

## HE CAME, HE

01 Canadian lumberjack Stirling Hart wields his customised racing saw to slice through a 46cm trunk in the day's final event, hot-saw racing

# BLADES OF GLORY

As sports go, Ice Cross Downhill – a high-octane hybrid of giant slalom and the punchier aspects of ice hockey – is higher on risk than it is reward. With zero prize money at stake and danger levels high, athletes are

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The race official's words ring out over the tannoy system and a veil of silence descends upon the snow-dusted hillside. Under a cold night sky, the 10,000 men, women and children pressed up against the waist-high barriers that line the track stand in statuesque stillness. Clouds of condensed breath escape their lips. Tonight, five seconds feels an eternity. Time, like everything in this icy, inhospitable Scandinavian snowscape, appears frozen.

A horn sounds. At the top of the hill the mechanical gates jerk open and the crowd erupts into clamorous excitement. Four men burst out of the starting gates and onto the track. The razor-sharp blades on their skates scrape through the acutely angled ice as the competitors propel themselves forward before adopting a tight tuck position, bracing for impact as they fly into the first corner.

Between these men, the finish line and ultimate glory lie 630 metres of steeply descending, viciously undulating and dangerously unpredictable ice. That's not to mention each other – only two of the four who started this heat will progress to the next round, and all will put their bodies on the line in pursuit of victory. As the cold air rushes past their face, each rider repeats a mantra in his head: "Follow the racing line, hold position, get out in front, and make it to the end of the night." Get stuck in the pack – all flailing arms, overlapping skates and clashing shoulders – and you're as likely to be climbing into the back of an ambulance as onto a podium.

**COLD MOUNTAIN**

For the 64 athletes assembled here in the frostbitten hills outside the Finnish town of Jyväskylä, the risk is one they are happy to take in the hope of victory in this idiosyncratic sport. The brainchild of an evidently highly-stimulated Red Bull employee, Ice Cross Downhill, is a unique



**THE TRAINING**

and thrilling contest in which four skaters – usually ice hockey players – race down an icy track complete with bumps, jumps and inevitable crashes. Fifteen years after its conception, it has become one of the most physically demanding disciplines on the winter sports calendar.

Similarly to Formula 1, the skaters amass points over the course of the season based on their finishing position at each event. Unlike Formula 1, however, all it takes is one crack in the ice or a shove from an off-balance opponent before you find yourself sliding face-first down a slippery slope and out of the race. Tonight's meeting is just the second of four Red Bull-sponsored events in a nine-date season, but already the bruises are showing. "It can all go wrong in a heartbeat," says Reed Whiting, a 37-year-old veteran of the sport turned TV commentator. "Especially on tracks with dangerous features. Which, thinking about it, is nearly all of them."

Whiting gestures up the serpentine



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track towards the so-called rock drop – a sheer two-metre wall of ice that athletes will later career over, shoulder-to-shoulder, at speeds approaching 50mph. "During a practice run, you can see a big jump coming and prepare for it. But when you're racing three other guys and the group is tightly bunched, you can easily be racing blind. Hit something like this and you're in the air for seconds at a time and landing on just eight inches of steel. It ramps up the adrenaline, that's for sure."

This potent danger is precisely what has enticed the swathes of spectators out of their warm homes and into the freezing Finnish night. But it is also represents a significant appeal for the competitors themselves. "As a kid growing up in Austria I remember looking out of the car window and imagining myself skating down the hills," says Marco Dallago, a former world champion and firm crowd favourite. "Now, every time I race, I have





# THE RACE



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## BLADES OF GLORY

the best time of my life. Racing is pure – it feels like meditation, but with action. It’s adrenaline zen: you have to give complete focus to what you’re doing or you know it will end badly.”

Here on Jyväskylä’s natural ice track the opportunities for injury are myriad. The vast majority of Ice Cross tracks are artificially created, but here in the remote heartland of central Finland – where average temperatures in winter hover around -10°C – the ice course requires no human intervention. The result is one of the most challenging courses on the circuit, a world away from the flawlessly smooth surface of your local ice rink. “There are thousands of little humps and bumps,” says Dallago who, like most of the guys on the tour, transitioned to downhill racing from professional ice hockey. “It makes it insanely difficult to stay on your line, never mind on your feet. It’s as tough as it gets.”

### FIRE AND ICE

The technical proficiency, physical preparation and race-craft required to excel in Ice Cross have few equals in the sporting world. The Red Bull Crashed Ice series may have started as a one-off exhibition event, but as the fledgling sport continues to grow, its creators may have inadvertently inspired the evolution of some of the most complete athletes in the world.

Tonight, 26-year-old former ice hockey player Cameron Naasz leads the pack. As the reigning world champion the American is naturally one of the favourites and has been credited with dramatically raising the bar for the sport’s athletic standards. Sponsorship money is sparse, prize money non-existent, yet Naasz dedicates his life to Ice Cross, training year-round with the express purpose of continuing his dominance over this singular sport.

Without specialist coaches to train them, athletes turn to a variety of sources to build the explosive power they need to be first out of the gate; the unshakable balance to tussle with an opponent at 50mph around a 90-degree bend; and the straight-line speed of an Olympic skater. “You have to get creative,” says Naasz. “There’s obviously lots of hockey-specific training, but a lot of the guys do parkour-type workouts to prepare their cores and improve mobility. I do a lot of Crossfit as it’s the best exercise for full-body conditioning; you’re lifting weights, using a variety of different movements, building





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strength and balance.”

Tonight the biggest threat to Naasz’s title is 2015 world champion Scott Croxall. The 28-year-old Canadian won the Jyväskylä race last year and has been taking his off-season prep to the next level. “I train at a hockey facility in Ontario with my brother [fellow racer Kyle] and the head trainer. In the summer, he’s training 40-plus NHL guys, so he knows what I’ve got to do to be explosive out of the gate.” Athletes like Naasz and Croxall (whose summers are given over to waterskiing, in which he competes for Team Canada) are pushing the fastest sport on skates to develop a more polished, professional edge.

### FREEZE FRAME

With the listless winter sun long since departed and the crisp evening air illuminated only by bright spotlights that border the length of the skate-scarred track, just four men remain in the competition. Naasz and Croxall are among them, joined in the final by American Maxwell Dunne and Canadian John Fisher. This race will be their fifth in a little over two hours, demanding their final reserves of concentration.

“Five seconds warning.” The familiar refrain reverberates around the conifer-lined hill. The skaters grip their starting gates with thick-gloved hands, tighten their posterior chains and focus their gaze on the sharp left-hander some ten metres down the track. As the horn sounds, Croxall fires out of the gate and edges into the lead. Naasz finds himself in traffic and has to use his gym-honed speed and racing nous to work his way back into contention. All four athletes descend the course at breathtaking speed, somehow managing to stay on their feet through a number of thumping collisions. As they round the last corner, Fisher loses balance and slams into the barrier, sending Naasz tumbling over his splayed body. With teeth gritted, Croxall extends his arms, drops to one knee and glides over the line to victory.

Naasz, who suffers the ignominy of sliding over the line on his belly, finishes third. The Minnesotan is clearly disappointed but remains stoic in defeat. The season is far from over, and there are plenty more points to be won between here and the series-ending finale in Ottawa, Canada. “None of these guys would be here if they didn’t want to get fired up, have crazy races and do wild

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