

Published: 20 Jan 2014 – kensingtonandchelseatoday.co.uk
Author:
URL: <http://www.kensingtonandchelseatoday.co.uk/motoring-and-sport/sports/jv97pvvy25.html>

The Cresta Run

On December 19th at St Moritz in Switzerland, high up in the Engadine Valley, otherwise known as the “Roof of Europe”, a group of gentlemen from various nations began the 128th season of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club, the Cresta Run. The course itself is like a handmade ice sculpture, following the natural contours of the land that snakes down from the famous town of St Moritz, with all its 5 star hotels, bars, chic nightclubs and expensive boutiques, down to the sleepy village of Celerina. St Moritz and Celerina are fifteen minutes apart by car. But only forty or so seconds on a particularly swift ride on a toboggan down the Cresta Run.

These gentlemen will arrive at the clubhouse in pitch darkness to get fully kitted out; helmet, knee pads, elbow pads, metal hand guards and spiked boots, to be ready when the bell sounds for the first rider of the new season in winter sports which all began in the late 19th century; started by the British, of course!

This is also the season of the Winter Olympics at Sochi in Russia, where so many of its elements began in this part of Switzerland. The Cresta is 128 years old and is the father of the Skeleton event. The Bobsleigh arrived a little later and its famous track intersects the Cresta Run; in fact they are built every year by the same team of builders. All natural; there is no concrete structure, which makes them unique in the world. It's also why they are never quite the same year by year, meaning that riders have to learn the latest nuances of the track, adding to the challenge.

In its early years, gentlemen, and ladies rode their “schlitten” sitting upright; it was only when a “Mr Cornish” decided as a bit of a lark, to go headfirst and concluded that although it seemed foolhardy, he could gather greater speed with better control. Soon the riders were getting much faster, and up until 1910, Cresta riders were the fastest humans on the planet; you could call it a very early Formula 1, with crowds gathering to marvel at the fastest speed during the numerous trophy races of the season.

There have been thrills, spills and sometimes tragedy. A most notable event was the death of Henry Pennell, falling at Shuttlecock, the notorious left-hander built deliberately shallow to catch out the unwary. Pennell, a decorated war hero who won the VC during the Tirah Campaign in India, succumbed to his injuries in 1907 and made headlines across the Empire. Shuttlecock is still the main challenge when riding the Cresta; if you fall there (get the wrong line and get thrown out and over the top) you immediately become a member of the Shuttlecock Club and are entitled to wear the distinctive tie, which to the untrained eye makes you look as though you might be quite good at badminton.

Shuttlecock can be especially demanding for beginners, which is why the club makes sure that they

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are well instructed; a “guru” is at hand to ensure that a newcomer is well prepared for his first “dart” and rides steadily but carefully. It’s a good idea for a beginner to impress his “guru” by being decently turned out; i.e. a nice tweed jacket, hunting breeches, cotton shirt and knitted tie would do the trick. To turn up in a slippery skin tight “condom suit” of the type worn by the quicker riders would not do!

The club itself is awash with tales of some of the interesting characters in the past; especially during those glamour years of the 20s and 30s, when playboys, rogues, chancers and charmers sought out the Cresta Run as an essential activity for the all-round sportsman to impress the ladies and make a bit of a name for themselves. Freddie “Suicide” McAvoy was fairly typical. The Australian born sportsman, socialite and best chum of Errol Flynn won the Olympic Bronze medal in the four man bobsleigh at Garmisch in 1936, as well as racing his Maserati 6CM all around Europe. After marrying a string of heiresses, this part-time gun runner and probable spy drowned with his new young wife sailing from Tangier to the Bahamas in 1951. He once brought along his old friend Flynn (he was best man at Flynn’s wedding) to try the Cresta Run. Alas, the great movie swashbuckler rode down in an embarrassingly slow time, jumped into a limousine at the bottom and was never seen again!

Billy Fiske, another chum of McAvoy’s and Cresta Rider (in his day Fiske won all the major races there) managed to win the Olympic Gold Medal in 1932 leading the US 4-man Bobsleigh team. His team consisted of Clifford “Tippy” Gray; actor, songwriter and something of a mystery man who wrote the tune “If You Were The Only Girl In The World”; Eddie Egan, Champion heavyweight boxer, the only man in Olympic history to have won Gold in different events in the Summer and Winter Olympics; and finally brakeman, Jay J. O’Brien, jockey and playboy and at 48, the oldest Winter Olympic Gold medallist of all time. Fiske, American by birth, was a great Anglophile and enlisted in the RAF at the outbreak of WWII. In August 1940, he became the first American airman to be killed in WWII.

The Cresta Run continues to thrive; last season had the record number of rides in its entire history; over 800 riders rode over 13,000 courses. It’s cold and fast, sometimes you do get knocked about a bit, other times it’s the most ridiculously enjoyable escape from the stresses of day to day life you can imagine. Clement Freud called it “The greatest laxative in the world.” The quick ones hurtle through the finish line at 80 mph. If you had any cobwebs, they’ll be blown far away down the valley.

For information and booking riding the Cresta Run;

www.cresta-run.com

Fee for beginners, including 5 rides

600 Swiss Francs