

2010 marks the 85th anniversary of the formation of the DHO – Wengen’s legendary Downhill Only Club. In this hilarious account, the celebrated author **Rosie Thomas** (alias Janey King) describes the day she boldly signed up to race in the DHO’s McMillan Cup – and found that no quarter was given!

Cup fever



Flying past me like an arrow, comes a woman of 70 who is wearing a fur doughnut on her head. One blink and she's gone.

IT'S EARLY on a crisp, clear February morning in Alpine-postcard Wengen, in the Bernese Oberland. And as on every other day of the season, little green trains packed with eager skiers are heading up to Kleine Scheidegg, where the Eiger hunches its shoulders around the black wall of the North Face. But on this particular morning, for some of those skiers, the keen edge in the air isn't just due to the scenery, or the plentiful snow, or the sunshine.

It's McMillan Cup day.

The McMillan Cup is a trophy awarded by the Downhill Only Ski Club to the winner of an amateur ski race, annually competed for by members and friends of the Club. There are no rules, to speak of, nor any real entry requirements except a willingness to have a go, and this is appropriate because more or less the same is true of the DHO itself. The Club offers race training for keen young skiers, but there are plenty of older, slower members whose racing days are (almost) over (see below). Anyone who enjoys skiing and loves Wengen is welcome to join.

The Club is so called because it was founded in 1925, before the invention of ski lifts. Early British skiers in the resort gained much satisfaction from the fact that, unlike enthusiasts in Mürren and other established neighbouring resorts, instead of having to skin tediously uphill before whizzing down again, they could just ride the cog railway and step into their skis at the top.

Many early members of the Club were RAF officers.

Flying Hawker Woodcocks and downhill skiing were similarly glamorous and daring pursuits in those early days of both aviation and winter sports. In 1928, Sir Arnold Lunn recorded in the Ski Club of Great Britain Yearbook the death of a promising young skier named Douglas McMillan. Flying Officer McMillan was 25 when he died following a mid-air collision during combat practice. He had learned to ski in Wengen, and his father presented a cup to the DHO in his memory.

The McMillan Cup race has been run more or less annually ever since. Recently I found myself staying in Wengen during Cup week. My laid-back and gentle hosts declared that they had entered, and was I going to have a go?

For some reason, I said that I would – although I have never entered a race in the whole of my adult life. (When I was required to undergo psychometric testing in order to join an Antarctic expedition, I scored so low on 'competitiveness' that the result didn't appear on the scale. Although there may be an element of competitiveness revealed in demonstrating the exact degree of my lack of competitive spirit...). Anyway, I blithely assumed that the race would be a friendly and informal affair, like the DHO itself.

Wrong.

Badly wrong...

As I discovered when race day dawned.

My hostess – an excellent skier – confided over breakfast that she was 'feeling nervous'. My host had a



preoccupied air. When I looked out of the window, Wengen itself seemed to be biting its collective lip and doing a few stretches. My own flutter of anxiety turned into a full-blown hurricane when the time came to set out for the course. When my friends emerged from the ski-room, they were both wearing helmets.

'Our insurance policy stipulates...' he murmured, evasively.

By the time we reached the start point, I knew that I had been stark mad even to think of entering this event.

It is run over what was the Ladies' downhill course, from the old starting hut down to the Gasthaus Aspen restaurant. The piste had been perfectly groomed for the event, and closed to non-racers. Race organisers were importantly conferring and shouting into walkie-talkies, and a sizeable knot of spectators had gathered. The competitors themselves were milling around, joking through clenched teeth and pulling on their race bibs. There were, as it turned out, 42 of us. I took a surreptitious look at the opposition as I put on my Z-grade rented unwaxed skis.

The age range was from 20 to 70+. Pirmin Zurbriggen wasn't actually present, although several people looked quite like him. (And that was just the women.)

I had imagined a Ski Sunday-style start with all of us popping out of a hut at decent intervals, to a soundtrack of that rousing music. Wrong again. It turned out that it was to be a mass start.

Just picture it: 42 outwardly well-behaved British skiers, not wanting to push and shove their way to the front like a bunch of um, Italians, but on the other hand, dammit, it's about winning. This lot would elbow their own granny aside for a fraction of a second's advantage at the off. And, since this is a family event, several of the young are probably doing just that.

I find a place somewhere in the middle of the pack. Not having skied or even looked at the course in advance, I've no idea what lies ahead. This is quite

frightening. In the long moment of tense silence while we wait for the starter's signal, I review the imperatives.

- These are
1. not to die
 2. not to come in last.

A reasonable set of goalposts, I think.

The flag drops. Aaaaaaagh...

This is serious. The fastest skiers are out of sight around the first bend before I'm even properly under way, my hosts amongst them. I'm amazed by the speed, as people from the back of the pack flash past me in a dazzle of snow. From the feeling of space at my shoulder, I deduce that I'm now right at the tail end. I gulp in some

air and bend ze knees. And overtake a couple of skiers. Yeahhhh!

I'm still putting in turns, though. To come anywhere near winning, I'd have to schuss it...

I skim past the timekeepers and marshals at the halfway mark. Even manage a grin at a familiar face.

I'm slow, but I

know I'm not the last. I effect a bit of a tuck and cut past another skier on a bend. Maria Walliser, or what?

But then, flying past me like an arrow, comes a woman of 70 who is wearing a fur doughnut on her head. One blink and she's gone. Instantly I feel like Zero Mostel (the late, great American comic actor). Next, right at my elbow, is a man I have met before. We're neck and neck, and at last there's a glimmer of racer spirit in me. I ski as fast as I can, and the wind's in my lungs and here's a punishing set of bumps, bang, and now here's the finish line and I'm almost over it and... he's in ahead. But only – as it turns out – by .03 of a second. Result!

By this time, of course, my friends and the other front runners are already into their second Martini.

But that was FUN. Better than a day at Alton Towers. The winning time was 2 mins 19 seconds: mine was 4.47, which gains me a muted 34th place.

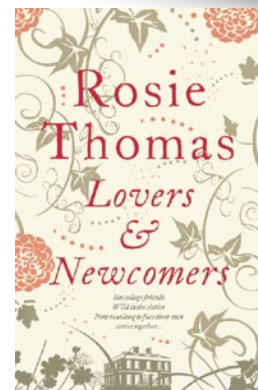
But I'm alive. And not last. Which is good enough for an uncompetitive competitor.

At that night's Prizegiving Dinner, I sat next to the man who almost won. He told me that when he smells the first tang of autumn in the summer air, he knows that it's time to begin training for next February's McMillan.

Now, where was I?

Ah yes. My training schedule... □

This year's McMillan Cup race is on February 4.



Rosie Thomas is the author of many best-sellers, including *White*, *The Potter's House*, *If My Father Loved Me*, *Sun at Midnight* and *Constance*. Her love of travelling and mountaineering encouraged her to climb in the Alps and the Himalayas. She has competed in the Peking-Paris car rally, and spent time on a Bulgarian research station in Antarctica. *Rosie Thomas' new novel, Lovers and Newcomers, is published on March 4 by Harper Collins at £12.99 (hardback).*

SKIFreshtracks

Ski Freshtracks is running several holidays to the Jungfrau region, including a 'Jungfrau Getaway 2' to Wengen from March 6 - 13. Call 020 8410 2022 or go to skifreshtracks.co.uk for more details.

There will be a Ski Club rep in Wengen until 10 April and in Murren until 27 March. For more information go to skiclub.co.uk/ reps

