
125 Years of the Cresta Run: Gentlemen, Count Your Bones!

11 February 2010 | Jan Baedeker

For 125 years, the death-defying members of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club have thrown themselves, one by one, headfirst down the steep, narrow Cresta Run...

Invented by the British, the Club is British-run to this day but it has always attracted the cream of the international jet set, prepared to risk broken bones – or worse. This delightful insanity began in the winter of 1884/85, when British visitors to St Moritz turned the lighthearted pastime of tobogganing into a serious sport. W. H. Bulpetts, an English Major, worked with an Australian enthusiast to design an ice channel, three quarters of a mile long, between St Moritz and Celerina. With a total drop of 514 feet through 10 banked turns, and a gradient of up to 1 in 2.8, gaining speed was never a problem. Riding ‘skeleton’ toboggans, heavily ballasted with lead, the officers, gentlemen and aristocrats launched themselves into the abyss, without brakes. Within five years, all riders were using the now traditional headfirst riding position and speeds of up to 80mph became possible.



Cresta riders follow the club’s unique rules and customs, with traditional clothing favoured. There is a noticeably military ethos; no bad thing in such a dangerous sport. Although it’s a playground for the rich, the famous and the titled, the Cresta Run is not a snobbish clique. Anyone with the courage, the

manners and a pure sporting spirit is welcome, regardless of class. It just helps if you like gin and tonic with your adrenalin.



Apart from the British, the Cresta Run has attracted a passionate following of international celebrities over the years, including playboy industrialist Gunter Sachs, Fiat patriarch Gianni Agnelli and top auto industry figure, Bob Lutz. Although women have been barred from riding since 1929, the social membership includes such stars as Brigitte Bardot. Relaxed but elegant, the Cresta Run seems slightly eccentric; non-British members see it as a charming last outpost of the British Empire.



© Jason Larraman

Behind the fun, danger still lurks. Between them, innumerable riders have managed to break every bone of the human body at least once. Since 1885, there have been over 500,000 rides and 28,000 falls – but only four deaths. Beginners are lectured with the famous ‘Death Talk’ in their introductory lesson, which includes a collage of interesting X-ray images. Those who do fall are instructed to stand up (if possible) and signal their survival by waving to the Control Tower. Only then may they depart for the *krankenhaus* (hospital).



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There are two starting points on the Cresta Run. Beginners must ride competently from the starting box at Junction, outside the Clubhouse, before being allowed to start from Top, which is considerably higher up the valley. One corner, Shuttlecock, acts as a safety valve and it’s especially tricky from Top. Then taken at over 50mph, riders steer by alignment of the body. Those who get it wrong tend

to fly over the top, harmlessly at that point into soft straw and loose snow. Statistics show that one in 14 rides ends there. Fallers then qualify to wear the Shuttlecock Club tie. Steering in the lower slopes is more by movement of the head in the airflow. With one's face inches from the ice, the notorious 'Cresta Kiss' needs no explanation.



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Beginners who follow instructions properly, by raking hard with their spiked boots, always get to the bottom safely on their first ride. The risks rise as speed is increased and expert riders use different boots, with no spiked rakes. Everybody feels apprehensive before starting and, once on the move, the Cresta Run feels incredibly fast. Even first-timers are convinced they've broken the sound barrier. At lunch afterwards, in the Sunny Bar of the Kulm Hotel, daring exploits can be explained at length. The Run is closed in the afternoons, for maintenance and to avoid damage from the sun.



© Jason Larraman

The Cresta Run is a favourite destination for many members of the British armed forces, including such stars as RAF fighter pilot and World Land Speed Record holder, Squadron Leader Andy Green. However, the locals often dominate the results and St Moritz greengrocer, Nino Bibbia, won the 'Grand National' no fewer than eight times. That honour is now shared by Franco Gansser. Nevertheless, British rider James Sunley holds the record from Top, which he set in 1999 at 50.09 seconds, making an average speed of 53mph.



For evening entertainment, there's always the Dracula Club, by the start of the nearby bobsleigh run. Built in 1974 by Gunter Sachs, even the Dracula Club can seem frightfully British at times. The Cresta season runs from about December 20 until the end of February or early March. The Run is still crafted by hand every year, out of the ice and using the natural contours of the valley. An exhibition, celebrating 125 years of the Cresta Run, is being held until May in the Design Gallery, St Moritz. See www.stmoritz.ch.





Many more pictures of the Lake Parade and Uphill Cresta events can be found in our [extensive gallery](#). Also, do visit the website of official Cresta photographer Ryan Larraman, www.crestaphotos.com, where you can order photographs and buy prints of the 125th anniversary celebrations.

Text: [Jan Baedeker](#) & [Tony Dron](#) (himself a wearer of the Shuttlecock Club tie; and for 35 years a member of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club)

Photos: SMTC (2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16), Jason Larraman (1, 6, 8, 11), Max Galli (7, 10)

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