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A LOOK AT THE SHUTTLECOCK CLUB

By ROMAIN CAVELTI

The Shuttlecock Club is surely one of the most original in the world. Its members are spread over every continent. Its doings are unencumbered by statutes and by-laws. No membership dues are paid. But not everyone can belong to this unique group. First must come tests of courage and the performance of a challenging task.

Chief meeting-place of Shuttlecock members is the famous Cresta Run at the *St. Moritz* toboggan track. Experts take this icy, curving grade at breathtaking speed. Record time for the entire run, which was set in 1957 by Canadian industrialist Doug W. Connor, is 56 seconds. Although many first-class sledders have tried since, no one has yet succeeded in bettering Connor's time.

The track is re-laid every year, with the most exacting precision. Even so, sledders go over it carefully to test it; the slightest change in its surface from the previous year calls for a knowing change in technique on the part of the riders. Equipped with crash-helmets, knee-pads, elbow-shields and special shoes, they whiz around the curves, prone on their small, heavy sleds.

From the announcer's platform of the *St. Moritz* Tobogganing Clubhouse, a commentator describes their runs to the assembled crowds: "... and now he's driving in the Shuttlecock ..."

At these words, the eyes of all spectators turn toward one particular curve. Tension fills the air. And if the sledder successfully negotiates it, there is an almost audible sigh of relief from the audience.

The Shuttlecock curve is not particularly dangerous, in and of itself. But it is treacherous, and the sledders must know it well and exploit its every minute bank and turn. A split second of faulty weight displacement, or any other mistaken manoeuvre, and the skeleton-sled rider is tossed like a shuttlecock off the track. On the outside of the curve, to the right, a bed of straw and hay is laid down, to lessen the shock of being thrown. If the sledder succeeds in pushing the skeleton away from his body as he goes off the track, he can sink into the soft bed of straw and come out the other side safe and sound.

It is this kind of baptism which allows a man to join the ranks of the Shuttlecock Club. Of course, if he was thrown at the turn, he is required to go back and do it again, properly.

When a man becomes a Shuttlecock member, he receives an insignia, in the form of a stylized shuttlecock, as well as a necktie with the same symbol on it. Membership in the club brings many amusements with it, too.

Harry Hays Morgan started the club in 1933, together with four friends. In those days, there were no female members. Even today, women skeletoners are not permitted at *St. Moritz*. But as "inactive" members, quite a few ladies enhance the friendly atmosphere of the Shuttlecock Club, which now numbers about 500.

Every club has a president, and the Shuttlecock is no exception. Harry Hays Morgan is lifelong Honorary President. But in addition, at the start of each winter season, a President is selected for a year. As it was originally set up by Morgan and his friends, the new President is chosen by the President of the preceding year, and is first announced to all the members at the Shuttlecock Dinner. This annual gala affair, held at the Hotel Steffani in *St. Moritz*, exercises an irresistible pull on club members. Even honeymoons have been known to be planned around it.

The past President takes care of all the preparations for the dinner. In the straw-and-candle decorated banquet hall, he ceremonially relinquishes his office, and the privilege of making a speech, to his successor. The new President, however, may not simply rise to thank his predecessor. He is required to make his appearance in the most original possible manner. A wealth of ideas has been used to date — one president made his entry riding a goat, another was carried in a coffin and rose as a mummy. There is no limit placed on the imagination, in the Shuttlecock Club. And the new President's acceptance speech must be spirited, sparkling and sarcastic. He also has the right to call upon other members for short, witty remarks. After the gala dinner, the members separate once again. Most active sledders take advantage of the season to practice their sport — and their time is limited, since the track is generally closed by the end of February. Of course, the members meet again, early in the day near the track, in the clubhouse, or later in the small bar of the Hotel Kulm. Friendships and contacts are made and renewed. Chances for a race are considered. The big dinner is discussed and re-hashed, and there is already talk of the next year's affair.

Each year, a guest of honour is invited to the dinner. Some years ago, Viscount Montgomery filled this role, and subsequently became an Honorary Member of the Club. A horse named "Apple" was once the guest of honour. (He was very fond of hay and straw. Viscount Montgomery prefers tests of courage.)

Men of all nations meet on the *St. Moritz* toboggan track. The sons of famous families, celebrities, simple people — they gather there to measure each other's daring and athletic skill. And to these basic ingredients, the members of the Shuttlecock Club add the sounds of laughter and spirited conversation.

(By courtesy of "Swissair Gazette".)

A WINTERSPORT EXCLUSIVITY — HORSE RACING ON SNOW

Besides the many national and international ski-ing and skating competitions, toboggan and bob races and curling tournaments, horse racing on snow takes a foremost place on the Swiss wintersports programme. Races will be held at Arosa on 17th and 24th January and at *St. Moritz* on 31st January and 7th February. — Jumping competitions are scheduled for mid-January at *St. Moritz* and at Davos beginning of March. — Outstanding ski events will be the Swiss national Alpine championships at Wengen on 5th-7th March and the international "Three Peaks" races at Arosa on 19th-21st March.

[S.N.T.O.]

INFRA-RED RAYS IN THE SWISS RAILWAYS

In order to simplify the smooth running of the railways in the event of heavy falls of snow or severe frost, as well as to cut down the cost of clearing the tracks of snow, the Swiss Federal Railways have installed for the first time a large number of infra-red heating units for points, worked by propane gas. The gas is fed through a network of plastic pipes from a central tank. The Swiss stations at Brigue, Vallorbe, Airolo, Chur and Sargans are equipped with a total of 180 units of this kind.

[O.S.E.C.]