

FT Weekend

Saturday February 28/Sunday February 29 2004

City Ski Champs shine again

Never mind the bad weather. Everyone was a winner in the Aosta Valley, says Peter Whitehead

It's not usual for a skier to wish a ski-lift to break down and stop, especially in foul weather. But it's not often that on the piste, a few feet below, a former Olympic champion and three of Britain's finest skiers are racing. And in the same race as me.

As Tommy Moe (Olympic gold and silver medallist in 1994), Konrad Bartelski (Britain's best-placed World Cup downhiller), Graham Bell (competed for the UK at five winter Olympics), and Emma Carrick-Anderson (four Olympics and many World Cup placings) shoulder-charged the gates on a makeshift giant slalom course, I was occupying one of the best seats in the house.

But it was a seat that kept moving, eventually dumping me at the top, ready to join the line of skiers in numbered racing bibs. And a mixed bag of racers it was, too. The fifth annual City Ski Championships in Courmayeur, in Italy's glorious Aosta Valley, had drawn to the starting gate skiers of all abilities who spend the rest of their year as bankers, traders, brokers, consultants, lawyers, journalists and more.

Some of the 230 racers, each representing their City company, were fabulous skiers; others novices with little more ambition than to slither to the finish line in one piece.

The weather has not been especially kind to this event – one year, bones were broken by flying equipment as a blizzard blew the race off the mountain. This year, snow and wind closed half Courmayeur's lifts and pistes,

DETAILS

Info: The Swiss International City Ski Championships are organised by Momentum Ski (tel. + 44(0)20 7371 9111; www.momentumski.com) and promoted by City Championships (tel. + 44 (0)1787 249604; www.cityskichampionships.com). Next year's event will take place in Courmayeur from March 17 to 20. The Financial Times is one of the event's sponsors



including the planned race course. At 6am on Saturday, there was no race.

By 8am Simon Jacot, the City Championships promoter, and Amin Momen, of Momentum Travel, had persuaded the resort, on a Saturday in early February, to devote one of its few remaining skiable pistes to our race. The snag was that each contestant would have just one run: it had to be right first time.

And for many, it wasn't. Half decided it was a tricky course that needed respect. Those were the ones seen kicking themselves at the bottom for going more slowly than they needed to. Others decided to go for broke. These were the ones seen bouncing along on their backs past gates four, five and six.

I chose excessive caution. But if Tommy Moe's inspiring post-race speech had been delivered pre-race, I would have let the brakes off: "Every race is just like an Olympic downhill. You've still got the gates. You've still got to give it your all," he said at the Veuve Clicquot prize-giving dinner. "You're either gonna do really well, or you're gonna crash. If you get hurt, well, that's a bummer," he said,

giving us a flash of his uncompromising cowboy-town philosophy. (He's from Jackson Hole, Wyoming.)

In reality, there is a huge gulf between the mindset of a World Cup ski racer and a skier taking a weekend break from the office. Bartelski summed it up: "This race isn't a matter of life and death."

Although no lives were lost, a little blood was spilt. Among the courageous, reckless and unlucky were Hetty Bright, representing the Ski Club of Great Britain, who was left shocked and wounded about the chin after a fall. Several other racers failed to find the penultimate gate and crashed



Swish: Tommy Moe

spectacularly into a crater we could justifiably name Hell Hole.

But the prize for "best wipe-out" was awarded to Maryla Shingler, part of the large Rathbones contingent. She completed the course but then, as Matt Chilton, the BBC's Ski Sunday commentator and prize-giving compere, described it, she became "tangled up like a haddock" in the safety netting.

Chilton himself had had a tough day. Expecting a snug commentary box and full sound system, the change of course left him standing out in the cold for well over two hours with just a megaphone, blasting out a ribald off-duty version of his TV commentary.

On equally good form at the prize-giving dinner, he announced that Moe, a special guest member of the Financial Times team, was the fastest person down the course with a time of 29.17 seconds. Einar Johansen, a former Europa Cup racer from Norway, representing Goldman Sachs, was among the prize winners for the third year in a row, finishing one fifth of a second behind Moe, making him the fastest eligible ex-racer and the fastest banker.

But as the Links of London trophies were handed out, a little more of that homespun Moe philosophy came back to me. He had said the real winners were those who enjoyed the weekend the most. And by that criterion, I think just about everyone crossed the line in unison.

Peter Whitehead is FT Special Reports editor