

IT'S not every day I can boast that I've beaten a five-times Olympic gold medallist in a big race. But, last month, that's what happened. The race? The Inferno, in the Swiss Alps. The Olympian? Sir Steve Redgrave. Obviously, this involved snow, not water, and I must confess I'm a seasoned-enough downhiller to own a catsuit, whereas Sir Steve was clad in a jumper and salopettes. It was also his first Inferno and my fifth, and, of the 1,875 contenders, I had a favourably early start number (459). But in a year that marks a century since the first official downhill ski race ever staged, it was pleasing to be in such illustrious company.

That initial downhill, organised by the British in Crans-Montana in January 1911, laid the foundations not only for World Cup racing, but also for the amateur contests that are booming today. The Inferno in Mürren—first staged in 1928 by an intrepid group from the Kandahar Ski Club—is king of these *Volksrennen*, drawing contestants from 21 countries: the Swiss dominate, but 500 were German and 180 British. 'If the Devil were a skier,' reads its tagline, 'the Inferno would be his first choice of race.' It's devilish enough when rutted and icy, and even more so when there's enough snow to run the full 9¼-mile course from Kleines Schilthorn (at 9,150ft) to Lauterbrunnen (2,600ft).

However, for the 2011 four-mile edition, finishing in Mürren, the Devil laid low. Heaven, instead, sent three days' snowfall, which cleared for race day and made the sight of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau, framed by powdery pines and weathered chalets, more magical than ever. Chamois grazed yards from the most fearsome section, Plattwang, and supporters fired up fondue sets and shared bottles of Fendant at the most critical corner. 'Seldom have I seen the race so beautiful,' declared alphorn maestro Albert 'Böbs' Feuz, a former dual winner who was racing in his 48th Inferno.

It's more than 80 years since a Briton won, and competitors take the race seriously: some are contenders for the Super-Vier, a series that includes downhills at Belalp, Davos and Saas-Fee; some avoid alcohol for weeks beforehand; and I saw one young man taking the snow's temperature to determine ski-wax choice. Six members of the Irvine-Fortescue family raced as Team Monty to commemorate the presentation of a cup to their ancestors by Field-Marshal Montgomery in 1952, and the Hardres Ski Touring Club were there in memory of their friend Toby Cox, who was killed in an avalanche last year. Some were surprisingly inexperienced: a trio from the Parachute Regiment had 10 weeks on snow

Going through Hell on Heavenly snow

If the Devil were a skier, the Inferno would be his race. Yolanda Carslaw is proud to have beaten a distinguished Olympian in this legendary amateur event



between them, but, coached by an Inferno veteran, they all finished.

For me, the race was the most exhilarating yet. My main concern was to activate an iPhone application that registers speed, distance and gradient with freezing fingers in the minus-17°C air. I then clicked into 198 super-G Völkls, slid into a queue of men (who outnumber female racers 9:1), bypassed the *schnapps* that dangles in the start gate, and set off 12 seconds behind number 458. After two *schusses*, five racers had overtaken me, but this meant I could follow their expert line through

Sir Steve and Lady Redgrave were last-minute race entrants





Each year, thrill-hungry visitors from all over the world descend on the small, car-free village of Mürren to tackle the Inferno course

the steepest section—albeit in a stable ‘lavatory’ crouch rather than a tidy tuck. Most testing was the uphill, but cries of ‘Hup, hup!’ and clanking cowbells spurred me to the last hairpins and the finish. A glance at the iPhone left me sceptical: I trusted its claim that the gradient hit 43°, but not that my velocity reached 509kph.

Sir Steve, who set off hours later, may be accustomed to four years’ preparation for a big day, but here he’d had just a week—and has only recently recovered from a serious bicycle crash. He and his wife,

Ann, came to Mürren to ‘have a look’, and he jumped at the chance to race when last-minute places became available. ‘I woke up nervous,’ he admitted. ‘My lack of fitness was a problem and I struggled on the uphill. You think, “Why am I doing this?” and then you cross the line with such a big grin and a sense of achievement.’

The advice from Böbs to anyone else wanting to have a go is: ‘Get fit, get to know the course thoroughly, and inspect it with someone who has raced it before. And don’t leave your head under your helmet!’

For more information on the race, visit www.inferno-muerren.ch. Mürren lies just over three hours by train from Zurich and Basel airports. A Swiss Transfer Ticket, which covers you for a round trip from the airport to the resort and back again, costs from £79 if booked in advance—to book a ticket, visit www.swisstravelsystem.co.uk or telephone the Swiss Travel Centre on 00800 100 200 30. For more details on travelling to and within Switzerland, visit www.myswitzerland.com