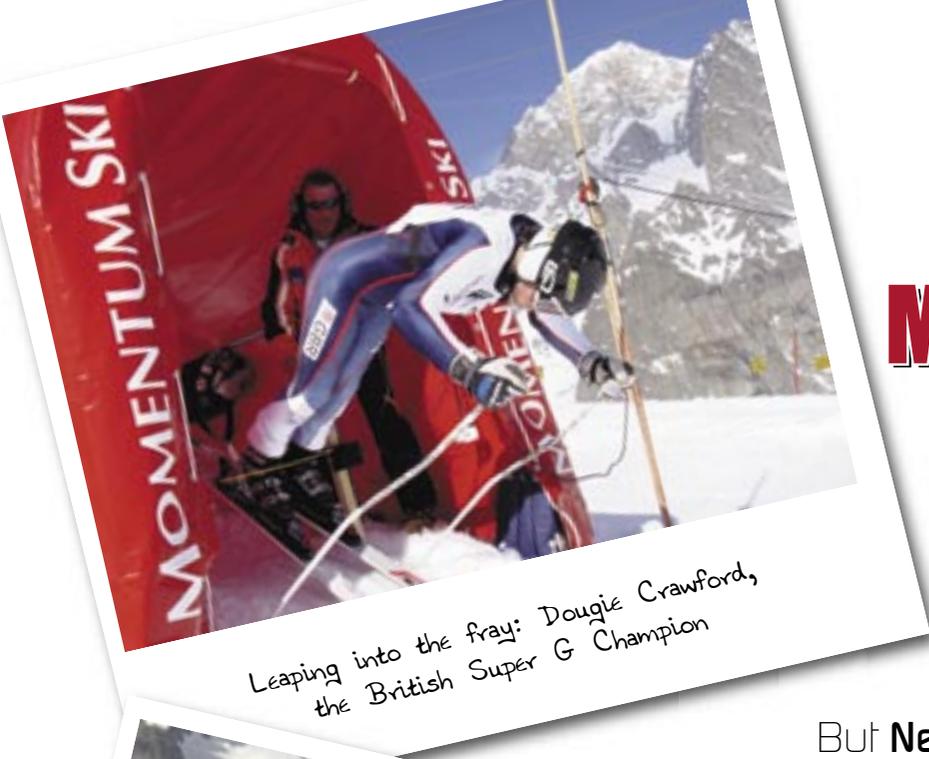


Magnificent men (and women) in their, er, body stockings

But **Neil English**, in mufti, misses out on all the glittering prizes at the City Ski Championships



Leaping into the fray: Dougie Crawford, the British Super G Champion



English, Jackson and Johansen slow down for a photo opportunity

the wide open slopes of Courmayeur in the Aosta Valley, where the shimmering glaciers of Mont Blanc provide a majestic backdrop, the scorching Italian sun certainly shone on Lloyds. As imposing as their eclectic range of physiques are when clad in skin-tight, go-faster race suits, the Lloyds boys defiantly scooped the prestigious Fastest Men's Team prize on the World Cup-graded GS course. Now factor into their haul the

Trap slope, Fastest Insurance Broker, Fastest Over-40 Skier, Fastest Over-50 Skier and Third Fastest Male on the GS course, and you can imagine why the boys, who usually require no extra reason to celebrate, were in super-buoyant mood.

All their prizes comprised generous gifts from joint event sponsors including Links of London, Snow+Rock, Crew Clothing, not to mention copious numbers of very large bottles of G.H Mumm Champagne. Most of the 200 or so people from the 40 City of London institutions at the glittering gala award-winning dinner in the sumptuous Pavillon Hotel received a splash of Lloyds' success - more douse rather than tipple - as the Lloyds team sprayed champagne liberally around the banqueting hall.

There was plenty more to compete for (not that the two guest celebrities, Damon Hill and Colin Jackson did any better than yours truly). The amiable Hill, who has enjoyed skiing for several years since retiring from Formula 1, was snapped up by the Snow+Rock team - known for their razor-sharp competitive spirit. His teammates presented him with some highly tuned GS race skis and put him through the race-technique training sessions conducted by the former British Team racer, Konrad Bartelski. But going from standard recreational skis to specialist GS race skis must have been like me stepping into a Formula 1 car direct from my Fiat Uno! In spite of a superb effort by Damon, it was Lloyds who took Fastest Team prize.

But Snow+Rock had a trick up their sleeve - a 'ringer' in the shape of John Harris, another former British team skier, who



Graham Bell: Duelling for top honours with Einar Johansen

Fastest Team on the dual-slalom course, where these magnificent men in body stockings held their nerve throughout the sometimes chaotic excitement of the relay style knockout heats - this victory made all the sweeter by beating the sponsors and favourites of this particular race, Accenture. Then stir in no less than five individual successes for Fastest Male Speed Skier on the Radar

There's only one thing wrong with taking part in a ski contest which has so many enticing prizes - when you come away with nothing you feel utterly worthless and psychologically scarred!

Welcome to the annual Ski Championships which, for one weekend each winter, turns the glamorous and otherwise peaceful resort of Courmayeur into a Who Dares Wins style of alpine combat zone - on and off the slopes!

The 'Lloyds' Boys', as they are affectionately known, probably epitomise the character of the City Ski Championships better than anyone. They are called 'boys' probably because they behave like boys when really they are a team of middle aged men with one or two not far off being eligible for a senior railcard (but still many years away from a free lift pass, of course!).

But they take their ski racing as seriously as their partying. And in March, high up on

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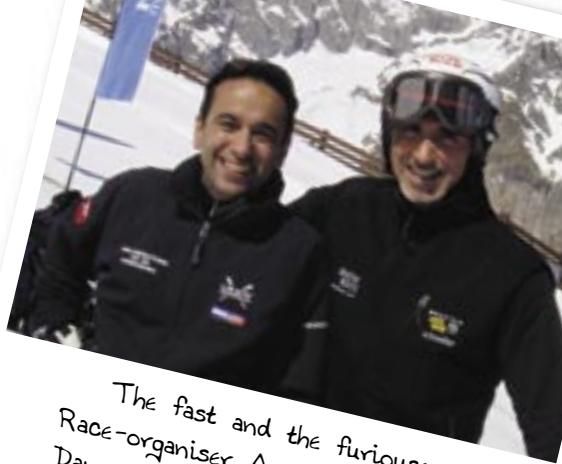
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picked up the individual prize for the Fastest Sponsor/Journalist.... spit!

Colin Jackson and his girlfriend, Bettina, joined me in the Mail on Sunday's team, but despite sterling efforts, we were unable to win a prize - though hopefully, Colin will forgive me for revealing that he did win one great accolade



The fast and the furious: Race-organiser Amin Momen and Damon Hill pause for a pit-stop

Victoria Dahner Main, to remove her civilian clothing. Of course Graham did not stop there. He also persuaded her to squeeze into a skin-tight race suit, and, after just one hour of tuition - her first time on skis - persuaded her to ski the entire World Cup-graded course. Her knees would surely have knocked if only her legs had not been so widely spread in the lowest-profile snowplough I have ever seen. But with equal measures of terror and determination on her face, and unwavering encouragement from Graham, she managed to negotiate every single gate and crossed the finishing line to the loudest applause of the day.

The BBC sports commentator Matt Chilton, a regular at the championships, talked Victoria down over the course megaphone. Afterwards he said: "If Victoria can do this, anybody can. This is a fantastic weekend and although I am essentially here to work and commentate, I look always look forward to this weekend. I can't think of a better way to mix business with pleasure."

There were so many great feats over the weekend and so many more prize winners, but if I fail to

highlight that the Ski Club of Great Britain's team, ably led by the club's Chief Executive, Caroline Stuart-Taylor, and supported by the intrepid duo of Vanessa Fisher and Betony Garner, won a Special Commendation Prize for their excellent joint time through the GS gates, then I would probably find myself on the sharp end of Caroline's ski pole! **STB**

Ski Freshtracks is running several holidays to Courmayeur this winter, including an Action holiday with instruction and a Touring holiday into the Val d'Aosta, both from 27 Jan - 3 Feb.



Johansen: Unbeatable? Maybe next year Graham!

during the gala dinner: voted 'Rear of the Year' by all of the female contenders!

Einar Johansen from Merrill Lynch continued his remarkable streak of victories in the Super FIS category, and was pleased as punch to also beat the time of his great rival, Graham Bell, who this year desperately wanted to beat Johansen.

Said Einar: "Even though I bring clients to this great annual event, do some real work while we're here, and obviously use this magnificent weekend in the resort as a bonding opportunity with clients, considering that all year long I bury my head in spreadsheets and only ski about twice each winter, still being able to beat Graham was more than pleasing!"

Bell of course hated that, but triumphed in another area which demonstrated better than anything that the City Ski Championships is truly for all levels of skier or snowboarder.

He managed to skilfully persuade the bubbly and pretty sponsor from Links of London,



Pit-stop refuelling: Giacomo Calosi

Next year's City Ski Championships will be sponsored by Air France and held in Courmayeur from Thursday March 13 to Sunday March 16. To enter a team, book early to avoid disappointment by contacting City Championships Ltd on 020 7863 8813 or www.citychampionships.com

The City Ski Championships are organised by the event and ski weekend specialists, Momentum Ski, on 020 7371 9111 or visit www.momentumski.com



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