

Ironmen of the mountains scale new peaks of achievement

Charlie Norton was in the Swiss Alps to see the first British team to successfully finish the gruelling 100km Zermatt to Verbier race

A BRITISH team returned in conquer their demons in the Southern Swiss Alps last month by completing the punishing Patrouille des Glaciers (PDG) race, tagged appropriately the Ironmen of the Mountains.

Duck denotes they must have been. Two years ago in the biennial race between Zermatt and Verbier an avalanche at the final checkpoint agonisingly prevented the three strong teams of Tom Avery, George Wells and Andrew Gerber from finishing. By that stage they had traversed overnight on foot, ski and rope all but a few hundred metres of the 4,000 metre ascent, and almost all of the 100km race.

The event, first organised by the Swiss army in 1943 to patrol the border with Italy, was reimagined as an open endurance race in 1984 and this year comprised 525 teams of three – made up mostly of the Swiss army and other mountain forces.

Avery said at the finish: "It was the worst day of my life. Never again. It was a massive relief to get over the line. This race is nonsense and it is now a huge weight off my shoulders. It had been bugging me for a long time."

To give an indication of the quality of this event the Champagne G21 Mountain team of Avery, Wells and Gerber had previously broken the world record time in the North Pole, but the incredible speed of the Alpine teams here saw them finish well down the field in 22nd place with a time of 18hr-13min – 10 hours behind the winners, but there is much mountain leech in simply finishing the event, especially for the first-class British team to do so.

Throughout the back-breaking course the Swiss Mountain Reserve were only a gawping yodel away and nearly half of the teams were forced to drop out through exhaustion, dehydration or injury.



Two of the Royal Marine A team, Major Jon Cumber and Sgt Christopher Hise, completed the course in 230th place – their effort all the more impressive as they had only been chosen to represent British forces a couple of weeks before.

Avery added: "We saw competitors pulled out by helicopter and we saw one woman, going downhill, edge her skin on a rock and then crack her head. I think there were a lot of injuries in the downhill sections because skidding down in a whiteout in the dark is very difficult. We were not even on a piste. We really had to pay attention, our hearts were racing all the time because of the altitude."

The team all showed signs of acute mountain sickness which they managed to overcome, meaning they got off the course with nothing worse than blisters, cracked lips and blinding snow.

The race started at 10pm and the teams, who were carrying food, water and mountain survival equipment, ran uphill until they reached the snowline. There they stopped on tearing skin with snowshoes to go a further 2,000 metres in five hours to near the Matterhorn in temperatures of -19C. Then they skied straight down a crevassed glacier for about 600 metres,

tepped up to their team-mates in the dark. This was not even halfway.

The rope was introduced because the course is so dangerous. The race was banned for three decades because of a tragic accident in 1949 when one of the military patrols fell into a crevasse on the Mont Niviger glacier and the corpses of the men were not found for eight days.

All teams in this race are plagued by similar fears, Avery said: "The worst bit of the race was up and down a shark's fin of rock with 200-400 yards of absorbing wet ice (Ciel de Rhodation). We were like lemmings going off it because we were so tired. I felt like I would slip and fall at any moment."

The Great Britain team were handicapped purely by their training. Other racers fit and train in the mountains and the top teams would have been sleeping at over 3,000 metres to acclimatise. It is above the cloudline where myths are made in Alpine regions. There is nothing that the Swiss, French, Austrians and Germans appreciate more than endurance prowess in the mountains. Puffing around on the Dufour in East Sussex is not the same.

Thousands were lining the final stretches of the descent into Verbier on Saturday morning ringing cow bells to cheer on the racers. Despite adverse conditions the winners, Team Michel Sautin-Mt-Blanc with Franzenberg Stéphane Frossat and Patrick Blanc, and Italian Guido Giacometti, recorded the astonishing time of the 100km when, a race record.

Avery said: "They were just running and skiing over the mountains in a furious pace. In terms of achievement this is up there because this is a really difficult event to race in as a Brit. I've been to the North and South Poles, I've climbed mountains. There was a great atmosphere and great camaraderie, but I've never in my life been so intensely knocked as I was at the end of the PDG."

The Champagne G21 Mountain luxury Expedition Kit will be available at £250 (p/s) in selected retailers from July 2006.

Mountain relief Tom Avery's British team celebrate completing the back-breaking ski-touring race, Le Patrouille Des Glaciers, from Zermatt to Verbier in 16hr 22min