



Obituaries

Nino Bibbia

St Moritz greengrocer revered among Alpine sportsmen for his skill and daring on the terrifying Cresta Run

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February, 1948: Nino Bibbia adjusts his helmet and, right, hurtles down the Cresta Run in a gold medal-winning performance at the Winter Olympics in St Moritz



The most accomplished of all riders on the daunting Cresta Run in St Moritz, Nino Bibbia won more than 180 races there, including all the major titles, in a competitive career that spanned five decades. He took the gold medal in the individual skeleton on the Cresta at the Winter Olympics in St Moritz in 1948.

As well as tobogganing, he was a master of all the alpine disciplines at which he tried his hand, excelling in the two and four man bob, as well as at ice hockey and ski jumping. But it is for his triumphs on the Cresta Run that he will be remembered.

A greengrocer from St Moritz, and a notably shy man, he stood out from his fellow competitors in a sport associated in the popular mind with English aristocrats, international playboys and daredevil military men. He stood out, too, for his performances. He rode this most challenging of runs more than 3,000 times, yet suffered no more than a dozen falls.

The Cresta Run has been built from scratch, with snow packed into diamond-hard ice, every winter (except the war years) since the late 19th century, when St Moritz was a favourite resort of Victorian gentlemen.

Administered by the St Moritz Tobogganing Club, the run has been ridden by an illustrious list of names since then. It drops 514 feet over three quarters of a mile from just above the Kulm Hotel, through the Cresta valley to the little village of Celerina.

Riders emerge from the warmth of the Victorian Top Hut to hurl themselves into the run, down the vertiginous Church Leap and into the famous

ten banked corners. Protected only by pads on their hands, elbows and knees, and wearing raked boots, they ride head-first (a position adopted in the 1890s) on single-man "skeletons". The rider's nose is just inches from the ice; it is not known how many times Bibbia was the recipient of a "Cresta kiss", when face connects with ice at speed.

The most infamous of the corners is Shuttlecock, a long, low bank, about halfway down, that acts as a safety valve at which point numerous riders fly out into a bed of straw and snow. Once safely round that, the expert rider would be heading down into the lower banks and crossing the finish at some 80 to 90 mph — these were, in the early days of the run and indeed in

His blue Fiat delivery van was a familiar sight around St Moritz

early days of aviation, the fastest men on Earth.

When St Moritz held the Winter Olympics for a second time in 1948, the Cresta Run was incorporated as an event. Bibbia, a champion ice-hockey player and skier as a schoolboy, as well as an excellent cyclist, qualified to compete in four Olympic disciplines but the timetable allowed him to enter only two. He competed for Italy in the two and four man bob and, although he had only started riding the Cresta a year earlier, he also entered the individual skeleton event. This involved three rides from Junction, a lower starting

point, and three from Top, over two days.

Shuttlecock was especially low that year and there had been a number of falls. Expert prewar riders such as the American Jack Heaton and John Crammond of Great Britain were the favourites, but on the second morning Bibbia took the lead with the fastest run on the first course of the day and with the final two courses swept to victory. Overcome with emotion at winning Italy's first gold medal in a Winter Olympics, he wept.

Nino Bibbia was born in 1922 in Bianozone in Italy near the Swiss border. His grandfather rented a fruit shop and as a boy Bibbia would ride with him and his father on their horse and cart to sell fruit and vegetables on the Via Maistra in St Moritz. He later moved to the town and took on the running of his grandfather's shop.

While delivering a box of groceries one day, he was offered a toboggan in exchange for a case of Chianti. His long association with the Cresta was born. His success in 1948 was the beginning of 50 seasons of riding during which he won all the major races: the Heaton Gold Cup 14 times, the Grand National and Curzon eight times each, the Morgan Cup and Brabazon Trophy four times each.

His many records included fastest time of the season from Top six times between 1948 and 1968, and he was the record holder from Top from 1965 to 1971. He also held the record from Junction from 1958 to 1971. It was briefly broken by another rider in January 1965 but Bibbia, whose uncle Lorenzo was in

charge of the dressing-room and would telephone him when one of his records was broken, soon re-established a new fastest time.

In the 1950s at the height of his sporting reign his winter weekends were busy, typically incorporating six courses of a Cresta race such as the Swiss Championship, spread over the two days and interspersed with a couple of games of ice hockey and a run in the four-man bob.

His blue Fiat delivery van — bought at favourable rates through his Cresta friend Giovanni Agnelli — was a regular sight around the roads of St Moritz and carried not just fruit and vegetables but injured riders too. On one occasion a rider fell in the lower banks of the course, finishing unconscious and bleeding heavily. Bibbia transported him to hospital, his hand on the horn for the duration of the drive before carrying him into the clinic.

Bibbia spoke little English (the St Moritz Tobogganing Club is run in English) and while he was revered by fellow riders he remained somewhat of an enigma to them. On receiving a trophy (a regular occurrence) he would simply bow and depart soon after.

Although extremely competitive as a young man, he was full of encouragement and advice to young riders. His son Gianni won the Brabazon trophy in 1975.

Nino Bibbia is survived by his wife, Rösli, his son and three daughters.

Nino Bibbia, grocer and Alpine sportsman, was born on March 15, 1922. He died on May 28, 2013, aged 91

Lives remembered

Lothar Schmid

Simon Whyld writes: Among Lothar Schmid's (obituary, May 22) vast collection of books was what I believe to have been the largest chess book ever produced. As an 11-year-old schoolboy in 1962 I had the pleasure of delivering this book, unaccompanied, from Nottingham to his home in Bamberg. The details of this book are vague but I believe it to have been a scrap-book style collection of newspaper articles. The book itself was both larger and heavier than the suitcase that I had for the two to three weeks that I was to spend with Lothar, his wife Ingrid and their sons Wolfgang and Bernhart. A regular visitor was the under-21 world champion Helmut Pfleger who generously offered me a draw in one game. While there, Lothar took me on what seemed to be most nights of the week to the Bamberg Chess Club which was home to some of the strongest players in Germany. I have fond memories of the warmth and affection shown by Lothar and Ingrid, and the atmosphere of the chess club has lingered since.

The Rev Ian Weathrall

Edward Towne writes: I was fortunate to spend several days as a guest of the Delhi Brotherhood, at the suggestion of a colleague at King's School, Rochester. Ian Weathrall (obituary, May 28) and his colleagues were unfailingly welcoming and hospitable, and would only accept donations by way of payment (if I remember, there was a crack in one of the internal walls where I stuffed a bundle of notes). Ian showed me round Delhi, imparting much useful advice, but his serene manner briefly disappeared only once, when I was caught having both the meat and vegetable curries at lunch. He arranged for me to see the excellent work performed by the Brotherhood in the community, as outlined in your fine obituary.

Sir George Quigley

Lord Lexden writes: It was only in the second half of his career that George Quigley (obituary, May 30) became "convinced that Northern Ireland's dependence on public expenditure was not sustainable". As a senior civil servant in the 1970s he was well-known for "his carefully nurtured and semi-ally Keynesian judgments", as his colleague Maurice Hayes delicately put it in his memoirs. They informed the official report on "economic and social strategy" which he published at the request of the Labour government in September 1976. It called for a substantial increase in public spending, large subsidies to reduce energy prices and generous incentives to attract inward investment. Even Labour ministers distanced themselves from the Quigley Report, describing it as "a valuable basis for discussion". The then Conservative Shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, Airey Neave, repudiated it in speeches which I helped to draft. It was never implemented. Quigley remained enthusiastic about spending public funds, backing the notorious DeLorean car plant on which the taxpayer lost £77 million.

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