



INSURANCE. The word alone sparks off images of Health & Safety guidelines, risk-assessment forms, and trawling through pages of small print. Clearly not a turn-on for a serial risk-taker such as myself. So why then did I so readily accept an invitation to the 17th International Lloyd's Ski Club race weekend?

I blame the Génepy - an inoffensive mountain herb brewed and distilled into the most evil drink in the Alps. It was one of those frequent bad-weather days last season, and I was holed up in the Maison Vieille restaurant in Courmayeur. A storm had closed all but two lifts, and forced

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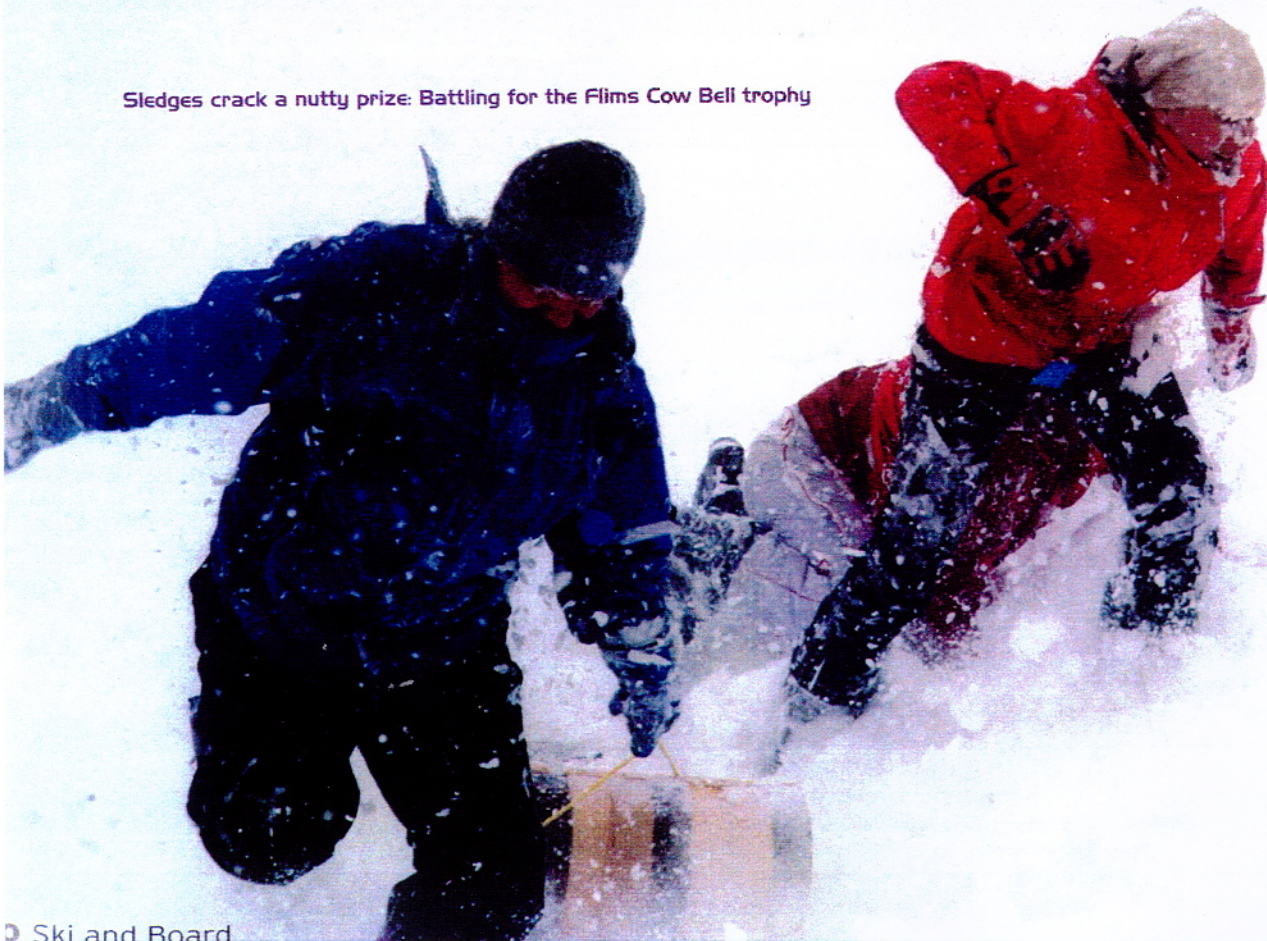
the cancellation of the second run of the Swiss International Air Lines City Ski Championships. On the way in, I met the former Olympic Champion Tommy Moe heading out. "Lloyd's Ski Club invited me for lunch" he said, "but after last night, I don't think I can handle another session with them." Strong words from the man who once partially severed his thumb diving over the Londoner bar in Kitzbühel during a post-race party. I recklessly offered myself as a substitute.

Founded by a former member of the 1948 British Olympic Ski Team, John Boyagis, the Lloyd's Ski Club has organised races since the late 1950s. The current Club President, Antony Barrow, explained, "We don't work for Lloyd's as such - we work at Lloyd's. With its famous Lutine Bell, it's the biggest insurance and re-insurance marketplace in the world. The Lloyd's Ski Club works the same way, in that we all work for different companies, but race here under the Lloyd's banner."

A ton of pasta, a gallon of red wine, and two bottles of the evil green stuff later, I had forgotten all I had learnt about the re-insurance business. Eventually, the charismatic *proprietario*, Giacomo, told us reluctantly that we'd have to leave, as the ski patrol needed to close the mountain. Showing a total disregard for Health & Safety guidelines, I suggested a Chinese Downhill to the village below. Fortunately the pistes were deserted, although the sky was darkening rapidly. What followed was carnage of epic proportions as everyone wiped each other out in a series of spectacular collisions. Keeping out of trouble at the back of the pack, I was able to pick my moment to shoot past the leader, Filippo Guerrini-Maraldi, on the final jump. Once everybody had picked themselves up and rescued stray skis lost to the forest, I was cordially invited to return to Courmayeur the following month for Round Two: the Lloyd's race. Held in recent years in Verbier and St

Graham Bell meets

Sledges crack a nutty prize: Battling for the Flims Cow Bell trophy



Anton, this year marked a move to Courmayeur, in the Aosta valley, for the Lloyd's Championships. "Lloyd's have entered a couple of teams in the Swiss International Air Lines City Ski Championships, and we've seen it grow into a very popular race weekend" said Antony Barrow. "We hope to build the same atmosphere within the international insurance industry."

Just as with the City Ski Championships, the Courmayeur Mont Blanc lift company provided an excellent piste for the planned Super-G, Giant and Parallel Slalom. But unfortunately, once again, the weather looked set to disrupt the

mark the way, and the race was back on.

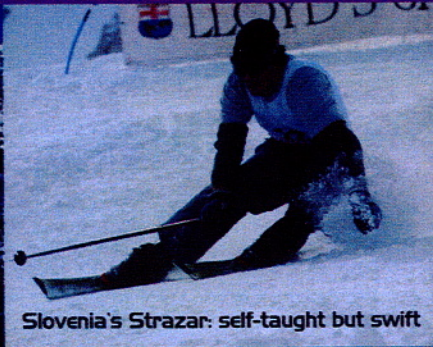
Taking a leaf out of Strazar's book, a Swiss competitor, Anne-Francoise Kladny, quickest in the Super-G, also posted the fastest women's first run. Lucky to have completed any racing at all in the rapidly deteriorating conditions, we sojourned to the Bar Roma for some much needed après-ski. A quick shower at the hotel, and it was on to Pierre Alexis for a typical Lloyd's Ski Club meal. And of course it wasn't long before the Gényépy made a reappearance. As is so often the case with nights like these, there is always one man who sets the standard. Tonight that honour fell to Alain Stuby, or the Crazy Swiss Snowboarder as he was

bottom for a couple more to join their group. With every passing second we could sense the powder being skied out. Time to invoke the old adage: no friends on a powder day.

When all the fresh tracks had been laid, we headed back over to Maison Vieille for lunch. Conscious that the parallel slalom, the most prestigious events of the Championships, had been cancelled, Messrs Barrow and Momen came up with an idea. Two of Giacomo's big old sledges would substitute. The Flims Cow Bell trophy would be decided by an off-piste dual luge competition. As I watched the Lloyd's Ski Club prepare to



Courmayeur's stunning backdrop



Slovenia's Strazar: self-taught but swift



Via Roma: après-ski till late

the Lutine Bell boys

occasion. Early in the morning it looked like we might be lucky, but just as I prepared to forerun the Super-G, the thick fog that had been hanging at village level pushed up to cover the bottom half of the course. Even with years of training, racing into a fog bank at 50 mph is always a scary experience. For the hundred or so entrants from a dozen countries, the challenge would not just be of skiing skill, but also a test of nerve. Gregor Strazar, from Slovenia, took the win with a run so powerful that I initially suspected we might be looking at an ex-national team ringer. He denied ever having raced before, even at junior level - and insisted he was entirely self-taught.

The plan was to race the first run of the Giant Slalom that afternoon, although with the mountain still shrouded in thick fog, it led to a rather erratic course with a very tricky final gate. The women got the race under way, and after watching four of the first five starters wipe out across the finish line, I radioed up to Momentum Ski's Amin Momen, the race organiser, that we might have a problem. Within minutes, the boys from the lift company had found some blue dye to

affectionately known. It was now well after midnight, and having decided to opt out of the hotel/shower stop in favour of more Bar Roma time, he was still wearing his hard-shelled snowboard boots and rather garish once-piece ski suit.

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Needless to say, there were a few sore heads in the morning. Amin Momen's announcement that the day's racing had been cancelled, and that yesterday's first run times would stand, was greeted with poorly disguised sighs of relief. Now as every keen skier knows, no matter how bad you're feeling, when there is powder to be had you ski it. The Youla cable-car had disappeared into thick fog, so the higher slopes were out. But the glade-skiing under the Plan de la Gabba chairlift was outstanding. After a couple of runs screaming down through the trees, I met Ian from Lloyd's and an American, Eric from AIG, waiting at the

throw themselves wildly down a mountain yet again, I realised why their events have run for so long. They are damned good fun. I still don't know much about insurance. Perhaps I will learn some more next year.

Next year's Lloyd's Ski Race, open to anyone from the insurance and re-insurance industry, will be held in the Swiss resort of Engelberg from March 2 - 6, priced £574 for the full package. Contact Momentum Ski on: **0207 371 9111 www.momentumski.com**

Ski Freshtracks (formerly Ski Club Holidays), is running an action on-and-off piste holiday to Courmayeur for intermediate and advanced skiers from 20 - 27 March.

For more information call 0845 45 807 84 or go to www.skifreshtracks.co.uk