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Skeleton's Predecessor Is Still Alive at Cresta Run

ST. MORITZ, Switzerland — Alexandros Kefalas had just plunged down a bobsled run more than a mile long at almost 80 miles an hour. His time was 1 minute 11.93 seconds, only a second slower than that of the fastest rider during a recent practice here. But in skeleton a race is often decided by hundredths of a second.

“Room for improvement,” he said after his ride as he adjusted the metal runners on his skeleton, a steel sled that carries a rider headfirst down a twisting ice track where forces of up to 5Gs can be encountered on turns. The sport has been a regular event at the Winter Olympics since 2002.

Kefalas, 29, is hoping to ride for Greece at the Games in Sochi, Russia, which begin next month. But he is also riding for the Sika race team, a private training group that supports smaller countries that might not have the resources to train their athletes at the pinnacle of the sport. Since its inception in 2005, Sika has won more Olympic and world championship medals in skeleton than any nation, and it includes luminaries like Martins Dukurs of Latvia, the current World Cup skeleton champion, and his brother Thomas.

Kefalas was introduced to the sport at a more renowned track in St. Moritz.

That course, the Cresta Run, is “the original and traditional form of skeleton,” said Heike Grosswang, the secretary general of the International Federation of Bobsleigh and Tobogganing, which also oversees skeleton. Founded by British travelers to the Alps in 1885, it is the only course of its kind in the world. Amateur men from throughout the world still compete on it. (Women are allowed to ride it only one day a year.)

Riders say the Cresta is far different from other courses. It is straighter and has low open corners, meaning riders can slide out. Unlike skeleton racers at the Olympics and the World Cup, Cresta riders wear large rakes on their boots to control their speed, and their sleds have blades on the back of the runners that allow greater control on the turns.

“The equipment is different, the approach — how you do the sport — is different,” Grosswang said. “The approach at the Cresta Run is very traditional. Skeleton is the developed sport that comes out of Cresta.”

The Cresta was the site of the Winter Olympics skeleton in 1928 and in 1948, the last time the event was held at the Olympics until 2002.

But the run was closed the season after the 1948 Games.

“The Cresta was handed over to the Olympic committee — which of course in those days was very,

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very small and very amateur — and they put a complete blight on the Cresta,” said Sir Brian Williamson, the president of the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club, the organization that runs and maintains the Cresta. “There were no funds; they’d run out of money; there was a new secretary; the assistant secretary had resigned; the person in St. Moritz looking after everything had disappeared. The police couldn’t find him, his mother couldn’t find him, and the records of the club had been lost.”

But the club and the run were brought back to health, and Cresta racing became a strictly amateur sport in the 1950s, separate from skeleton racing.

Some Cresta riders have made the transition to skeleton, which is faster and has more G-force in the corners. Lord Clifton Wrottesley, the most successful Cresta rider of recent years, started the trend when he competed in the 2002 Salt Lake Games for Ireland and finished fourth.

Tyler Botha, a South African who placed 21st in the 2006 Games, said a sign a Cresta rider could be good at skeleton was “a really good running start” — the sprint and push before jumping on the sled.

Kefalas has what members of the Cresta describe as an “explosive start.” After placing 20th in the World Cup here last weekend, it is all but certain he will ride at Sochi.

He grew up in the nearby town of Chamfer (his father is Greek) and started on the Cresta in 2007 after working the door at a nightclub called the Dracula, which was frequented by many of the run’s riders. By the time he started skeleton two years later, he was ambitious for more. Then a conversation at the Dracula with Fritz Burkard, a founder of the Sika team, changed his fortunes.

“It was about 4 in the morning at Dracs; I probably wasn’t walking straight,” Burkard said. He asked Kefalas what his ambition in life was and Kefalas said he wanted to ride the skeleton for Greece.

In the years since, Kefalas has had to unlearn certain characteristics unique to the Cresta.

“When he started skeleton, you could see that he started on the Cresta,” said Matthias Biedermann, the Sika team coach. “His form was totally different.”

Biedermann said that Cresta riders tend to try to steer with their feet and move around on their toboggan too much, but that Kefalas learned quickly. He will find out if he has qualified for the Olympics on Sunday.

About half an hour passed before Kefalas shot down the track for the second run of his practice. He clung around icy corners and shot down the straight. He reached the bottom and had knocked 0.13 of a second off his time. He was pleased.

“The first time I was a bit too aggressive,” he said. He had even grazed the top of one of the

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corners. “This time I was a bit more gentle, and it worked.”