

'Some skiers miss the last gate and are despatched into a ravine'

CITY CHAMPIONSHIPS; JAMES BEDDING; SKISHOOT OFFSHOOT



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titles such as Fastest Banker, Fastest Solicitor and Fastest Stockbroker.

Participants not only pit themselves against their rivals but bet against them, too. Surprisingly, the bets are small, a tenner or so and rarely over £100 – but that's because the big money is the size of bar bills, which can run into the thousands of pounds and which are competitively compared on the last day.

Courmayeur, where much of the skiing looks onto the stunning glaciers and rolling peaks of Mont Blanc, is the perfect venue. Most of the main pistes suit intermediates but there are some very challenging off-piste runs, including the Toulou Glacier, reached by a cable car on the Italian side of Punta Helbronner and which runs from the Cresta d'Arp, the highest point of the lift network. There is also a simple but scenic off-piste route that ends in Chamonix.

After getting to bed around 4am the first night, nearly everyone is in time to catch the first cable car up the mountain. Such a feverish pace calls for a personal survival kit and mine includes elephant-strength painkillers and Berocca, effervescent vitamin tablets. But there is nothing like a blast of cold mountain air to clear fuzzy heads.

While some of the better skiers take the option to ski with a mountain guide, others are eager to fine-tune their race techniques at Konrad Bartelski's Snow+Rock Race Clinic. Bartelski's instructors, who include Tommy Moe, give pre-race coaching to teach competitors tips on starting and holding an edge for the giant slalom the next day.

I opt to join the clinic but, halfway through it, high winds and cloud force all participants to relocate to Christiania, a restaurant located at Plan Checrouit. Bad weather plagues the rest of the day, with several chairlifts closed due to high winds. Inevitably, lunch is the best option. Mountain restaurants in this ski resort are used to the Italian multi-course meal. So a few bottles of Prosecco launch us into the *primi piatti*. For most of the racers this is now their fifth visit and a lot of good relationships have already been

formed. By the time we're on the red wine and three courses downwind of dessert, tongues are loosened – and that's when my fears first set in.

Until then I have managed to concentrate on talking to a few participants eager only to complete the gates. With few women racers, I even think I might have a chance of making one of the lesser prize categories – until I realise the sort of women who are racing. There is Emma Carriek-Anderson, Britain's top female skier with four Olympics and several World Cup places under her belt. Then there is Swedish-born Caroline Oldman who, racing for Singer&Friedlander three years ago, achieved the fastest female time in the race's history. Georgina Bowes-Lyon from Rathbones is also a force to be reckoned with.

Race day dawns and with it come vaguely worrying memories of the night before: the lawyer who was late for dinner because he had been waxing and tuning his skis; the fierce competition between Accenture's Jamie Skeate and Lloyd's Filippo Guerini-Maraldi. Then there were all those tales of spectacular wipeouts; of shredded knees, broken bones, dislocated shoulders.

To make things worse, the weather is treacherous – high winds and a white out – and the race, we learn, is in jeopardy because the course is unsafe. Amazingly, the organisers manage to set up a new course, but now instead of two runs, with your best time chosen, racers are only going to get one shot. Matt Chilton, the BBC's *Ski Sunday* commentator, was promised a cosy commentator's box with an elaborate sound system but now he is relegated to standing by the safety nets at the end of the course with a megaphone.

We arrive at the starting paddock and all my worst fears are justified. There are an alarming number of competitors in slinky, latex catsuits warming up and the atmosphere is tense. Even the Veuve Clicquot girls look nervous, a far cry from the night before when they joked that even if they did the entire race on their bottoms they wouldn't mind as long as there was a glass of Champagne waiting for them at the end.



essentials

Getting there

Swiss (0845 601 0956; www.swiss.com/uk) has return flights from London City to Geneva from £79. Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111; www.momentum.uk.com) specialises in tailor-made and corporate ski weekends from £379 b&b in a three-star hotel, including flights and car hire.

Further information

The 2005 City Ski Championship takes place in Courmayeur from March 17-20. For further details, contact City Championships (01787 249604; www.citychampionships.com).

As my start number is in the 80s (out of 240), I follow the experts walking the course. The top gates are tight and there is one in particular, gate number four, that needs to be taken slowly to avoid coming out on its steep corner. Then to get to gate five skiers virtually have to change direction, going slightly uphill for the left-hand turn.

They are off, the blue and red of Tommy Moe's Spyder catsuit zooms by, practically flat on the ground. Bell, Bartelski and Carriek-Anderson come and go in a second. Then it is Einar Johansen, a former Europa Cup racer from Norway, for Goldman Sachs and Candida Williams for HSBC.

Suddenly, it is time for me to join the starters' queue. I have a flashback to my youth when I did some junior racing for the Downhill Only, one of the British junior race training clubs, and pray that the force will, against all odds, still be with me. "Questions flash through your mind when you are standing at the gate," Bartelski told me last night. "Things like, will I go fast enough? Will I make the first turn? Will I beat that guy from Lloyd's who made that silly bet with me in the bar last night?"

Three to go and my heart is beating like a jackhammer. Four out of the last five racers have fallen at gate four. My poles are out in front of me, I am in the racing position: three, two, one – I push off with all the force I can muster. Gate one is easy; by gate two I have built up quite a bit of speed; by gate three I am going too fast; by gate four, I am out of control, it is too steep and there is already a deep rut. I hit the snow fast with a thud and somersault down the course, landing alarming far from my skis. But my chances of a prize are not over – "Best Wipeout" is still a distinct possibility.

I'm far from the only one to have a mishap. The bad visibility has also caused a number of skiers to miss the last gate and be despatched into a ravine. "It was hilarious hearing the screams as they went over the edge," chortles Jacot de Boindol later.

Bad weather isn't always a disadvantage: in a previous year Andy Stuart, racing for UBS, was overtaken at the final gate by an empty Champagne box which, courtesy of a strong



wind, had left the starting paddock at the same time as he did. The box flew past his shoulder, breaking the beam that clocks the finishing time, giving Stuart an extra second.

With the tension of the race over, the serious party begins. First there is a Champagne reception. "We usually get through 180 bottles of Champagne over the weekend," says Naomi Hancock of sponsors Veuve Clicquot. "I look at it as practice for the polo championships." The Gala dinner, which is always at the Hotel Pavillon, starts at 9pm. By the time the prize-giving begins, the noise has increased and the occasional bread roll has hit its target, including one aimed at the event's star skier Tommy Moe. The prizes include a holiday in the Chilean Andes, jewellery from Links of London and a pair of next year's skis.

Once again Accenture gets Fastest Team and Moe Fastest Time. Antony Barrow wins Fastest Master and accepts it like a Grand-Prix winner, shaking the bottle until it spurts over his team-mates.

Then it's off to Poppy's nightclub. Most of us are past conversation by now so it's time to dance, preferably on tables and chairs. Off come the boys' shirts and raucous attempts are made to sing along to the old favourites.

Much, much later I wander back to my hotel along the quiet cobbled streets. My only regret is that I haven't won the prize for Best Wipeout: that went to Marylia Shingler from the Rathbones team who completed the course only to fall into the safety netting and become, as Matt Chilton cheerfully reported, "tangled up like a haddock".

Oh well. There's always next year. Then again, perhaps not.

SLIDE SHOW (clockwise from main picture) the teams from Rathbones and Lloyd's party hard with the other skiers. But everyone, including (left to right) Jason Bray, Amin Momen and Matt Chilton and Victor Fomasier, skiling for Lowellski, takes the race very seriously