

# Courmayeur's wacky ski race

By Neil English, The Mail On Sunday

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**Courmayeur is home to the annual City Ski Championships**

There's only one way to end a ski season and that's on a high but this year I struck a comic note as well.

Taking part in the annual Air France City Ski Championships in Courmayeur, Italy, each March is normally a deadly serious affair as skiers from the Square Mile's top financial institutions race each other on a World Cup-graded giant slalom course.

The quest for victory was no less intense than normal but gladly several new factors combined to ease the tension. For starters, I found myself in a race team that included snowboarding fanatic Marcus Brigstocke, who also happens to be a stand-up comedian.

Among the new entrants, Financial services brokers GFI made quite an impact. The four young guns in the team have all been ski instructors in France and members of French ski-racing clubs.

Now living and working in London, they seemed passionately keen to display their Frenchness, sometimes even skiing in French flag-patterned underwear and head gear. They got a laugh a minute but still managed to win the dual slalom race and several individual prizes in the giant slalom.

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The GFI boys provided a lighthearted bonus to the whole race weekend with crowd-pleasing, airborne stunts that they pulled off while racing.

One competitor, world-champion hurdler Colin Jackson, who is now a BBC sports presenter and was runnerup in TV's Strictly Come Dancing in 2005, said: 'GFI are a great addition - they are the Harlem Globetrotters of City Ski.' Another British sporting personality who, like Colin, was making his second successive appearance at City Ski was the 1996 Formula 1 world champion Damon Hill.

The 47-year-old has been working hard on his skiing technique..

Former British ski team racer Konrad Bartelski, who was in town running a training clinic, told me: 'Damon has taken a giant leap forward.' Being fitted with the right pair of racing skis had helped.

'Those skis are the highly tuned equivalent to the cars he used to race,' said Konrad. 'Damon is used to adapting quickly to high-performance equipment and learning how to get the most out of it.' And so it proved. Damon chalked up an excellent 62-second time on his first giant slalom run, beating me (curses!) by four yawning seconds in the process.

I went skiing with Damon on the morning of the dual slalom competition.

He took off down the practice slope as if he had been ski-racing all his life and I was hard pushed to keep up.

Matt Chilton, from BBC's Ski Sunday, provided the race commentary.

His pinsharp wit punctured the sometimes over-inflated egos of the City boys and girls taking part.

I felt sorry for one of the victims of his tongue, my good friend and fellow ski journalist Sean Newsom, founder of the winter sports website [welove2ski.com](http://welove2ski.com), when he fell on one of the vicious ruts that had formed around each race gate..

From his elevated commentary box, Matt rather cruelly suggested the site might now be rebranded [welove2skibadly.com](http://welove2skibadly.com).

The prize-giving dinner at the four-star Hotel Pavillon was as elaborate as ever, with champagne flowing as freely throughout the four courses as the GFI boys had done through the slalom gates.

However, those buoyant French were about to be brought down a peg or two, not by Chilton, but by Brigstocke, who took to the stage for a thank-you speech that included an impromptu bit of stand-up comedy.



**Neil English, second right, with comedian Marcus Brigstocke (right)**

After the customary back-slapping, Marcus turned his attention to the celebrating newcomers whose ostentatious waving of the French flag had turned out to be ill-advised because, earlier that same day, Wales had swept to a Six Nations Grand Slam victory by comprehensively beating the French at rugby.

Marcus took some pleasure pointing this out, to the delight of many, particularly Welshman Colin Jackson.

Plans are already under way for the tenth-anniversary City Ski Championships next year. They will run from March 19 to 22 at Courmayeur. Marcus, Damon and Colin will be there again.

But all the fun in the Alps is not over just yet. If you want to treat yourself to a range of live bands, top DJs and comedy acts in the mountains, act fast and head for the end-of-season Altitude Festival in Meribel, France (April 5-20), founded by none other than Marcus Brigstocke himself.

Only last week, friends living in Meribel told me they had had heaps of new snow and were skiing and snowboarding in waist-deep powder, so good end-of-season skiing in the Trois Vallees is pretty much guaranteed..

#### **Travel facts**

Neil English stayed at the three-star Bouton d'Or Hotel in Courmayeur.

Italian ski specialist Momentum Ski ([www.momentumski.com](http://www.momentumski.com), 020 7371 9111) offers three-night weekend breaks there including breakfast, return scheduled flights and hire car for £375 per person. Seven nights on the same basis costs £495 per person.

For more information on next year's City Ski Championships visit [www.citychampionships.com](http://www.citychampionships.com) or call 020 7863 8813.

Tailor-made flight and accommodation packages to the Altitude Festival in Meribel from April 5 to 20, 2008, can be organised by calling 00 33 611 22 68 52 or visiting [www.altitudefestival.com](http://www.altitudefestival.com).