

Ulysse Nardin honors the 125th Anniversary of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club with a Cresta Run Limited Edition that takes up the famous colors of the Cresta Club.



Apparently Unharmmed



Watchmaking and the Cresta Run certainly do inhabit polar opposites of the 'Swiss' brand and there could only really be one watch man to bring them together. Step forward the irrepressible Rolf Schnyder of Ulysse Nardin. *QP's* resident daredevil investigates.

Simon de Burton

Fine watchmaking and the world's most infamous toboggan track - two areas of Swiss heritage that don't immediately appear to join together harmoniously. Yet timing statistics are what the Cresta Run is really all about - the aim being, of course, to get to the finish as fast as possible. To facilitate the compiling of such statistics the St Moritz Tobogganing Club (SMTC) uses super-accurate Omega electronics, but with 2010 being the 125th anniversary year of the first time the run was used, the Club wanted something a little more daring and groundbreaking to celebrate the milestone. And from a shortlist of one, Rolf Schnyder was the man chosen for the job. While the dedication to traditional master watchmaking is not forgotten at Ulysse Nardin (the Genghis Khan immediately springs to mind), what the company excels in is creating mechanical watches that, just like the Cresta itself, are more thrilling than those offered by other brands.

Known for doing what others don't, for example dismissing the more traditional sponsorship of yachts and racing cars in favour of the slightly lesser-known sport of elephant polo (an idea conceived, incidentally, over a drink in the Cresta Run Bar), Ulysse Nardin has been commissioned to produce a highly exclusive commemorative watch for the St Moritz Tobogganing Club, limited to just 12 pieces. Why Schnyder? His desire to test the limits of creativity in horology and, of course, his very real passion for the Cresta Run, which he has been riding annually for the past 40 years.



Below: *QP's* very own action man Simon de Burton takes his life in his hands.



In the beginning

And to gain a true impression of Schnyder's love of the Cresta one really does have to experience the run first hand. Carved out in 1884 under the guidance of a former British Army major called WH Bulpetts - one of many Englishmen of the era to adopt the fashionable habit of travelling to St Moritz for the winter in order to take advantage of the Engadine resort's health-enhancing atmosphere. How ironic, then, that riding a sledge face-first down the Cresta Run has come to be recognised the world over as being

among the most dangerous sporting activities one can possibly indulge in - only a handful of people have actually died doing it, but there have been countless injuries over the decades. But having waited more than 35 years to tackle this crazy, snaking, widow-making ice chute I, for one, was not about to back out - even though I was more scared than I care to admit.

Down at the start, known as The Box, I was handed a toboggan (an 85lb lump of steel with runners that terminate in razor sharp

blades), told roughly what to do by my 'guru', a 70-year-old Cresta veteran called Arnold von Bohlen und Halbach, and sent on my way with a pat on the back and all good wishes. At this point, I might mention that I have ridden motorcycles at 160mph, driven a Formula One car, flown in a fighter jet and travelled across the water in a powerboat at a rate of almost two miles per minute - but never, ever, have I experienced a sense of sheer fear comparable to that induced by losing my Cresta virginity.

I can only liken first entering the notorious Shuttlecock turn - the high-banked, horseshoe-shaped curve where most people come to grief - to the moment when you force yourself to leap off a diving board which you know is five times bigger than your ability. If you make it, it's over in a flash. If you fail, you know it will hurt. A lot.

After that a rider just has to negotiate Stream Corner from whence it is relatively plain sailing as you pick up (more) speed on the Bledisloe straight, find yourself quickly spat out by three further bends (Bulpett's, Scylla and Charybdis), cross the Cresta Leap and emerge at the finish, probably unharmed but, in my case, hyperventilating from the massive adrenaline rush.

In ten ever more thrilling runs, I managed to shave more than 20 seconds off my first, rather feeble time with a 'personal best' of around 61 seconds which represents an average speed of around

45mph. To put this into perspective, the record time from Junction (the point from which beginners are obliged to start, 322m below 'Top') is a remarkable 20 seconds faster with a terminal speed of almost 90mph.

Anniversary time

And the thrills and spills are something that Rolf Schnyder knows all about, being the one time owner of 58 stitches in his head after crashing at the Cresta's Thoma curve. But his four decades of experience made Ulysse Nardin a shoe-in to produce the Cresta Limited Edition, each with a white gold case and powered by UN's Calibre 160 double-window big date, self-winding movement with small seconds sub-dial, 50-hour power reserve and silicium escapement.

The dark blue background of the elaborate, three-dimensional dial contrasts nicely with the SMTC's colour scheme of maroon and orange vertical stripes, with the anniversary dates hand-engraved on white gold plates. Along with the rest of the SMTC's merchandise (which ranges from cricket sweaters to the Shuttlecock Club tie for those who have come off on the notorious curve) the SFr.22,000 commemorative watch is available only at the clubhouse, but the bad news is that only full members are entitled to buy one - which seems to me like a good reason to get yourself nominated as soon as possible. That, and the fact that riding the run is probably one of the most thrilling experiences you'll ever have. ☺



This page and previous:
Running with the boys
at St Moritz's infamous
Cresta Run then and now.

