

Snow, snow, quick, quick...

Skijoring is a thrilling combination of skiing and racing – why not give it a go this winter?

WRITTEN BY MARTHA TERRY



The gates spring open. Twelve thoroughbreds surge forwards through a cloud of snowflakes, a gaggle of neon-clad skiers jostling in their wake as scrabbling hooves hurl snow pellets into the sky. A furlong later and the chaos subsides, the horses settling into a familiar racing pattern as they stretch out along the snow-white track around the frozen Lake St Moritz. They stream past fur-clad crowds cheering from the rails, towing their skiers – bar two, cut loose in the initial mayhem but whose rigging remains to trip up the others. One skier is valiantly continuing on one ski, his other having flicked off in the early *mêlée*. If it is exhilarating to watch, it must be electric to take part, a heady blend of speed, horsepower, danger and blow-your-mind adrenaline – with a blast of icy kickback in your face.

This is the skijoring race at White Turf St Moritz, this enigmatic sport's blue-riband event. It is at once traditional and bonkers. Skijoring (without the second 'k') – which involves a horse and rider pulling a skier over the snow – dates back millennia to the days when hunters in snowbound climes harnessed reindeer to speed up their search for food. The sport's name derives from the Norwegian for ski driving: *skikjøring*. While Asians, North Americans and the Scandinavians lay claim to its origins as a method of transportation, it has gradually evolved into a sport that is enjoyed by novices and experts alike, from Norway, Scotland, the Alps and the Tatras to the Rockies.

Not many people – around 12 a year – are brave or brilliant enough to steer a racehorse 2,700 metres round an icy lake at 40mph. But providing you're good enough to carve a parallel turn on a pair of skis, there are plenty of options for those who want to have a go, from a *belle balade* in an Alpine forest to handbrake skids and even obstacle courses.

FAST AND FURIOUS

At the top end is the racing, which made its one and only Olympic appearance in St Moritz in 1928. Since then, skijoring in its purest form – without a jockey and known as skikjøring (with two 'k's) – continues to take place annually and exclusively at the swish resort's White Turf horseracing festival (6, 13 and 20 February 2022).

'Drivers', as the skiers are known, are licensed and need to be fantastic skiers. Most are ski instructors with slalom racing backgrounds, while the horses are all thoroughbreds. It's fast and furious.



Valeria Schiergen (*née* Holinger) was the first woman to take part in the skijoring race. The Swiss driver has twice won the title of 'Queen of Engadin' for top ranking over the three races during White Turf.

"My father had already done skijoring, so it was natural that I would follow," says Schiergen. "It's an amazing experience. You have so much adrenaline in your body. The speed, the horses galloping next to you and the crowd shouting for you is just awesome."

Although skijoring is a limited elite sport, Schiergen has advice for amateurs. "If you have the opportunity to try skijoring, enjoy it," she says. "You have to be a good skier, because you need to be able to concentrate on your horse [not your skis].

You also have to be brave, maybe also a little bit crazy."

GO CRAZY IN CALGARY

Craziness was part of the appeal for Susan Oakes, Master of the Fingal Harriers Hunt in Ireland and an accomplished showjumper. In the pub after a day's hunting with Canadian friend Sam Mitchell, Oakes accepted an invitation to Skijordue, an inaugural skijor competition Mitchell was organising in Calgary in February 2020. Unlike in St Moritz, the skijoring races would involve a rider steering the horse that was towing the skier.

Billed as 'part snow rodeo, part extreme ski competition and the wildest spectator

Above: White Turf's blue-riband skijoring event at Lake St Moritz last year. Left: Susan Oakes and Barry O'Brien Lynch practising for Skijordue 2020. Previous page: the pair (right) heading for victory

sport around. Ski haw!', Skijordue blends cowboy spirit with the ski and snowboard culture of the Rockies. While White Turf's fur and snow is an Alpine version of Cheltenham's tweed and grass, this is the Wild West. Oakes, already a side-saddle supremo at the Calgary Stampede, could hardly turn it down. Together with friend Barry O'Brien Lynch, "a very good skier", they set about preparing an 'Irish team'. Snag one: Ireland's lack of snow. "I told Barry we had to practise, so we had a roll of carpet we put on a hill, a child's sleigh and an old Massey Ferguson 85," explains Oakes. "We made Barry stand on the sleigh to practise the pull."

After two days' training at the race venue, Millarville, where Oakes had to →

“We had a roll of carpet we put on a hill, a child's sleigh and an old tractor”

get used to a Western saddle, dallying (the art of wrapping the tow-rope round the saddle horn) and acquainting herself with the “brilliant quarter horse Bowie”, the Irishlanders were ready for action.

There were several different types of race, some with jumps and obstacle courses, but the most prestigious was the two-furlong sprint. “People come from all over America to watch – it attracts the top cowboys and skiers,” says Oakes. “All the cowboys were so professional, and I was struggling to hold the reins in one hand and the rope with the other.

“I’ve done lots of crazy things on horses but I have never been so nervous. When the flag dropped, the power of the pull was so strong I nearly came off. You have to be very strong in your core to hold on to your skier. Then I started kicking so hard, I lost my stirrup, my hat came off, I kept kicking – and then my boot came off.”

Despite finishing in sartorial disarray, the Irish pair not only won their heat but the overall trophy. “It was the funniest thing ever – they’d given us such a good horse but we had come from Ireland training with a tractor and a roll of carpet,” says Oakes, who felt inspired by the underdogs of the Jamaican bobsleigh team. “Hunting and point-to-pointing stood me in good stead; you have to be brave and adventurous.”

Few of us will have the opportunity or ability to follow in Oakes’ hoofprints. But skijoring is available on a more casual basis in many ski resorts. Ski instructor Neil English had a go in the French Alps, despite an acute allergy to horses.

“It’s a niche sport, like so many of the activities on offer in the Alps, such as *parapente* [paragliding],” he says. “I was the only experienced skier in the group, so they let me loose with a really big horse, while the novice skiers went for a walk and a trot with a little pony.

“Mine was a magnificent beast and the rider was a pro who played polo, so he could make the horse stop on the spot. He’d get going flat out, with me hanging on like a water skier, then he’d give a signal to me to spin off, so I was almost parallel with him on full tension, like going out of the wake on the water. Then he’d suddenly stop his horse and spin it round, and I’d cut round like a sling shot. The acceleration when you’re slung round at high speed and don’t know what to expect was exhilarating.”



Left: skijoring on Lake St Moritz is no modern activity, as this old postcard shows. Below, left: skijoring comes in many permutations, including this event in Utah, USA, during which a skier is towed around a course of gates, jumps and rings. Above: skijoring with a paso fino for added elegance



Billie-Jean Duff; Alamy; Amanda Ubell; Shutterstock

English, who has raced at a semi-pro level, advises that to get that much of a buzz out of the session, an advanced ski level is essential. “You need to be able to put a lot of power through your edges and trust your ability,” he says. “And after half-a-dozen slingshot turns, my arms were shot to bits. You wouldn’t do it for a whole day, but it’s a fun adrenaline fix.”

STEADY AS SHE GOES

Meanwhile, as English was carving up the white stuff, his friends were enjoying a gentle forest trail. “For them it was more about cooing over the ponies,” he says. “It’s like a husky or reindeer ride – it’s a recreational activity, like a nice sleigh ride in the snow.”

It may be a rare sport, even in snowy climes, but skijoring is a thing in this country, too. It’s not the white-knuckle ride of St Moritz or Millarville racetracks, but certainly more accessible to the average skier.

Ruaridh Ormiston runs Highland Horse Fun in Kingussie (highlandhorsefun.com) in the heart of the Highlands and, given the right conditions, skijoring is on the agenda.

“I’ve been doing it since I was a boy,” says Ormiston. “We have the right climate,

we have the Highland ponies, everyone can ski around here, so it was natural to put it all together.”

The emphasis is on the skiing experience rather than the riding, and Ormiston limits the activity to competent skiers with their own kit. As well as the Highlands, he used to use a Percheron, which could pull three or four skiers.

“It’s good fun and something to do in winter with the horses. Depending on the level of the skier, you can do more exciting terrain on higher ground, or I’ll set up obstacle courses if we get a heap of snowy weather. But most people enjoy touring through the cross-country tracks in the forest near Loch Morlich on Glenmore. It’s a good way of going round the trails without much effort.”

A horse is the classic towing vehicle in skijoring, but if the blend of spurs and ski boots doesn’t cut it for you, how about a husky, a reindeer or even another form of horsepower – motorbikes, popular with the Austrians and Germans? There’s something for every palate. So come the first snows this winter, break out those skis and head for the slopes – there’s a whole new sporting challenge ahead. ■

HOW TO SKIJOR

Concierges in the smart hotels in many ski resorts will be able to arrange a skijoring outing. Here are some options for a taster...

► **St Moritz:** family days are held on the three Saturdays prior to racedays (5, 12 and 19 February), where kids can try skijoring. Plus there are White Turf Experience Days on weekdays from 31 January to 4 February, 7-11 February and 14-18 February, when they will offer skijoring on the lake. Call +41 81 833 84 60 or visit: whiteturf.ch/en

► **Les Houches, Chamonix:** one-hour intro or a 16km tour with Christophe André. From €68, depending on group size. Visit: explore-share.com/trip/unique-skiing-horses-alps-chamonix

► **Meribel:** new venue for spring 2022. Le Coeur Equestre will offer a range of skijoring trails. Call +33 6 09 15 65 54 or email: anne@coeurequestremeribel.com

► **La Clusaz:** Aravis Equitation offers a 30-minute discovery session for two people (€30) or a performance session for one skier, including jumps and slalom (with or without rider) for €60. Call +33 6 71 56 62 53 or email: aravis.equitation@outlook.com