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Autor: [s.n.]
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Hickory skiers mark centenary downhill



Teams turned out in style for the historic race in Crans Montana

Crans Montana saw an invasion of hickory, tweed and pipes in April as ski fans paid homage to British winter sport pioneers in a popular centenary downhill race.

Sporting long wooden vintage skis and period costumes, 250 skiers celebrated what is claimed to have been the first-ever downhill alpine ski race, the Roberts of Kandahar Challenge Cup, organised in 1911 by Sir Arnold Lunn.

The sound of laughter echoed from the top of the Plaine Morte ski lift (3,000 metres) in the Valais resort as groups of men and women strapped heavy leather boots into flimsy-looking leather bindings under the hot spring sun. Each team of three to five slowly shuffled forward to the starting line, where the authenticity of their dress, skis, boots and poles was checked by a judge. Then they were off, sliding cautiously together down the icy Violettes piste.

The 60 teams were reliving the adventure of eleven pioneering skiers, mostly British, who on January 6, 1911 climbed for six and a half hours to the Plaine-Morte glacier above Crans Montana and spent the night in the Wildstrubel mountain hut. The next morning the intrepid group launched themselves down the mountain. The eventual winner of the first-past-the-post race to below the village of Montana was

awarded the legendary Roberts of Kandahar Challenge Cup, donated by British general and winter sports fan Lord Frederik Roberts of Kandahar.

This challenge, organised by ski pioneer Sir Arnold Lunn, has an important place in the development of downhill ski racing. The name Kandahar is still used to this day on the World Cup race circuit.

After the tricky icy slope near the top, some teams streaked ahead, effortlessly telemarking their way through the spring snow, which was warming fast in the hot April sun. But others found it heavy going and skied slowly or stopped off for some eau-de-vie from a hipflask.

Halfway down the course a welcome raclette awaited the teams and allowed them to regroup and swap stories about their exploits, bumps and bruises and broken skis. "It's fun to see how our ancestors used to ski," said Philippe Clivaz. "You have to adapt as we ski on super high-performance carving skis and here we are on old bits of wood with bindings we are not sure are going to hold."

The participants acknowledged that the conditions were not easy – especially with the added risk of people on snowboards and carving skis flying by.

In 1911 the race was won by Cecil Hopkins, who arrived just below the village of Montana in 61 minutes. The first team to shoot over the finish line in the anniversary race did so in just 45 minutes, but many did not finish until three or four hours later. Speed was not the decisive factor, however, as look, skiing style and attitude also came into the equation and for that the "Tagwohl" team with their ancient hickory skis and bindings, dapper suits and caps and pipes were the obvious winners.

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Forests flourish but face challenges

After a year devoted to biodiversity, the United Nations has turned its attention to forests. In Switzerland, trees cover more than 30 per cent of the country. The year will help raise awareness of the problems facing the world's forests.

Managing and conserving forests is an age-old practice in Switzerland, and people take the situation for granted. But it's far from ideal elsewhere. In Switzerland, forest conservation and management policy doesn't allow forests to be cleared. While forests were largely overexploited in the middle of the 19th century, resulting in natural disasters, the forested area has now doubled and forests have been restored to good health.

In Switzerland, the civil code allows every citizen free access to all forests, regardless who owns them.

Furthermore, the state has the legal duty to guarantee that forests play a role in protecting against natural hazards – especially in the mountains where they prevent landslides, rock falls, avalanches and floods.

Timber production is left to the private sector. The state does, however, offer support and advice to forest owners. Forests are expanding in the mountains, but stagnating in the lowlands. Agricultural zones have to be protected, especially in the mountains.

The main concern regarding forests in Switzerland is climate change. Rising temperature means that species that are currently well adapted to their environment will be less so in future. The focus is on trying to raise the forests' resilience, especially by increasing the number of species to ensure forests include species more tolerant to climate change.

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