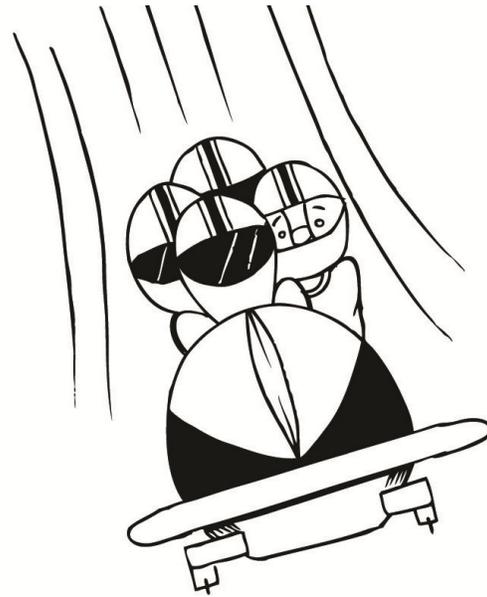


## Chapter Thirteen – The Cresta Run – 28 years old



I had never heard of the Cresta Run before and now I was being asked to organise a holiday which would take in the event. It was the latter part of 1997 and I was in the process of organising my second parachute jump. I was attempting to persuade a work colleague (Stewart Hellen) to join our group of twelve who had already signed up. Stewart was training to be a small aircraft pilot and I naturally assumed he would have no concerns about parachuting. After several days of wearing him down he eventually announced he would come with us. But this was providing I would also arrange one of his lifetime ambitions. When he told me it was the Cresta Run I had to ask what and where it was. Of course I agreed to his demands without hesitation.



I was to discover the Cresta Run was a skeleton toboggan run held annually in St Moritz (Switzerland). It is built from scratch every year (to the same specification) utilising the natural valley and earth banks.

I had heard of St Moritz but only associated it with rich people holidaying and skiing. So this arrangement was not going to be an afternoon at a football match or an evening in the pub. It would involve international travel, participation in an iconic sporting event and a holiday. Once I took up the challenge I immediately started my investigations. First stop was the Swiss centre in Leicester Square where I had a useful conversation with the staff. I left with a few brochures and an all-important telephone number.



The next stage was to assemble the group who would take part. I asked the parachute team but only Justin Wiki and Pauline Tribe showed any interest. I think most people were frightened off by the cost and the travel. If it had been in England I would have got a more positive response.

I made a call to Colonel Willoughby who was the main contact at the resort. I asked how it was best to proceed with our booking and supplied the names of our group. The most disappointing part of the whole process was being informed that women were not allowed to participate. They had been banned in the 1920s for travelling too slowly. I had to tell Pauline that she would not be going with us.

Stewart was amazed when I told him that I had spoken directly to Colonel Willoughby and made a provisional booking. He had assumed I would be dealing with an administrator. He likened it to talking to the England football manager and asking if we could have a kick about at Wembley before an international match.

The Cresta season runs from December 20<sup>th</sup> to the end of February / early March, so time was against me if we were to tackle it in the near future. During my investigations I was to discover a lot about the Cresta Run. It has a long history with a host of traditions linked to the British armed services. It seems locked in time and remains one of the last amateur sports in the world.



I booked the flights and the hotel for the end of January so we only had to wait a few months, which passed quickly. We were working seven days a week at that time and looking forward to the break. Overall the holiday would cost around £2,000 each for one week, this included £450 for five Cresta rides. It cost £44 for each additional ride and £20 for a certificate. This was typical as St Moritz is not a cheap place for a holiday.



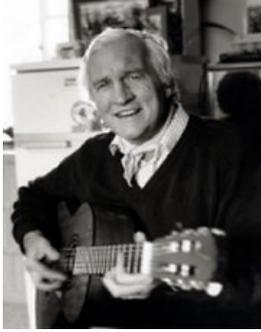
We flew to Zurich and made our way to the train station where we then faced a four hour journey by train. Despite the snow on the ground I remember the train arriving at every station on time. This is no doubt due to the design of their system as the use of overhead lines is a far better idea in these conditions.

The hotel Soldanella was quite near the station and it wasn't long before we were checked in. We had a couple of days to explore the town as our first three rides weren't scheduled until Monday, with the remaining two the following day.

On Monday we arrived at 07:30 as instructed to receive our pep talk from Colonel Willoughby. The first thing he did was to draw our attention to a skeleton made up of X-rays. To emphasise how dangerous the course was he announced that the X-rays belonged to the three trainers that stood before us. Between them they had broken every bone in their bodies on the run.

On more than one occasion we were told that the Cresta Run had to be ridden, the sled would not make it to the bottom on its own. But if we followed the instructions we were given we would be safe enough. We were given a handbook to read which typically we only glanced at and took no notice of. It details the approach that should be taken at every corner either starting from Junction or the top, whether beginner or experienced rider.

I recently found an interesting article about Colonel Willoughby and I remember him being quite a character. Some of the quotations and stories I recall quite vividly and he appeared to have led an interesting life.



*For almost 25 years Lieutenant Colonel Digby Willoughby oversaw the Cresta Run at St Moritz with an engagingly autocratic manner.*

*His "death talks", as they were known, emphasised to potential riders the high risks involved.*

*He would then illustrate his instructions with X-rays of his broken neck. "These metal bars, he would explain to a courageous but increasingly alarmed group of young men are the ones which, since an accident in 1990, have connected my head to my shoulders. Does anyone have any questions?"*

*Willoughby, whose personal bravery had been recognised by the citation of a Military Cross while he was a regular soldier, had a complete skeleton pieced together from X-rays of injuries sustained by committee members, which would hang on a table lamp in his room.*

*He enjoyed the ghoulish effect of his presentation, which would inevitably result in the occasional request for a refund, but his aim was to instil in newcomers a proper respect for the run and for its safety.*

*If a rider came off at the notorious Shuttlecock Corner, Willoughby would instruct him to rise to his feet to ensure neither of his legs was broken and then to cross his chest with his arms.*

*"Only then do I know if you are capable of taking your toboggan out of the way because we are wasting our time down here." The upshot was that membership rose considerably during his period in office, which was the longest of any secretary of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club since its foundation in 1887, and enabled him to build a network of friends and contacts all over the world. His generosity and brusque manner, which could appear rude to those who did not know him, were fabled.*

*Digby Jermaine Willoughby grew up in India, where his father was serving in the Bombay Grenadiers. From there he went to the National Service Cadet School, enlisting as a private at Eaton Hall with the Devonshire Regiment, and thence to Sandhurst.*

*He joined the 1st battalion 2nd Gurkhas. In 1964 his rifle company advanced over the border between Indonesia and Sabah, east Malaysia, to attack regular Indonesian forces in Nantallor. Willoughby planned and executed the raid, destroying enemy weapons and returning to base, which took more than a days march. He was awarded the Military Cross for bravery. In 2003 he was appointed MBE for services to the sport. He died in St Moritz the day before he was to watch the Willoughby Cup, which he founded.*

**Lieutenant-Colonel Digby Willoughby, MBE, MC, soldier and sportsman, was born on May 4, 1934. He died on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2007, aged 72**

Some Cresta facts:

- *Riders brake using the rakes on the top of their boots*
- *The Cresta is an ice run, which measures three quarters of a mile in length*



- *The Cresta Run has a long association with the British Army, being created by Major WH Bulpetts and Caspar Badrutt, owner of the Kulm Hotel in St Moritz, in 1884*



- *The first Run was completed in January 1885 and took nearly nine weeks to build*
- *It is a private club, but non-members are welcome to come and ride on practice days*

- *The Cresta has two starting points: Top and Junction*
- *The current record from Top is 50.09 seconds, held by James Sunley*
- *The total drop is 514 feet and the gradient varies from 1 in 2.8 to 1 in 8.7*
- *It is one of the worlds last amateur sports*
- *The St Moritz Tobogganing Club (SMTC) is a private Club, which was founded in 1888*
- *Beginners start from Junction and are encouraged to go down between 65 and 75 seconds*
- *Ladies once rode in practice but were banned from riding on 6th January 1929*
- *Fallers at the Shuttlecock corner automatically become members of the Shuttlecock Club and are entitled to wear a Shuttlecock tie*
- *The Cresta season runs between mid-December and early March*
- *The club recommends people to take out personal insurance*
- *Photographs and videos are taken and are available to purchase at selected hotels*



As a private members club the St Moritz Toboggan Club (SMTC) has its own atmosphere and it does appear to be trapped one hundred years back in time. There is very much an air of old British colonialism that I have only previously experienced in old films. Members generally fall into two categories, public schoolboy types and / or from the armed services. When Colonel Willoughby finished his section we were split up into groups and given our protective equipment.

- Helmet with visor
- Safety goggles
- Leather gloves with a metal disk across the knuckles
- Leather knee pads
- Leather elbow pads
- Boots with fierce looking rakes

The picture above shows the equipment in use along with my necessary warm clothing. I am very high with my hands in the wrong position. I made sure I wore my Arsenal top over the top of my warm clothing for identification purposes. We were quite fortunate that some passing Australians asked the club if they could take and sell pictures taken of the beginners. The club agreed providing they in turn produced the pictures of the members for the annual yearbook.

We then moved outside to continue our tuition and were introduced to our sleds for the first time. They were old and very heavy, just a metal frame with an adjustable worn leather seat on top. If the rider and sled separated during the run there was a real danger of getting hit and breaking some bones.

At last it was time to take the plunge and make our first run. We were only permitted to start at Junction as with all beginners. Justin went first and then Stewart, I followed last. When my turn arrived I was well drilled in proceedings after watching the others. My sled was placed on the run and held still by the stewards' foot. This was to stop me disappearing down the run at an inappropriate moment. The control tower then presented me to the crowd and, at the sound of the bell, the steward removed his foot and I was off.

The first turn was at rise (right turn) and is easy enough before passing under the bridge. Next through battledore (right turn) with a little light breaking as I approached shuttlecock (sharp left turn). The shuttlecock corner is the safety valve, if you are out of control this is where you will come off. The snow is deep with some hay strewn around and it is also policed by a steward. When you are in mid-air it is crucial you push the sled away as hard as you can to prevent injury. I know this corner very well as I came off here a number of times. But at least I was then entitled to purchase a shuttlecock tie from the gift shop! The remainder of the ride is relatively straight forward and this is where you are supposed to keep low down and become as aerodynamic as possible.

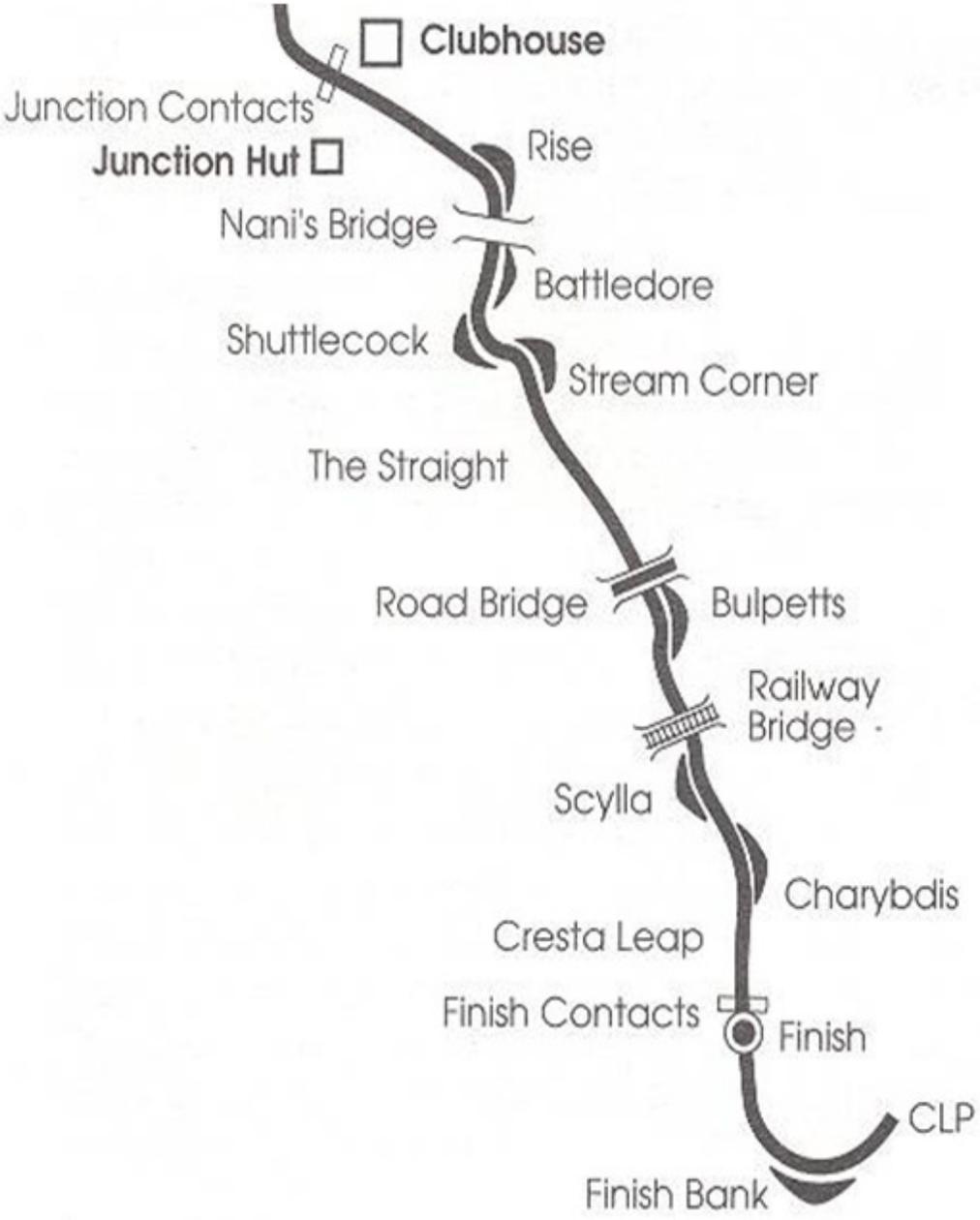


Confidence is gained with every ride to a point where you exceed your skills and come off. I came off on my 3<sup>rd</sup> and last run of the day due to overconfidence, I subconsciously allowed myself to go faster. The worst part (assuming you are not injured of course) is hearing the bell ring again letting everyone know. Then you begin the walk of shame (as I called it) trudging down the hill to wait for the van.



It feels like a waste too because the total rides are limited and you are pushing to record better times.

# THE CRESTA RUN





I had a mixed morning on Tuesday, with only two rides left I set my best time of the five runs and came off at Shuttlecock. That evening in the hotel I wore my Shuttlecock tie. I did get a bit of stick from Stewart & Justin but in the end they both agreed if I can't where it in the shuttlecock bar where can I where it.



The other people in the bar all appeared to know each other and were gathered around one particular person. Andy Green had set the land speed record in 25<sup>th</sup> September 1997 reaching a speed of 714.144 mph.



He was directing them through a video and giving them his version of events. The video was of the view from inside the cockpit which I don't believe had been shown on television at that time.

The Cresta Run does not take up much time, with an early start it is all over by 10:00 and the rest of the day is free. We were not going to spend all of our days and nights in a bar so we needed something to fill our days. Stewart and Justin wanted to go skiing but I wasn't keen, too much twisting of the knees and ankles for my liking. I went with them to the ski hire shop and waited while they tried on equipment and geared up.

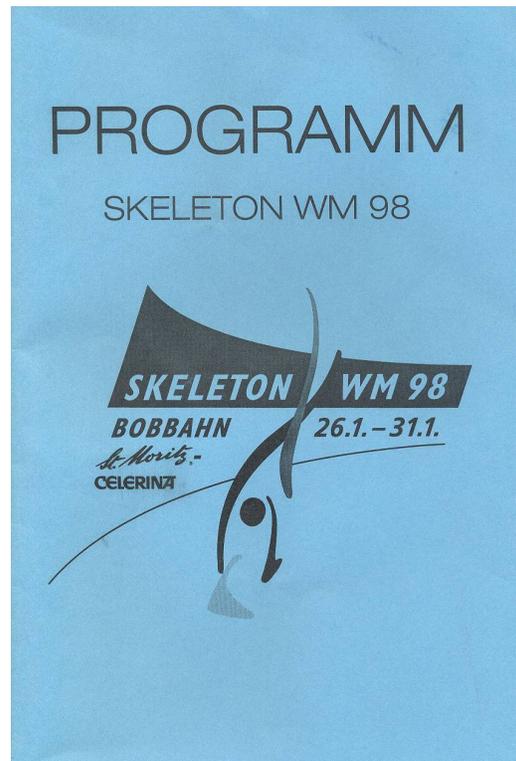
Whilst they were on the piste I went back to the hotel for a while to check the guide books to see what was available. It was then I saw an advertisement for the world championships bobsleigh in Celerina. Now, I knew Celerina wasn't far away because that was where the Cresta Run finish line was.



I thought it would be good to watch the four man bob world championship and sip a few beers. More importantly I noted there was an option to pay for a 'taxi' ride down the run between heats. A driver and a brakeman were included to assist the two passengers.

I made a call and enquired when the best time would be. When the other two came back from skiing I told them that I had provisionally arranged a 'taxi' ride in a four man bobsleigh.

On Thursday we made our way down to Celerina and familiarised ourselves with the area. I had a chat with the person organising the ride and we hit a problem, there were three of us and that would require two runs. Not a problem in itself, but we would require a 4<sup>th</sup> person or one of us would have to pay to go twice.



We arranged for me and Stewart to go first and Justin would have to wait to see if there was another person interested. We watched the first round of the world championship from a cafe / bar balcony and waited.

# ST.MORITZ BOBSLEIGH CLUB



HIERMIT WIRD BESTÄTIGT, DASS

Darren Stevens

AM 29.01.1998

DIE BOB-TAUFE AUF DEM

OLYMPIA BOB RUN ST.MORITZ/CELERINA ERFOLGREICH BESTANDEN HAT

ST.MORITZ BOBSLEIGH CLUB

PILOT: Donald Holstein

Der Präsident

Gunter Sachs

After the first round was completed they had a break and it was time for us to have our ride. No one else had signed up which I thought was surprising but we would address it after our first run. We were given safety helmets to wear and felt like old hands having completed the Cresta Run five times. This time however there were no pep talks, I suppose this was because they regarded it as safe? As a professional event this was of course televised (unlike the Cresta Run) and Justin could view us on the local monitors.

Traditionally all four riders hold on to the side of the bobsleigh and run pushing it along before jumping in. Well, this wasn't practical for us novices as we would no doubt fall on our faces. So the driver got in first and I positioned myself behind him, Stewart got in next leaving the brakeman to do the pushing and running on his own. When we got to a prearranged position the brakeman would (hopefully!) jump in as well.

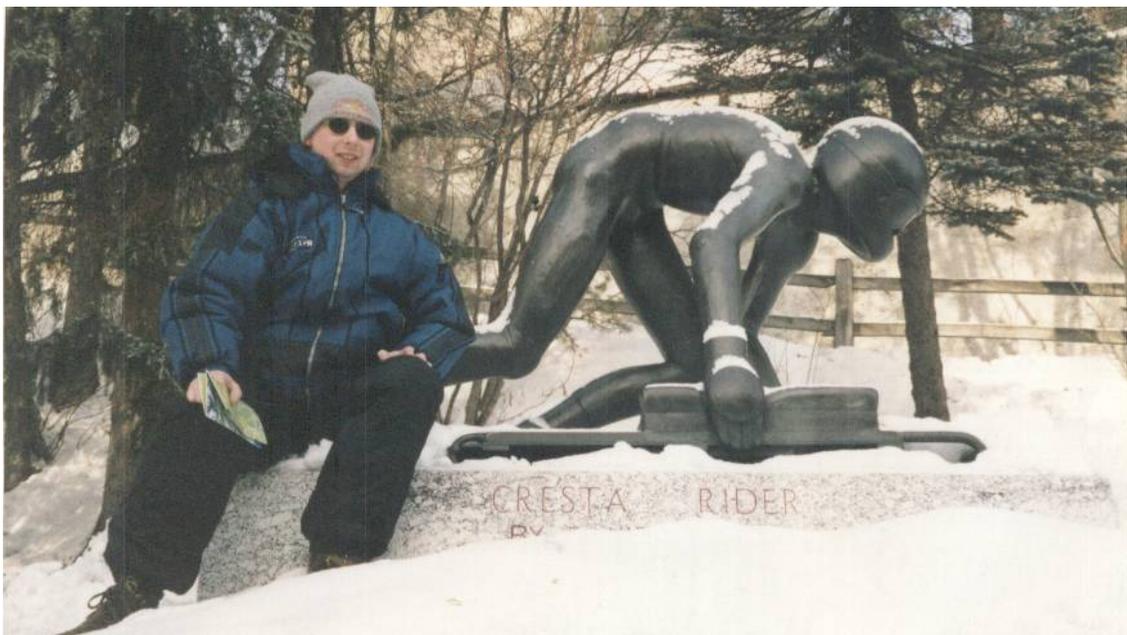
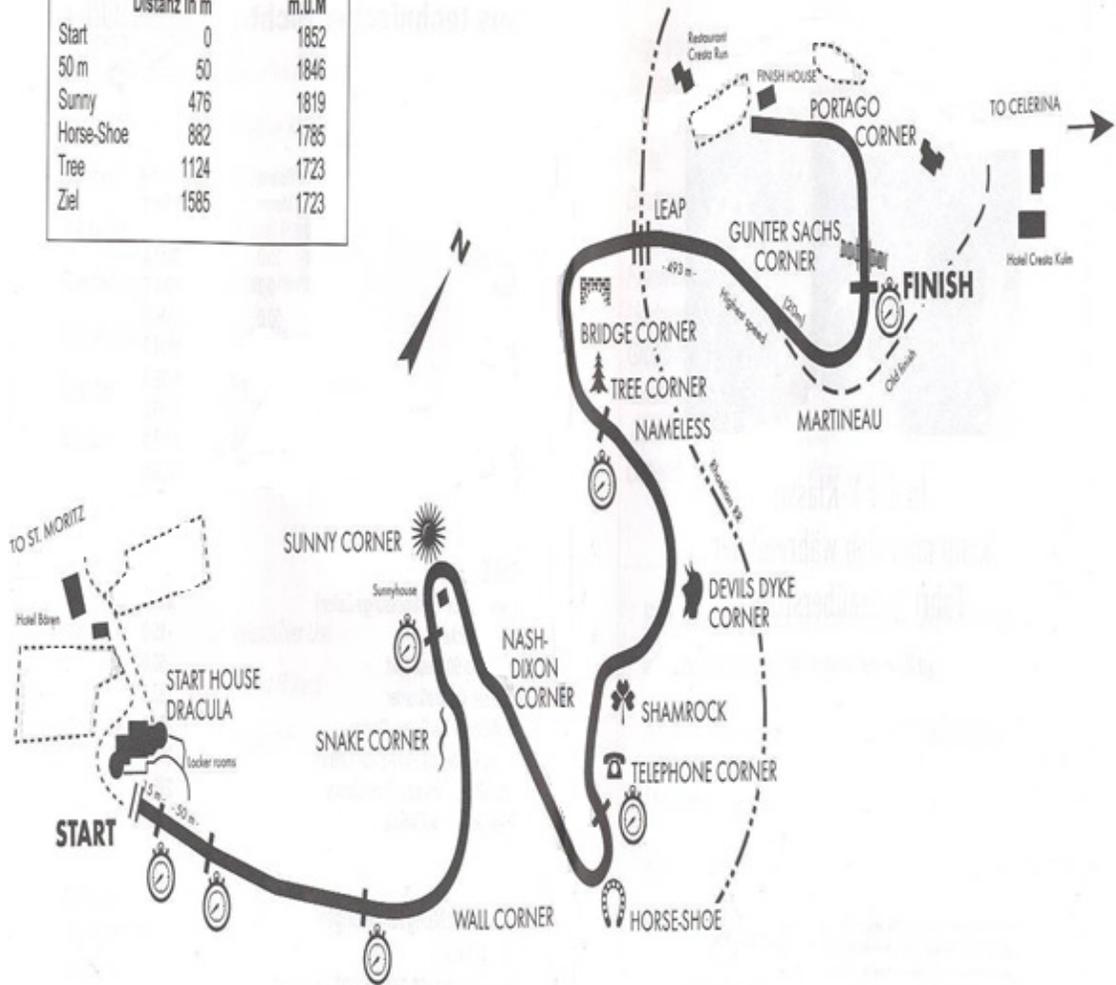
I had taken my glasses off and secured them in my pocket in case we had an accident and my face was feeling the cold. At the start I was tense and I hunched down as low as I could. After a few bends I relaxed though and started to enjoy the ride. This did seem a little too comfortable, but maybe they were taking it easy on us with the speed.

Suddenly the incline dropped and we started to move a lot quicker, when we took the Snake corner bends my head hit the side of the bob. Left and right I went in quick succession slamming my head against the sides. It was uncomfortable but the worst was yet to come. We approached the horseshoe bend travelling at 134 kph, we were on our side and the pressure being exerted was five times that of gravity. This felt like someone pushing down on my back and neck, pushing down as hard as they could. Not very comfortable at all and it felt like an eternity before we came out the other side. The noise the bobsleigh made is something I can still recall today as it is a heavy piece of kit. The steel runners sliding across the ice coupled with the rush of air makes a unique sound even a helmet cannot mute. Like a rollercoaster but without the tracks to rely upon.

When we reached the end I was torn between the exhilaration of the ride and being happy it was over. Justin and Stewart (again) went next and it was my turn to watch. After they finished we watched the rest of the World Championship from the balcony. When it was over we helped the Swiss team push their bobsleigh up the hill and into its berth. The bobsleigh run and the Cresta Run are not only nearby they actually cross under and over each other in places.

**TECHNISCHE DATEN:**

	Distanz in m	m.ü.M
Start	0	1852
50 m	50	1846
Sunny	476	1819
Horse-Shoe	882	1785
Tree	1124	1723
Ziel	1585	1723



We had booked an additional two trips down the Cresta Run for Friday. Hopefully we would go faster and break our personal best times. After the exhilaration of the Bob and Cresta runs the rest of the stay seemed tame by comparison. We divided our time between walking around town and in the bars.

When Friday morning arrived we were raring to go as this was to be our last chance. Colonel Willoughby called us up once more and the first run resulted in success for Justin and crashes for Stewart and myself. Whilst we waited to be called up for our final run Justin gave me some stick about coming off three times in total. As a Kiwi he is naturally competitive and that only strengthened my resolve.

Justin set off on his final run and we could not see shuttlecock but we knew how long it took to reach it. If we did not hear the bell after around ten seconds we would know he was safely through. The bell rang telling us a crash had occurred, accompanied by the inevitable follow-up announcement. The comments were routine so no injury had occurred ...physically anyway, never mind.

Stewart was starting to look nervous now and was losing a bit of confidence. But after some words of encouragement he set off, I counted the seconds off but once again I heard the dreaded bell.

My turn to go now...Colonel Willoughby called me up and added over the tannoy system that I was the last of the three musketeers. There was no way I was going to fall off now. I made a conscious decision to go relatively slowly. Once passed shuttlecock I could then get my head down and go as fast as I could.

I used my rakes to regulate my speed and before I knew it I had passed under the bridge and was approaching shuttlecock. I took the low line and raked heavy with my left foot. At the same time I grasped the left hand side of the sled at the bottom, the right hand side at the top and twisted the sled off to the left as hard as I could. I managed to stay low down in the trough of the run, kept my nerve, and swept through shuttlecock. I had made it!...now it was all about the time. I stayed low under the wind and moved the seat forward so my feet did not drag. I negotiated the remaining corners with ease and crossed the line before making a controlled stop. I thought I had gone relatively slowly but when I checked the time this was in fact my second fastest of the week. It is definitely all about technique and you have to enter and exit the bends at the right place. A look at the book may also have helped. I was presented with a certificate however the times were not in order. The best times of the day were always recorded first.

# CRESTA RUN

*This is to certify that*

**D.M. Stevens**

*has ridden the Cresta Run from*

**JUNCTION**

*and achieved the following times:*

26/01/98	63.18
	63.87
	Fall(S)
27/01/98	59.37
	Fall(S)
30/01/98	60.71
	Fall(S)

**Fastest Time: 59.37 on 27/01/98**

**With congratulations from the CRESTA RUN information providers**

IBM PERSONAL COMPUTERS

LEXMARK PRINTERS

MICROSOFT SOFTWARE

Overall this was an excellent trip and one I would highly recommend. I was fortunate to associate with someone who had the imagination to think it up. There were a couple of bonuses which made the experience even better. The bob run would have been missed if I had booked a different week. If I had gone skiing I might not have seen the advertisement. Fate seemed to play a part in this and I was very lucky.

The only regret I have now looking back was not trying the skiing. I stand by my reasons for not going but it does seem a missed opportunity, particularly as I was actually in the ski hire shop. The common thread throughout this book is about taking calculated risks but this was one that got away. Stewart never did the parachute jump after all but maybe it was just as well as his inclusion would have swelled our group to thirteen.

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## INVOICE - SMTC

**D.M. Stevens**

30-Jan-98

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**PIN:** 4738  
**PrintDate:** 30/01/98

D.M. Stevens

United Kingdom

**Item Group Accounts**

Item	Debit	Credit
Payment	0	450
Payment	0	20
Payment	0	88

**Item Group Certificates**

Item	Debit	Credit
Certificate of Riding	20	0

**Item Group Rides**

Item	Debit	Credit
Paid first 5 SL rides	450	0
Rides to Pay: 2 @ 44 as of 30-01-1998	88	0

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	<b>£</b>	<b>SFr</b>
<b>Total Invoice</b>	£0.00	0.00