

# SKI START

BY EVELYN SPENCE PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLIN SAMUELS



2:30 A.M., Zermatt, Switzerland: Patrouille de Glaciers competitors stampede at the race's start.

# HAUTE ROUTE

# ZERMATT

# FEST

When thousands of mega-lunged ski-mountaineers descend upon Zermatt for the world's toughest single-day ski race, pain is mandatory—and spandex is everywhere.

# ALLEZ LES BICHETTES!

**I**T'S 2:07 ON A SATURDAY MORNING IN THE CENTER of Zermatt, Switzerland, and hundreds of people are standing shoulder to shoulder on makeshift grandstands—or leaning against makeshift barriers—and frantically waving makeshift props: Swiss flags, hometown pennants, bedsheets spray-painted with words of encouragement. One fan holds a banner that simply proclaims, “Go bitches!”

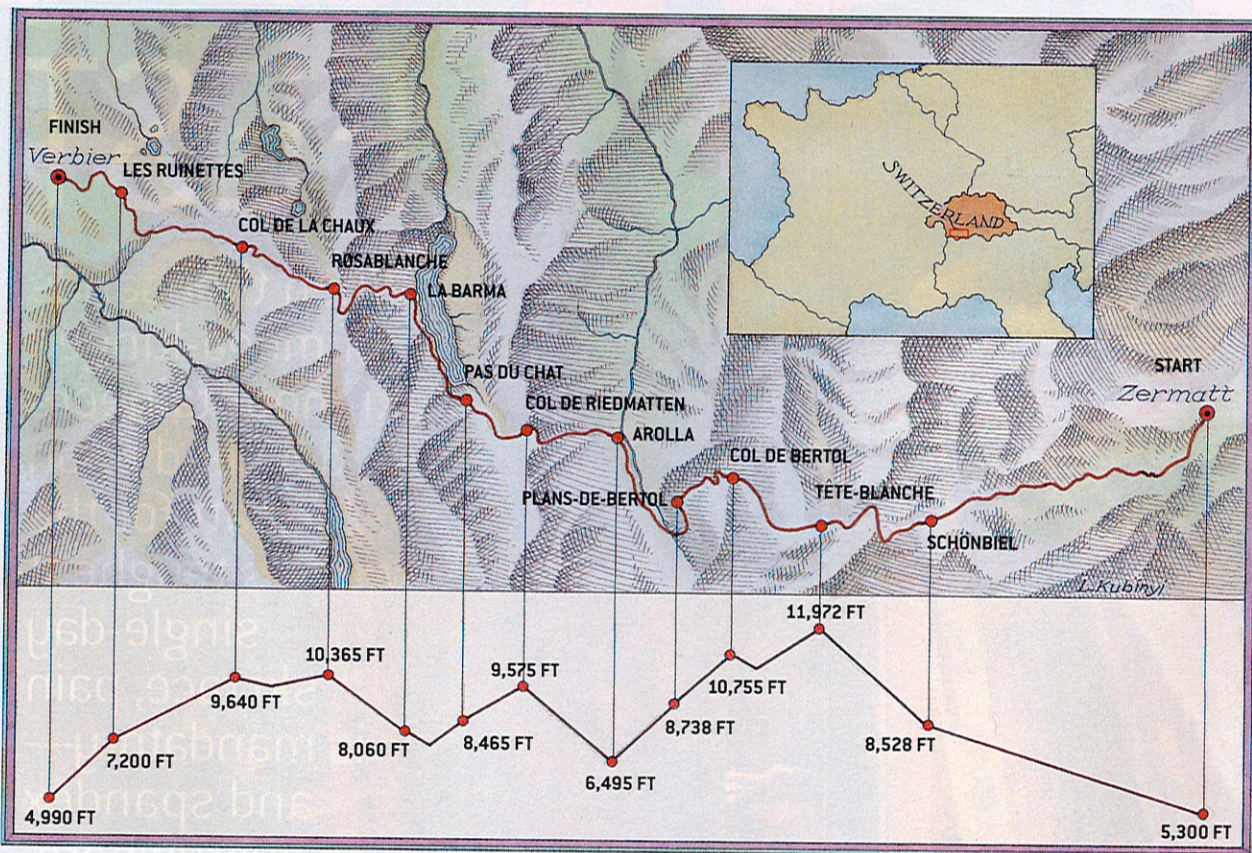
The air smells like stale beer. A stumbling spectator pulls his pie-eyed friend out of a puddle of slush. Over the loudspeakers, military marching songs alternate with a cheesy remix of “Hey Jude.”

As the 2:30 start time approaches, racers shake their spandexed legs to warm up. European reporters, towing tripod-mounted TV cameras and long mics, struggle for position.

The cowbells clank and the banners curl.  
The starter's pistol cracks.  
And the racers dash off into the night.

THE PATROUILLE DES GLACIERS (PDG) IS THE LONGEST and largest one-day ski-mountaineering competition in Europe, where the passion for this peculiar kind of alpinism runs highest. A freeheel marathon that attracts over 2,900 skiers from Slovenia to Sweden, Andorra to Austria (but not a single American), the PDG follows the Haute Route for 33 miles from Zermatt to Verbier, sandwiched by a 45-minute muddy sprint at the start and a final, one-mile run to the finish. In between, competitors yo-yo 27,000 feet over glaciers, up couloirs, and down crevasse-pleated faces.

It's been called Paris-Dakar on skis, but it's more skiing's answer to the Ironman. Thousands of fans watch the start,



And then a cry rises from down the street.  
“Bonjour les machines!”

The Swiss Team—there are hundreds of Swiss teams, but only one has been dubbed *les machines* by its fans—jogs into the light from a backstreet. Ten minutes later, the French all-star trio called Parc des Bauges Savoie struts out from another dim alley. The cameras turn to the top two seeds of the race, converging on them before they can duck into psych-up huddles. A few moments later, the loudspeaker blares a French countdown: *dix! neuf! huit!*

stake out spots at the finish, or skin for hours in darkness just to snag a vantage point at the most brutal col. The top competitors, so twiggy their spandex sags at elbow and knee, wear sponsor patches from obscure companies like Mobalpa (kitchen supplies from France) and Meryl Actisystem (base layers). In America, these racers are unheard of; in Western Europe, they're minor celebrities; in the Swiss Alps, come race time, they're practically heroes.

The PDG is just one of more than 200 ski-mountaineering races on the Continent. It's common for people to bring

**ANTS GO MARCHING:** As the sun rises, racers leave the flats and start another brutal climb.



Spandex: Check. Mega-lungs: Check. French phenom Patrick Blanc before the start, left. Racers topping out on 10,365-foot Rosablanche, the last steep climb.

their ski-touring equipment to resorts and head off for distant saddles and peaks, more concerned with efficient movement than the sensation of powder skiing. PDG athletes train year-round and nab jobs like “mountain policeman,” which bring in paychecks for patrolling the Alps by ski and racking up tons of uphill vertical. Racers are so hyper-weight-conscious they’ll strategically drill holes into the shells of their race boots to save a few grams—and travel to races with kitchen scales.

When it was reconceived in 1984, the same rules applied: Teams would be comprised of three members, and must pass checkpoints within 10 meters of one another. During glacial descents, teams ski downhill while roped together.

Since its revival, various renditions of *les machines* have dominated, winning eight of the last ten races—the other two were cancelled due to bad weather—and chipping away at the race record. This year, the French, determined to win the PDG for the first time, have assembled a nation-

## When Americans race Europeans, **‘IT’S LIKE A PRIDE OF LIONS LET LOOSE ON A PACK OF SHEEP.’** The Euros literally climb at twice the speed.”

Because it’s such a remarkable feat of logistics, the PDG is only staged every other year. The race is run by the Swiss military: 1,315 soldiers, including 45 doctors, 20 guides, and six avalanche specialists. For weeks before the start, soldiers flag the course with flashing lights and red danger flags. They methodically kick steps into the steepest sections—sometimes three sets wide—and set up fixed ropes on either side of the Col du Riedmatten, a steep, icy notch and the technical crux of the race. Avalanche specialists dig pits and chart changing weather conditions; heli pilots drop a total of 95,000 pounds of tents, tables, first-aid supplies, food, and water across 11 checkpoints. In all, the race costs the Swiss government two million francs.

The original PDG was created in 1943 as an exercise for Swiss mountain soldiers protecting the southwestern Alps from a German invasion. The conceit? Teams of three had to deliver a secret message to a sergeant in Verbier by a certain time. The race was banned in 1949, when a team fell into a crevasse—and wasn’t found until eight days later.

al ski-mountaineering dream team. One member won the 2004 World Championships and World Cup title in ski alpinism; another holds the record for the fastest ascent of Argentina’s 22,841-foot Aconcagua. And their 33-year-old captain, Stéphane Brosse, recently bagged 15,780-foot Mont Blanc in an astounding 5 hours and 15 minutes, also a world record. In an average winter, Brosse racks up around 500,000 vertical feet—the equivalent of skiing to the top of Everest 17 times, from sea level.

THERE’S A REASON NO AMERICANS HAVE COME TO ZERMATT to compete: They can’t keep up. In the States, randonnée rallies are still a niche within a niche; the best rando skiers—Andrew McLean, Brendan O’Neill—are merely avid backcountry skiers and ski mountaineers who happen to be in extremely good shape. There are only a handful of races, most of which are held on comparatively mild terrain within resort boundaries and attended by just a few dozen amateurs. One of the most demanding backcountry events, the



Words of encouragement? Whatever works. Faithful fans at the top of Rosablanche, left. Thirty-three miles, 27,000 feet, a sunrise, and a course record later, the winners cross the line.

Elk Mountains Grand Traverse, from Crested Butte to Aspen, covers 40 miles, isn't technical in the least, gains half the vertical, allows lighter and edgeless Nordic skis—and *still* takes the fastest competitors an hour longer than the PDG participants to finish.

McLean was the course director for the 2004 Wasatch Powderkeg, the first official World Cup-sanctioned ski-mountaineering race on American snow. The event brought the best Europeans Stateside to earn points for the overall standings. O'Neill, the top—and only—American in the

same intensity—or for quite as long. Only a third of the field starts in Zermatt; the other 1,800 race half the distance, from Arolla, a mountain town at the midpoint, to the finish in Verbier.

The scene at Arolla is louder, more chaotic. Everybody eats in one giant mess tent before the event. It's much more of a cross-section of the European ski-mountaineering culture—and there's very little spandex. There are Swiss military teams in cheap-looking windsuits, older men in green-and-pink one-pieces. The announcer jokes, "Don't push each

## Racers are so hyper-weight-conscious that they strategically **DRILL HOLES INTO THE SHELLS OF THEIR** race boots to save a few grams—and travel with kitchen scales.

men's field, finished 20th out of 25. "It was like a pride of lions let loose on a pack of sheep," McLean recalls. "In some places, the Euros were literally climbing at twice the speed."

Still, the sport is growing. Participation in Life-Link's randonnée rally series increases by about 20 percent yearly. Worldwide sales of Dynafit's lightweight TLT binding have tripled over the last three years. Scarpa sold 2,000 pairs of its quick-buckle racing boot, the F1, in its first year. Ski Trab, one of Europe's most popular brands, has doubled its sales of lightweight touring skis over the last five years. And the sport's governing body, the International Ski Mountaineering Council, is currently lobbying to be included in the 2010 Olympic winter games in Whistler Blackcomb, British Columbia.

The PDG's field, for its part, has quintupled since 1984. And while nobody seems to mind getting up at midnight just to suffer, not everyone who enters the race suffers with

other! Be nice! Smile for the cameras!" And when the starter's flare lights up the sky, people *moo* like cattle and everyone in the skinning herd laughs.

THE AFTERNOON BEFORE THE RACE BEGINS, I BUMP INTO the French team at the high school gymnasium where the Army runs the most anal assembly line of equipment-examining I've ever seen. Soldiers in full camo and cadet caps pick up boots, turning them over and grunting. They flex skis, pull out measuring tapes, and stretch ropes, twirling them and shaking their heads.

"Mountain ropes are not white," says a soldier to one of the French racers. The team exchanges mildly irritated glances, whispering and gesturing before someone finally produces an almost-identical coil in green. The rope

*continued on page 224*

# Black Diamonds. Moguls

**SUFFERFEST** *continued from page 134*

committee nods.

A few hours later, I'm supposed to meet up with the Swiss team near the train station. But when I show up, Jean-Yves Rey, their captain, informs me that his two teammates have gone to bed. He's already wearing his uniform, and he's visibly anxious. He shifts his weight from one running shoe to another, checking his watch repeatedly. This is his seventh PDG, and he's never won.

Rey's face is boyish, and he's built like a teenager who missed his growth spurt. Like the French, the Swiss have a huge support crew—more than 30 people—to hand out food and drink along the course (racers can burn 10,000 calories and lose two gallons of sweat while competing.) “During the race, I drink Coca-Cola with one-third water and no gas. It is my medicine,” Rey says. He's courteous, but clearly in

no mood to elaborate—in English—to an American writer.

He checks his watch again: It's not quite nine o' clock. “I must to go sleep,” he says. “I'm going to eat some spaghetti now. They say pasta is *fasta*, no?”

I head down the street to the Hotel Ambassador, where the French team is still awake, making last-minute adjustments and lounging around. Brosse pulls his red-and-white spandex hood over his head and pokes his hands through the sleeves to the thumbholes. “Look, I am terrorist of the PDG!” One of his team members counts out packets of lemon-lime Squeezy (the South African version of GU Energy gel) and untangles his harness; the other silently lubes the zipper on his one-piece with WD-40—jerkng it up, sliding it back down. “Maybe we should have practiced...zip?” Brosse jokes.

Then he proudly shows me his boots. Constructed by a friend in La Grave,

they appear too crude to inspire much confidence—carbon-fiber shells with a flimsy cord for a rear buckle and cardboard-thin liners. He places one on a kitchen scale on the coffee table for me: 746 grams. (A single Scarpa Laser AT boot weighs 1,425.) Then he points at his bindings, pared-down versions of Dynafit TLTs. He's taken the lightest touring binding money can buy, and cut the weight in half.

Brosse starts spraying silicone on his boot's soles so snow won't stick to them during the boot-pack sections, and the conversation quickly turns to the Swiss. “Their country has never lost. They stopped racing six weeks ago and have done nothing but train for this,” he tells me, searching for the right words. “We don't care the time, we just care the result: number one.”

AS THE B-TEAMERS MAKE FINAL RACE preparations, and the France-versus-

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Switzerland rivalry plays out over peak and valley, I drive four hours around the mountains to Verbier.

In downtown Verbier, the army has been up all night tracking the race in a command center that resembles the set from *War Games*. The gymnasium floor is sheathed in plastic; dot-matrix printers whir and hiccup. Three soldiers man what look like radio phones from Vietnam; eight more sit in front of dated Apple monitors. The printers spit out checkpoint stickers—there are five soldiers whose sole assignment is to match stickers to team numbers on the pieces of posterboard along the far wall. The more stickers you have next to your number, the farther along you are.

I retrace the sticker trail of last night's rally.

After jettisoning running shoes, jumping into boots that have already been clicked into skis, and skinning up 6,600 feet, the French (#508) and the Swiss (#513) hit the first checkpoint at the same time, 1:22. Then, with teams still flying by the light of their Petzls, the slope steepens. Everybody ropes up, and the French start to pull away. When they cross the course's highest point, Tête Blanche, they're ahead of the Swiss by three minutes. After screaming 3,400 feet down the Glacier de Bertol and the Glacier d'Arolla—roped together—the Swiss have all but caught up.

At Arolla, the midpoint, the French pass at 3:09. The Swiss follow at 3:10. The French gain a few minutes going up and over the technical Col de Riedmatten, where both teams clip into fixed ropes and climb like ants. The Swiss—who are more efficient on the flats—make up the lost ground as they throttle across Lac de Dix, a three-miles-long alpine lake.

At the last major ascent, a punishing 2,300-foot climb over the Col du Rosablanc, the French, demonstrating their superior leg and lung power, once again put the hammer down. By the time they hit the last of the 11 checkpoints, the clock reads 6:12



hours. The French are four minutes ahead of the Swiss—with only the 4,700-vertical-foot descent through Verbier ski-area slush and a mile-long run through the streets of town to go.

Out on the streets, crowds several thousand strong line the barriers. The cheers arrive before the leaders do, but it soon becomes clear that the French are about to take the PDG and rub out the race record. When they cross the line, arms around each other, skis held overhead as if they're at a coronation, the jumbo digital clock freezes at 6:31:42.

The TV cameras again converge, and no one pays much mind when the Swiss team lopes in at 6:36:15.

Brosse's eyes well up. His lip is bloody, his chin covered in dry spit. "Difference was in the head...it was big emotion...a big night," he breathes.

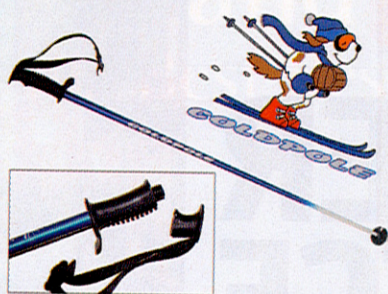
Jean-Yves Rey, talking to a smaller circle of reporters, leans on his poles. "We had...problems. Each time we caught the French team at the climbing parts," he explains in broken, exhausted English, "they stepped on it."

Rey glances over at the animated Parc de Bauges Savoie team. "This race is beautiful because the competitors are still human," he utters.

Behind him, as if on cue, teams start rounding the final corner, a wave of humanity in escalating disrepair—limping, collapsing hands-to-knees, dragging skis across the pavement. They will stagger past the finish line for hours, bedraggled in baggy ski pants and cotton T-shirts, wincing with blisters. Each time, the crowd is a bit thinner, claps a bit less. The reporters lose interest.

Some skiers—B-teamers mostly—won't reach Verbier until late afternoon, eight hours from now, long after the French have traded Squeezy for beer and *les machines* have politely collected their silver medals. They'll miss the awards ceremony and the national anthem. And when the final bouquets are passed out, they'll still be coming, finishing alone as the loudspeaker drifts a cheer over the rooftops: "Long live the Patrouille des Glaciers!" ♦

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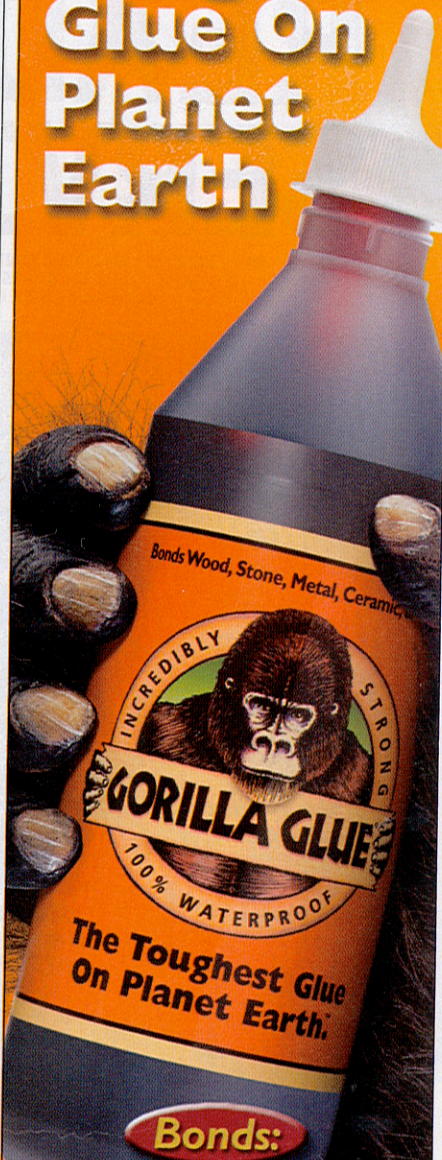
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