

Arrivederci Courmayeur... Bonjour Crans-Montana!

Ski Sunday's **Graham Bell** takes a personal look at the changing face – and venue – of the City Ski Championships

I was invited to the very first City Ski Championships in Courmayeur back in 2000, with Eddie 'the Eagle' Edwards as a guest celebrity. Every event has to start somewhere, and in the following years, Amin Momen the organiser, did manage to attract some real celebrity names; F1 world champion Damon Hill, world record hurdler Colin Jackson, Olympic downhill champion Tommy Moe, all making appearances – some on a regular basis.

My job with Eddie at the inaugural Championships was to set a time to beat as a course opener. But unbeknownst to me, on the first night in the Bar Roma – the Championships party HQ - a sweepstake started up as to who would be faster between Eddie and me. (I should perhaps point out the little known fact that Eddie was a somewhat better ski racer than ski-jumper!) A syndicate betting against me started plying me with every Italian drink under the sun - from grappa, through Sambuca and on to Fernet Branca. Thus was the scene set for this and every subsequent City Ski Championships: the mentality of work hard, play hard, taken from

the City's financial community to the ski slopes. (In the event, I still beat Eddie by more than three seconds, though I did feel rather ill in the finish area.) In that first year, we all crowded into the tiny American Bar for the prizegiving. The dodgy PA system meant shouting out the winners' times. Says Momen: "We didn't know what hit us the following year – we had triple the numbers !!

Over the years, the event has evolved into a full gala dinner with a champagne reception in the Hotel Pavillon. Courmayeur was an ideal location for the Championships to grow and flourish - close to both Geneva and Milan airports, with good hotels and excellent restaurants. One of the constants of the event was the superb spread of local Aosta Valley food in the finish area supplied by Giacomo Calosi from his quaint old mountain restaurant, the Maison Vieille.

In fact the 2011 Championships would get under way just a short slide from Giacomo's popular eatery. The enclosure, sponsored by Savills Alpine Homes was the base for a test centre for the luxury hand-made Zai skis, Fulham-based ski boot fitters Profect



were there for late boot checks, while Putney Chiropractic performed last-minute back checks.

The Friday afternoon parallel slalom is always an action-packed and potentially dangerous affair. Teams of four race head-to-head in a relay, in which staying upright is the key: the extra pressure of racing for a team often sees people pushing themselves faster than their ability. Lloyd's of London, featuring the Guerrini-Maraldi brothers, Filippo and Alessandro, James Pryke, and the former British Development Team skier Chris Olivera, pipped the team from Accenture in a thrilling final. The mixed event saw the Ski Club of Great Britain team beaten by First Energy, who had drafted the current British skiercross champion Emily Sarsfield into their ranks.

In a new addition to the Championships, Marcus Brigstocke performed a stand-up routine at the Friday evening start-number 

draw. Marcus let everyone know in no uncertain terms that his left-wing comic buddies would be horrified to see him perform to so many "evil capitalist scum". To make matters worse, as a snowboarder Marcus had plenty of ammunition to fire at the lycra-clad ski racers. However he did recall the time he'd donned skis for the BBC's Ski Sunday. After he'd set a time down a giant slalom, I had coached him for a few hours, working on his imbalance brought about by snowboarding. When we returned to the course he achieved a whopping 0.06 second improvement in his performance. Fair to say it was not my best day's work as a coach.

The City Ski Championships supports the Halow Project, of which Damon Hill is a patron; the charity helps young people with learning disabilities find employment. After his routine, Marcus Brigstocke auctioned a British Team racing suit and a chance to be No.1 out of the start gate. I had 'borrowed' the race suit from the British downhill racer Finlay Mickel a couple of seasons ago and generously donated it on his behalf. However unless the bidder was 6'2" and had spent most of their life pumping iron, it was unlikely it would be a perfect fit. In the end it was Damon himself who outbid everyone to claim the suit.

Overnight snow...yes, it did fall last season - just not so much on the French side of Mont Blanc - meant for safety reasons the course for the main Championships needed to be shortened. Even with some sterling work by Courmayeur's race team to slide the new snow out of the racing line, there were still some big piles of soft snow that could catch you out if you ran wide. I did my usual job of course opener, this time alongside Konrad Bartelski. My time of 33.45 would have been in no danger from Eddie the Eagle had he been there, but it was convincingly bettered by the eventual winner, Michael Coyler who posted a 30.92. Representing Accenture, Coyler had reached a British Junior Team level before concentrating on a career in the City. Filippo Guerrini-Maraldi skied an impressive 35.01 to take the best non-FIS category, and Emily Sarsfield was the fastest female.

Damon Hill made the most of his new, slightly baggy, race suit and start No. 1 to ski a 39.44, almost a second faster than the race organiser Amin Momen. Colin Jackson ran into difficulties and had to climb back



Caption



Sponsors: Cavendish Ware, R K Harrison Insurance Services, Accenture, Savills Alpine Homes, Zai skis, the canton of Valais, the Warren Smith Ski Avademy

The first Crans-Montana City Ski Championships will be held from March 16-18. The full weekend package costs from £595 per person

up for a gate, although it didn't dent his mood. He was all smiles in the finish area. One racer not smiling was Will Armitage from IG Markets. A spectacular crash on the last gate saw him tumble head over heels into the finish area. A rather harsh FIS rule concerning lack of equipment as he crossed the line meant disqualification, which made him understandably upset. However, when we had to explain for the fifth time just what had happened, we realised that his bang on the head might be a bit more serious than first imagined. Although he had not lost consciousness, he had 'lost' 15 minutes of memory. Will was carted off to Aosta hospital for a CAT scan and a night of observation. He was of course awarded the best wipe-out prize in his absence.

At the gala dinner Amin Momen's big announcement was that for 2012 the Championships would be moving to the Swiss town of Crans-Montana. Hosts of the World Alpine Ski Championships back when I was racing in 1987, Crans-Montana has beautiful south-facing slopes, and is right in the heart of

the Valais, Switzerland's wine growing region. Early bookers could grab a seat on a special charter aircraft from Stansted to Sion, which sold out pretty much on the night.

The 2012 City Championships will be more than just a change of location. The event has been expanded into a festival of entertainment that includes live music, top DJs and a full menu of well known comedians. Marcus Brigstocke with his company 'Taking the Piste', has given himself the job of persuading some of his left-wing buddies into taking the stage. Says Momen: "The idea of the Momentum Ski Festival running along city ski is that we can attract others who don't fancy racing but fancy the idea of a big Alpine party with the programme devised by Marcus. This way people can use our existing infrastructure to entertain clients, colleagues, network, hold meetings or just party. And the entry level is pegged at Courmayeur rates."

Hopefully any aching ribs will come not from crashing into the gates, but from the comic entertainment. 📍

