

Special Feature

British Bobsleigh Championships 2006

“Why don’t you come to Innsbruck and watch the British Championships” said Gordon Bosworth, our estimable physiotherapist at Breakspere House, and also



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For the first the President of the British Bobsleigh Association.

So I did in January 2005, had a guest ride down the track in a four-man bob and was totally hooked. For an adrenaline junkie this takes some beating; the noise, the violence, the speed, ever increasing with no chance of stopping all added to a terrifying experience. “But if someone else can do it, why can’t I?” I found myself saying at the finish when silence finally descended and we eventually stopped.

Ice Cold in Igls

Unfortunately, there was an instant response, which gave me no opportunity to change my mind, when our driver of the moment, one Graham Richardson, himself a top GB driver in the 80’s commented that he was setting up a Bob school in January 2006 and I could be one of his first clients.

January 1st 2006 saw myself, hung over with my brother in law, the only man brave or foolish enough to accept my challenge to be my brake man, poised at the top of the one mile blue ice track at Igls, in an alien machine and an alien environment, no wheel to steer with but

ropes to pull, no brakes, ever sharper turns and ever increasing velocity to a maximum of nearly 80 mph at the end. For the first morning we talked rudimentary facts - death, severe injury rates and what to do in the event of a crash (pray). We had walked the track where advice was given as to how and where to steer to negotiate the 16 terrifying bends, all decisions, of course, having to be made in split seconds with no chance of pulling onto the hard shoulder and starting again if you get it wrong. Scars across the ice walls on the banking bore testament to those who had.

The Kreisal Bend

At 4 pm on the first day from a start one third the way down the track we were pushed off the top of a ramp and were committed. All went well for the first half of the descent. The fearful Kreisal bend, which turns for 270 unremitting degrees, exerting up to 5G’s was successfully negotiated but at what appeared to be an innocuous first part of the final chicane we slid high on the wall. Like a rabbit caught in the headlights, I froze, (nobody had told me what to do at such a time) and in a trice flipped and continued on our merry way for the remaining quarter of a mile upside-down

Continued on page 41

and not much slower than the right way up, only noisier. Pride, dignity, our shoulders and my helmet were somewhat dented when we eventually came to rest. Without ceremony or sympathy the battered sledge was retrieved, placed on the camion and returned to the start for the second run of the day. No time to reminisce or remonstrate, it was back on again and do it right this time before the bruises come out. We did, but rather gingerly.

Four Helmets Later

The next three days saw the same pattern repeated. I felt somewhat like a matador must feel as he waits to face his destiny or a good goring. Morning spent in prayer. Lunch time - no appetite - return to the room, dress ritualistically - always the right sock before the left etc, a run and rerun through the course in one's mind's eye. Two o'clock, a silent minibus ride with the three other deranged couples to the track and walk it again and again with the boss, trying each time to ignore the blood stains from the previous day. Four o'clock as the sun set the floodlights came on and the cold biting wind turned my bowels to water, we slid. Now running from the top with a full running start, we began to feel more confident and in control of this bucking, violent, 400 kg steed and our times slowly improved.

Day 4, the day before the championships - words of wisdom from Graham on negotiating the big Kreisal; "Don't steer, adjust your position and let go." I did and arrived at the exit to that bend still some 10 ft up the wall, 90° from the desired horizontal position. This time we slid upside-down for the full remaining half

mile of the track, my head (in a crash helmet) wedged between the sledge and the frozen track wall being slowly stretched from the rest of my body. We eventually arrived at the bottom of the track at the same time as my wife and sister-in-law arrived to view our progress. They witnessed the plunging up-turned bob from whence suddenly with great volume and anger there erupted a furious sound that echoed around the Innsbruck hills in the still of the evening. "That's the last f...ing time I listen to Graham's advice". They knew then that we were alright, but my helmet (one of four during the week) was totally destroyed.

Adrenaline Junkie's Next Move?

The last run of the day we reverted to previous practise and survived. Next day, race day, we adopted the conservative but safe attitude while playing with the big boys. With our average age nearly 25 years more than any other competitor, it was the taking part not the winning that was important. We completed both runs in identical times to within 100th of a second with an average speed of 94 km/hr. At least consistent, we finished a creditable 13th, the 14th crashed out terminally on the first run!

Black and blue from shoulder to hip on both sides we licked our wounds, drank our beer, accepted our medals and limped home, battered but unbroken after the most memorable, most terrifying, and most satisfying interlude of my life - marriage apart of course.

But I think I know now in retrospect where I was going wrong, so next year ... but my wife and brother-in-law have different ideas. Maybe the skeleton bob?

Sandy Scott