

NINO BIBBIA
March 15th 1922 –May 28th 2013

In the pantheon of winter sportsmen, Nino Bibbia will be remembered above all for his outstanding feats on the Cresta Run. In 1947, at the age of 25, as a resident of St. Moritz, he could have equally become a champion ice-hockey player, a bob-sleigh driver, a ski jumper or a cross-country or downhill skier. In fact he performed all these disciplines at an exceptionally high standard and he was, incidentally, a top class cyclist as well. On one occasion, after breaking a ski practising for a race from Piz Nair down to Corviglia, and unable to afford a replacement pair, he used his jumping skis and still came in a respectable third. Today he might have been a brilliant snow boarder. He discovered his ability on the Cresta Run almost by accident. The story goes that one day a client of his father's fruit, vegetable, and grocery store in St. Moritz offered him a toboggan in exchange for a case of Chianti. Another version is that whilst carefully observing the riders one morning near Nani's house, a Member invited him to take off his work apron and give it a try himself. He did so just that, wearing some borrowed rakes and a helmet, but with no elbow or knee pads. He only had a few rides from Junction that season but the next year, the Cresta Run was included in the 1948 Winter Olympics for which, after a few weeks practice, he was selected to represent Italy. The Swiss also wanted him to ride for them but the land of his birth refused to renounce its prior claim. He also qualified in the 2-man and 4-man Bobsleigh competitions in which he finished 5th and 6th, but two of his other events, the ski jump and ice hockey competitions had to be forsaken due to a clash in the timetable.

The Cresta had been included in the 1928 St Moritz Winter Olympics when the medals were shared by two of the American Heaton brothers with the much-fancied Earl of



Nino with Clifton Wrottesley and Franco Gansser in 2011 – all three winning the Grand National eight times.

Northesk taking the bronze. In 1948 it was the reigning silver medallist Jack Heaton, John Crammond and Christian Fischbacher who were expected to take the honours, with Bibbia, a novice at Top riding, being the “dark horse” in the field. On the first day of racing there were 3 courses from Junction after which, the leader was Crammond, from Heaton and Bibbia tied in second place, only 2/10ths sec. behind. The stylish Fischbacher had sadly fallen at Shuttlecock on his first course. The following day there were 3 courses from Top and it was thought that the experience of Heaton would prove decisive. This was not to be as Bibbia stormed into the lead on his first ride of the morning with a 59.5, the only sub-60 second time of the race. It was an amazing effort by someone who hadn’t even been a “true” Cresta rider until just a few weeks before. Riding with the verve and elan of youth, he consolidated his lead to beat Heaton by 1.4 seconds, with Crammond in third place. On the same day, his old school friend and skiing rival, Edy Reinalter competed as a substitute in the slalom, taking the gold medal for Switzerland. Bibbia was so delighted to have won Italy’s first gold medal in a Winter Olympics that he broke down and wept. In 1985 the Italian Government recognised this singular achievement and awarded him the Croce dell Ordine di Cavaliere al Merito della Repubblica Italiana, the only Cresta rider ever to be ‘knighted’ for his success on the Run, and to be given a title so appropriate for the sport.

In a riding career spanning over 50 years until 1998, he won over 180 races on the Cresta Run, including all the major ones many times: 8 Grand Nationals, 8 Curzon Cups,



Nino with a representative sample of his many, many trophies.



Nino's distinctive van.

4 Morgan Cups, the 1st 4 Brabazon Trophies, 7 Knapp Cups, 9 Swiss Championships and 15 Heaton Gold Cups. He would have won the Heaton on one other occasion when leading after the first day, had he not had a long-standing commitment to play a game of ice-hockey in Zurich on the second day. His Sunday ice-hockey matches cost him several other major trophies and given that the Run was not built in 1949, and then only from Junction between 1950 and 1954, it is certain that this total would have been even higher had the Run been operational during those years. He won the Lady Ribblesdale Cup, the Beatrice Cartwright Cup, the Carlton Challenge Cup, the Coronation Cup and the Crockford's Trophy outright. In just over 1,000 days racing, he had some 3,000 rides, in the course of which he fell only 12 times – an incredible record unlikely ever to be beaten. A typical 1950s weekend for Nino was when he rode the first three courses from Junction in the Swiss Championship in the morning, played ice-hockey for his team EHC St. Moritz against the Grasshoppers in Zurich in the afternoon returning to St Moritz in the evening. On Sunday he had 3 more rides from Top to win the Swiss Championship before 11 o'clock, played another game of ice-hockey and then won the 4-man Bob in the afternoon. He was a fearless rider, but in 1951/52, a broken shoulder sustained on the ice-hockey rink hampered his riding considerably, and yet he still managed to retain the Heaton Gold Cup, which in the absence of any Top riding was held towards the end of the season. The only time he claimed to have been scared by the Cresta was when he went to the local cinema to see a film of himself riding from Top. He said he had to look away from the screen at one point.

In the 1950s, his supremacy on the Run was only briefly threatened. First by Paul Arnold, then by Colin Mitchell and Doug Connor, and in the 1960s by Hans Kuederli, Robin Seel and Livio Ciparisso from Junction, and Christian Fischbacher from Top. He

held the fastest time of the season from Top 6 times between 1948 and 1968 and was the record holder from Top from 1965 – 1971. On Jan 22nd 1965, Doug Connor's long-standing record of 56.0 was broken three times by three different riders. It was Nino who ended the morning as the new record holder with the time of 54.67 that stood for the next 6 years. He also held the record from Junction from 1958 to 1971 apart from January 16th 1965 when Livio Ciparisso broke the record (44.10), bringing it down to 43.89. On 17th January, "Chip" broke the record again (43.81) before Nino re-established his superiority by breaking the new record with a 43.59. Between 1962 and 1970 he won the Bathurst Speed Cup for the fastest time from Junction eight times out of a possible nine.

Bibbia was born in Bianzone in Italy, just over the border from Switzerland, in an area that was formerly part of Graubunden, where his grandfather rented a fruit shop. During his first years he lived there with a friend of his mother's until at the age of 4 he was moved to St Moritz to live with his parents, Simone and Caterina. They had opened a shop in the town and he was to spend the rest of his life in the Engadine although he would always represent the nation of his birth on the Cresta Run. He frequently accompanied his father on their horse and cart as they made the 33 mile journey to St Moritz to sell fruit and vegetables. His athletic prowess had been recognised as a schoolboy, and his physique developed rapidly, no doubt aided by the physical nature of working for his father. This involved the almost weekly loading and unloading of crates of produce from the farms of his native Veltallina, which were then distributed to the hotels, restaurants and citizens of the Engadine. He met Roesli as he was delivering vegetables one day to the Rosatch Hotel where she worked as a waitress and they were married on December 28th 1949. On their wedding day Nino took his bride for a fast ride down the Bob Run, a ritual that was to be repeated annually, with their last course together occurring on their 50th Wedding



Nino with his toboggan.

Anniversary. Taking over his father's grocery shop in the Via Maistra, he also became the sole distributor of San Pellegrino mineral water in the valley. His little grey delivery van became a familiar sight in the valley, until it was finally upgraded in 1970 to a much bigger green Fiat truck, acquired at a healthy discount through the intervention of his Cresta friend, Gianni Agnelli. On occasion its contents included not merely fruit and vegetables but also injured Cresta Riders. When one rider fell in the lower banks and finished the course unconscious, Nino wasted no time in driving the man, who was bleeding copiously, in his lorry from Finish to the hospital in St. Moritz, foot on the floor and hand on the horn all the way, and then, on arrival, literally carrying him into the Klinik.

Bibbia was held in the highest regard by all Cresta riders who jokingly nicknamed him "Junior". In the starting box he looked impressive, resembling a matador facing a bull or, perhaps it was the other way round. After the bell had sounded, he moved his exceptionally heavy traditional toboggan backwards and forwards with apparent ease, before launching it powerfully through the contacts, gathering speed quickly propelled by his distinctive gallop. Then with a great leap, he launched himself onto his waggon with an intuitive grace worthy of an Olympic diver. We would all rush over to see his Shuttlecock which was always high, smooth and fast, see him disappear under the road bridge, and then wait for those almost inevitable words from Mac over the tannoy - "Hello Hello, Nino.....".

He benefitted from the support and encouragement of many of the wealthier SMTc Members, in particular his friend the former pre-war President Harry Hays Morgan. To others less linguistically gifted, Nino's lack of English made him appear somewhat shy. He was by nature a modest, reserved, but warm-hearted man, and when he received one of his many trophies at a Prize-giving, he would make a quick bow and depart. In his youth he hated being beaten. Always intensely competitive on the Run, he entered every race with the sole intention of winning. He was criticised for overstepping the boundaries of accepted practice on one or two occasions but all Cresta riders will be forever indebted to him for introducing the "brush" placed after the entry to Shuttlecock to guide their path around the bank. His uncle, Lorenzo Bibbia, was in charge of the Club House changing room from 1963, having previously been the 1st Lord Brabazon of Tara's valet on the Run. Lorenzo always ensured that Nino's toboggan had pride of place by the stove in Junction Hut on a race day until the rules were changed. He was intensely loyal to his nephew and he would always telephone him when a record was broken. This would bring Nino scurrying to the Run, leaving his wife or daughter in charge of the shop, so that he could improve on the usurper's time and wrest his title back, before returning to work duties afterwards. "Team Bibbia" were a difficult act to beat.

In 1968 he generously donated the Nino Bibbia Challenge Cup that was always accompanied by copious quantities of local delicacies as "take-aways" for the prize winners. This was when he was getting towards the end of his eminence as the Scratch rider, and he always chivalrously refused to enter to his own Open race apart from one New Year's Day in 1975 when he tied with his son Gianni in 4th place. Later that season, Gianni, benefitting from his father's guidance, won the Brabazon trophy with Nino coming in a "lowly" 2nd place. Nino mellowed slightly with age and gave good advice to the young Turks trying to emulate his achievements, including his heir apparent, Bruno Bischofberger. There can be no doubt that by his example and successes on the Cresta Run, he inspired the next generation of Swiss riders and broadened the range and reach of the membership of the SMTc as a result. He won his last Grand National in 1973 just shy of entering his 52nd year. In his final race on February 8th 1998 he comfortably bettered his Olympic times from Junction with a 46.06 and a 46.24, 50 years on from his

first great triumph, and only injury prevented him from repeating the same feat from Top. By then Nino's torch had been passed on to Clifton, James and Luca, via Bruno, Poldi, Marcel, Reto, Franco, Christian, Nico, and Johannes Badrutt, another famous son of St. Moritz. He kept all his trophies in special cabinet at home and would, if asked, show his Gold Medal with great pride to any interested visitor. There were newspaper cuttings and letters concerning his many victories but they were of no great consequence to him. It was the act of winning that counted most. The family Bibbia, and Nino in particular, have left an indelible impression on the town of St. Moritz and the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club - his flame will surely burn on strongly for many years to come. His grandson Elia Bibbia hopes to become the 3rd generation of the Bibbia family to ride the Cresta next season.

Nino Bibbia, Alpine sportsman, was born on 15th March 1922. He died in St Moritz on May 28, 2013, aged 91. His funeral was held on June 1st. He is survived by his wife Roesli, his children; Giuliana, Daniela, Gianni and Claudia, and six grandchildren.

