



Tom Robbins makes his debut as a ski racer. But he may have left it a bit late for the Sochi Winter Olympics.

Racing demons

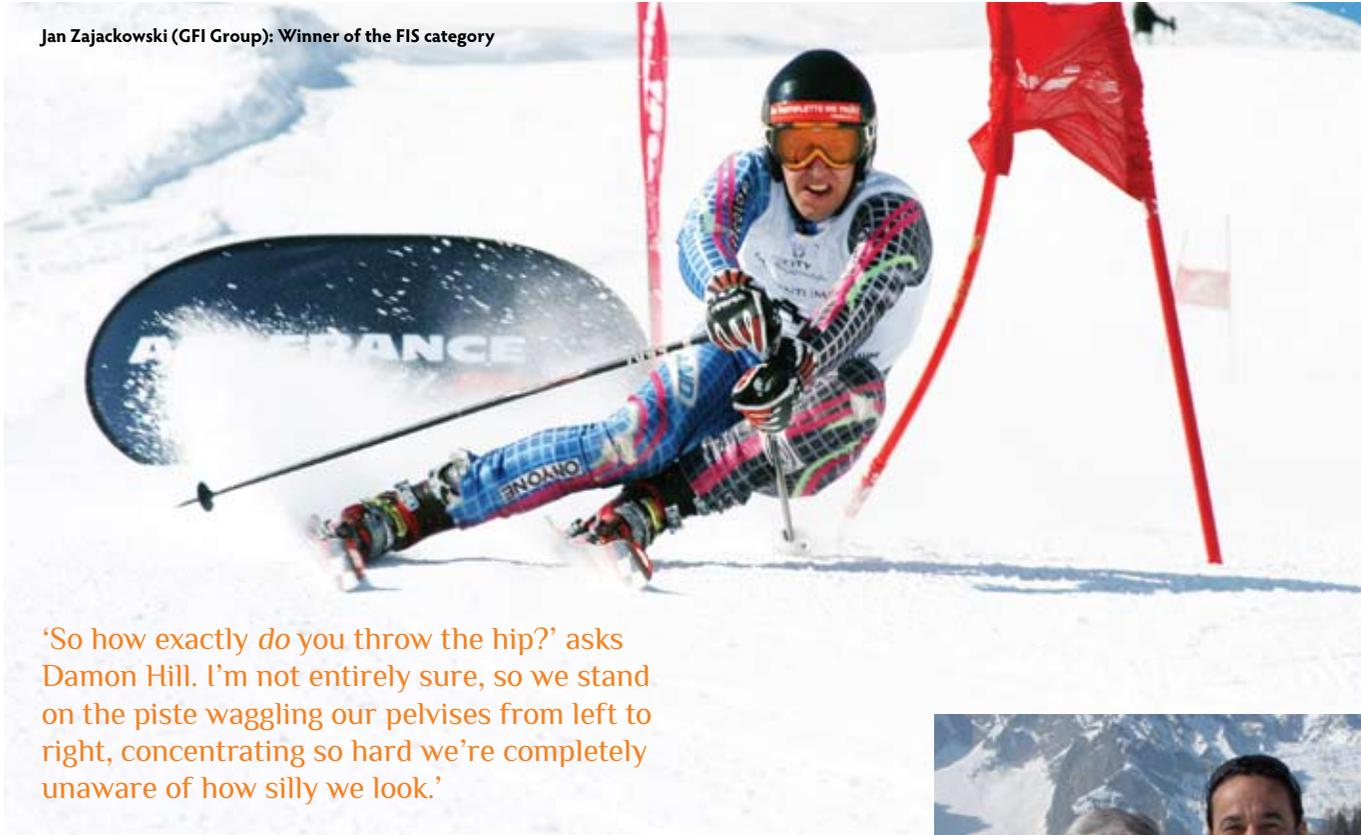
The 2011 City Ski Championships take place from March 17 to 20 in Courmayeur. See www.cityskichampionships.com. Money raised at the event goes to Halow (www.halowproject.org.uk), a charity which supports young people with learning difficulties.



The City Ski Championships

Jan Zajackowski (GFI Group): Winner of the FIS category

Andrea Fieschi



‘So how exactly do you throw the hip?’ asks Damon Hill. I’m not entirely sure, so we stand on the piste waggling our pelvises from left to right, concentrating so hard we’re completely unaware of how silly we look.’

The former F1 World Champion is asking me for tips on going faster. It’s the day before the big race and I’m standing beside Damon Hill on Le Greye piste in Courmayeur, trying to digest the morning’s race training session. “So how exactly do you throw the hip?” asks Damon. I’m not entirely sure, so we stand on the piste waggling our pelvises from left to right, concentrating so hard we’re completely unaware of how silly we look. But then ski racing has a way of sucking you in.

I had never raced before in my life, and to be honest, I’d been drawn to the City Ski Championships more by tales of the socialising and the boisterous après-ski than any competitive drive. Now in its 12th year, the event takes place over a long weekend in March, and features a team slalom race, an individual giant slalom, piste-side picnics, drinks receptions, dinners, a comedy show, a smattering of celebrities, and various events to raise money for charity. As the name suggests, the weekend is aimed at the bankers, brokers, traders, lawyers and accountants of the City of London, but any company that can put together a team of four can take part, and participants range from first-time skiers to former professional downhillers.

On the first morning, I reluctantly handed over my super-fat Armada powder skis in return

for a pair of skinny race-tuned Atomics, and swapped my trusty woolly hat for a helmet. As we rode the lifts up the mountain, I scoped the off-piste lines dropping off the ridge above. The sun was out, there was deep powder up there, and yet we would be staying on the piste all day turning around poles. I was frustrated. My helmet itched. We were wasting the day. But everything was about to change.

At the top, we were met by the renowned ski coach Warren Smith, and split into groups for our training. At first, as Daniel, our instructor, started to run through some basic moves, I felt that strange mix of cockiness (surely I’m way beyond ski school?) and nerves (these skinny skis are like balancing on knitting needles!). Then Daniel told us about “throwing” our hips down the mountain to initiate the turn. It’s hard to explain in words, but it felt as though after 20 years of skiing, someone had suddenly revealed its secret. Initiating the turn like this sets the skis into their most aggressive carving position, leant right over on their sides, at the start of the turn, whereas previously I’d always started by tipping the skis over gently and only gradually banked them over further as the turn progressed.

Which may all sound rather geeky, but the effect was profound - at once, all I wanted to do was hare around the piste as fast as possible,



Just a Momen – isn’t that Damon Hill I’m hugging?

practising this thrilling new technique. Who cares about floating through powder when you can have these feelings of huge G-forces, the sudden acceleration, the feeling of skis on rails? Like I say, racing can suck you in – and that was before we’d even started to compete.

The championships follow the same schedule each year – most participants fly out on Thursday night, Friday sees race training and the dual slalom event, Saturday brings the big race (the individual giant slalom), then a gala prizegiving in the evening. Sunday is free for skiing or sleeping off the celebrations or commiserations of the night before, ahead of evening flights home. The event has been held in Courmayeur since its inception, and it makes the ideal venue – it’s within an hour and a half’s drive of Geneva airport, has fabulous skiing for all abilities, and perhaps most importantly, boasts numerous top-class mountain restaurants for the lavish lunches that at City Ski somehow seem the natural accompaniment to the racing. ▶

The City Ski Championships



Andrea Fieschi

For the 'Accenture Dual Parallel Slalom' on the first afternoon, two race courses were created side-by-side, so teams of four could go head-to-head. At the foot of the course, a vast picnic had been set out, and the 150-odd City Skiers lounged in deck-chairs, listening to music, watching the action and cheering their colleagues. The sun was out, and there was a lovely, relaxed atmosphere, but wow! How addictive is the adrenalin of competition? I tried to act cool, but when our team made it through the first round, it was all I could do to stop myself punching the air as if I'd just won the Hahnenkamm. Damon Hill, who happened to be in the same team as me, looked pretty excited too, and apparently he's won a few races in his time...

But in round two, disaster struck. Despite all our hip throwing, we were knocked out when one of our team fell, and missed a gate. As the eliminations rounds continued, two star teams emerged – one from the brokers GFI, the other from the management consultants Accenture. As they duelled it out, two distinct styles emerged – GFI's members wore ridiculous fancy dress (tweed suits, shirts and ties, huge furry mittens), took swigs of schnapps between each round from flasks concealed in their ski poles, and skied brilliantly but erratically, to the delight of the crowd. Accenture, true to their professional reputation perhaps, were smart in matching black and white outfits, skied calmly and precisely – and in the end, by the narrowest of margins, won the day.

Much celebrating ensued, and soon day merged into night. Andrew Maxwell (the comedian who Channel 4 declared Britain's "King of Comedy") put on a great show at Poppy's bar, and partying continued at the Bar Roma – the traditional après-ski HQ, the competitive spirit now focused on drinking prowess and in seeing

who could amass the biggest bar bill. The rounds came at an unrelenting pace – *Jaegermeisters* followed *Peronis* (an Italian beer), then schnapps and Sambucca, wine, whisky, more *Peroni*, then all is a blur and suddenly an alarm is going off. I'm lying in bed with a pounding headache and a terrible sense of foreboding. It is race day.

Perhaps it's just the hangover, but as I stand waiting at the top of the course, I'm sure it is the nerves making me feel sick. The buffoonery of the previous night has been replaced by seriousness, and around me people discuss the course, race strategies and target times. Some even start to strip off their outer layers to reveal professional lycra catsuits. Worse, fog is blowing across the course so that at times it's hard to even make out the first gate.

I tie on my bib and try to remember what Rob has taught us. Start the turn way before the gate, choose your own line, not the existing tracks, weight forward, tuck, and throw the hip. I shuffle forward to the starting gate, the marshal counts me down – just like they do on Ski Sunday – and then beep, beep, beeeep: I'm off.

For a moment there is only a sort of blankness. I can vaguely hear the noise of people shouting, but I'm so pumped with adrenalin that I'm hardly aware of what I'm doing. When I come to my senses I'm four gates in, feeling confident, and then the thoughts start rushing in. Perhaps I can do alright. Maybe I'm a natural. Am I too old to turn pro? My mum will be so proud. What is it pride comes before? Ah yes...

Suddenly the piste steepens, and I'm going far too fast. I try to slow down but snag an edge and spin off-balance. By the skin of my teeth I hang on and stay on my feet, but by now I've lost all my speed and have to skate and push with my poles to get going again. I cross the line with frustration

burning in my chest (possibly exacerbated by heartburn from the Jaegerbombs) and only one thought – I have to do that again. I'd be surprised if heroin were more addictive.

In the end though, the second round was abandoned as the weather worsened and heavy snow came in. Just how fast everyone had gone was revealed at the gala dinner and charity auction that night. Peter Beardshaw of Accenture took the top spot with a time of 51.41 seconds, while Jan Zajackowski of GFI won the category restricted to

former pros (with 46.92 seconds). But those awards were just the start. Einar Johansen, a perpetual star of the event virtually since it started back in 1998 was named the fastest banker, Rory Dorman the fastest Fund Manager, James Eynon the fastest lawyer, and so on. The prize-giving continued until it seemed that every table was groaning under the weight of magnums of Ferrari Methodo Classico and our hands were raw with clapping. There was even a prize for 'most challenged skier'. If you want a get a taste for racing (and for champagne), it is the perfect weekend. 🇮🇹



Tom Robbins is the author of *White Weekends* (Bantam Press) and travel editor of the *Financial Times*. He is too modest to say so himself, but he won the prize for the fastest journalist racer (above).

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