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Bruno Petroni/International Inferno Races Mürren.

Welcome to the Inferno—the Oldest,  
Longest Downhill in the World

# A writer's rookie attempt at racing the world's oldest amateur downhill ski race

January 25, 2018 | By [Amanda Ruggeri](#)  

I'd come for the superlatives, the list of which was almost as long as the race itself. The Inferno is the world's oldest amateur downhill ski race (first held in 1928, it celebrated its 75th edition this year). It's the longest (a quads-killing 14.9 kilometers over a 2,170 meter elevation drop). And it's the largest (the number of competitors is capped at 1,800--four times the population of the host village of Mürren, Switzerland, itself).

What I didn't expect was this: in 2018, with the event falling just after [snow trapped tourists in Zermatt](#) and just before it threatened incoming Davos dignitaries (and then trapped tourists in Zermatt a second time), the Inferno would be the snowiest race, too.

**Which is why**, the day before my first-ever attempt at a downhill, I wasn't carving practice turns on prettily-groomed pistes, memorizing the course, or even figuring out how to throw around the uber-long sticks everyone told me I needed. Instead, I was playing in knee-to-hip-high powder around the Schiltgrat, cutting fresh tracks through slopes as blank as untouched paper. Blank, that is, except for the speckling of Alpine huts--one picturesque knot of which were those that Bond took a flying leap off of in 1969's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. I told myself that it still counted as race training. After all, I was trying to keep up with Bernie Lunn, the grandson of Inferno founder Sir Arnold Lunn.

Arnold started the Kandahar Ski Club in Mürren in 1924. At the time, the brand-new Winter Olympic Games and FIS only included Nordic events; Arnold wanted that to change. Under his leadership, the Kandahar Club organized a slalom and a downhill race to introduce Brits and locals alike to alpine racing.

But in a twist that the traditional telling tends to overlook, the Inferno started as a reaction against that kind of stodgy, rules-bound racing.

"A bunch of guys in the club said, 'This is all getting too serious. Why don't we just go and organize a ski race which goes back to the early days--where a bunch of people go to the top, somebody says 'Go' and first one to the bottom wins,'" Bernie told me at the Pension Suppenalp, an oasis halfway up the mountain where, a little before noon, skiers were coming in to heat up dripping gloves on the furnace and drink beers as rock 'n' roll playing in the background. "And he was really resistant. 'No, no, no. We've got to do serious racing!' But then he could see, well, this was going to be great fun. And he could see that other people thought it was great fun."

At that first race, not only were there no groomed pistes. There were no gates. Or official timers. Or so much as a T-bar. It was as wild as ski racing would ever get--or ever would be.

"If you want to write a POWDER story, well, the original race was a powder race. Or crud, or whatever it might have been," Bernie pointed out.

[Read more on the Inferno: \*The Devil Wears Downhill Boards\*](#)

For years, the skiers would climb the 750 meters of vertical from Mürren, which already is at 1600 meters, up to the Schilthorn hut, stay overnight, and climb the remaining 500 meters up to the top of the Schilthorn. Then they'd launch themselves into the abyss. (At the race's press conference, one reporter asked why the race became much more popular around 1970. "That's quite a simple answer," organizing committee president Christoph Egger said with a chuckle. "Until 1967 you had to walk up from Mürren. Then the cable car was built.")

Being reminded that that wild, devil-may-care attitude lies at the heart of the race made me feel far better. Because over my couple of days in Mürren, I'd become increasingly aware that maybe, just maybe, I hadn't taken this race seriously enough.

I'd watched the YouTube videos; I'd read [the articles](#). (That is, all of the articles except for the one that would be mentioned to me the most, usually with an eye-roll: a story by Tatler. That Tatler covered the race at all tells you something about the people who frequent the Inferno. It also tells you nothing, because if you aren't someone who can rattle off a who's-who of UK royals, all you'll notice on Inferno week is a lot of good skiers--the vast majority Swiss and German, few of whom probably know what Tatler is. Fine, there also are some Brits who sound more *The Crown* than *Trainspotting*. But along with the surgeons there are the snowholers. The group of die-hards don't let Mürren's pricey accommodations get between them and the Inferno; instead, they sleep in holes they dig out of piles of snow. On less abundant years, they find a barn).

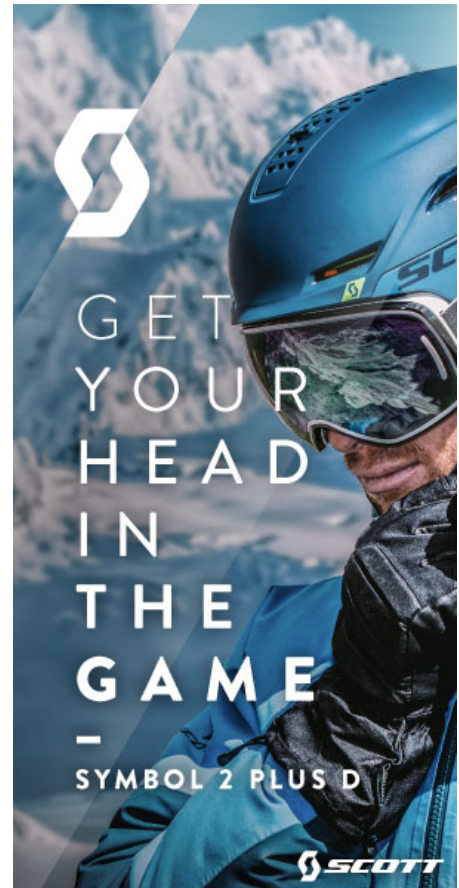
I'd also confirmed my spot extremely late and almost on a whim. And even though my partner, a personal trainer and former FIS racer himself, had prescribed me a thigh-toughening program, we both knew that one week of preparation wasn't exactly going to turn me into Picabo Street. I thought that was okay. After all, there's something about the phrase "amateur ski race" that takes the fangs out of even the wildest-sounding downhill.

But from the moment I landed in Zürich, I gradually realized I may have misjudged. My journey to Mürren--which included two trains, a cable car, and a little alpine train--was punctuated by conversations with strangers. All were headed to the Inferno. And all had done it at least four or five times before. (One skier in the Inferno's history, it turns out, participated 55 times).

By the time I'd gotten up to the village, I knew I was in trouble. Putting my gear away in the ski room at the Eiger Guesthouse, I blanched: my decade-old pair of 163s looked extremely stubby against a solid wall of 200 and 210cm skis.

Things only got more threatening from there. As soon as I met other racers at the bar that night, the conversation centered on how I needed to rent longer skis: I had to expect to be going 80 mph in some parts, they told me, and even the sturdiest of 163s would chatter. Somehow, I found myself agreeing to 180s. (I'm a small-framed 5'3". On me, those are sizeable). Other people made calls to find me a catsuit. Someone else volunteered to take me up to the course the next day.

Particularly in a hidden-gem ski town like Mürren, so different from the world's Vails and Courchevels that, it's said, even Kate Middleton was able to play cards at a local bar here without anyone bothering her, skiers are a friendly



bunch. But the vibe this week was more than that.

"It's exciting all year to meet new people and make new friends," said Emma, the gregarious long-time manager of the Eiger Guesthouse. "But the Inferno is different. This is family." She meant it: She's become such good friends with a couple from Stockholm, she recently went out to visit them.

Of course, that's the kind of bond that people form when they're coming back year after year. But even on my first visit I felt it. It was beyond just familiar faces. It was the warmth and camaraderie that comes about when people are a little bit afraid--not only for you, but for themselves.

"Hear that noise?" one Inferno regular asked me two nights before D-Day, referring to the buzz at the Eiger Guesthouse's bar and restaurant. "That's been getting quieter all week, and I bet you this: If they open the top, it'll be much quieter tomorrow night."

"Pre-race nerves?" I asked.

"Fear," he replied.

It turned out that opening the top was a big "if." Wind kept the cable car to the top closed, making the course impossible to prepare. Then the ongoing powder dump, which hadn't stopped for more than an hour since I arrived, meant increased avalanche risk at the top of the course, the steep, tough section that made the downhill not just long, but nutty. What resulted was a phenomenon even stranger than the unending powder. That week, Mürren must have been the only place in the world where nearly 2,000 strong skiers were griping about having too much snow.

By the time the race came on Saturday, our concerns had been confirmed. The race would not be starting at the Schilthorn. Instead, it would be starting at Allmendhubel, down at 1907 meters. Rather than the 12- or 13-minute race that was expected, it would be 3 or 4 minutes. As relatively puny as that sounded, it was still a minute longer than the longest downhill on the World Cup circuit: the Lauberhorn, which takes place just over the valley at Wengen.

**And that's how I found myself** clad in a borrowed catsuit, peering over the tips of my 180s, at the top of a far less frightening than expected--but still, I knew, exhausting--race course.

As a "bunny," a first-time Inferno racer, I'd gotten one of the coveted first-hundred spots. After that, you run according to your ranking. With 1,800 racers of all ages and gender (mostly men) lumped together, that means a rough ride for the vast majority of skiers. This time, I could enjoy a completely pristine course.

The sheer number of participants meant one started every 12 seconds. My turn came up so quickly I didn't even have time to sip from the bottle of schnapps that hung from the start hut--an Inferno tradition--before the countdown beeps came. The race starter put a hand on my shoulder, gave me a gentle push... and I was off.

At the bottom of the first turn, I was feeling speedy and smooth. Then came a sharp hairpin turn. Realizing I couldn't get my skis around fast enough to avoid



landing in the orange nets, I panicked, throwing in the kind of double-turn, with a wedge for extra effect, that would make Lindsey Vonn grimace. Shedding all my speed there wasn't the best choice, because up came another hairpin turn and then... the dreaded Woodcutter's path. Even the bigger, stronger guys often wind up skating and pushing here--part of the reason I'd been told to get, along with my overlong skis, overlong poles. I was feeling good about those poles as I overtook another skier. Then I saw she was in her 70s.

At the crest of the climb, lungs bursting, I caught up to another racer. "Hup, hup, hup!" cheered the locals who had come up to support the race. The other racer and I were going to go for the same line. I glanced at her. For a split second, I thought about holding back to let her go first. *Nah*. Pushing off, I took off down the hill. Another turn, a relatively flat, gliding section where, this time, I passed a guy (in case you haven't been able to tell, how many people you pass in the Inferno is almost as important as your time itself), and already I could see the finish line. The organizers had thrown in a twist this year: a jump. I thudded over it with all the grace of a walrus and skidded messily through the finish line, feeling inelegant and exhilarated.

My time came to a solidly middling four minutes, 10 seconds: a bit ahead in the women, smack at the midpoint of my category and behind in the overall. I felt happy to have survived. I was also thinking of where I could have pushed more and gone faster.

On my way home the next day, taking the train back down the mountain, the snow was still falling heavily, whiting out the view of trees and wooden huts and mountains through the windows. I had given up my 180s, my weirdly-long poles, and my catsuit. My four minutes of pretending to be a World Cup racer were over.

"Tomorrow, we start training for next year," I overheard someone say to his friends. My legs ached. My face felt hot from windburn. Without thinking, I found myself nodding in agreement.

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