international playboys who helped build the town's reputation. At the end of a mid-winter evening's celebration he left his hired car on the frozen lake, without paying much attention to the exactly where he had parked it.

"It was the lake where they have horse races, polo, motor rallies. At that time in January most of the ice is so thick, nine to 12 inches, that it can cope with anything. But where the water comes in off the mountain, it's relatively thin.

"I left it on the lake, shimmering in the moonlight, and by the time I got up in the morning it was no longer there. So it had either been spirited away by helicopter-powered thieves or it had slipped to the bottom – which was confirmed by the Schweizer Polizei, who sent divers down as soon as they could and floated it back up again. By that stage Herr Budget of Zurich had decided it was now worth 20,000 Swiss francs less than when we first borrowed it, and he charged me accordingly."

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No such escapades are recorded against the name of Nino Bibbia, who was delivering groceries in St Moritz one day after the war when a customer noticed a case of Chianti on his horse-drawn cart and offered to swap it for a skeleton bob. Soon afterwards, when the 1948 Olympics came to St Moritz and an event was held on the Cresta Run, Bibbia became Italy's first Winter Games gold medallist. Fifty years, countless course records and a cabinet bulging with trophies later, and well into his 70s, he finally called time on what must surely have been one of the great careers of amateur sport.