

THE
BUCKET
LIST
MOTORCYCLING
MUST-DOS ✓

WITNESS SKI-SPEEDWAY

Skijöring... like a crazy version of waterskiing but you do it on snow behind a bike

● 'An avalanche of man and machine breaks free'

It has its origins in reindeer but we prefer bikes...



The skiers help steady the bikes



The paddock is crowded with bikes of all sizes



Skiers brace themselves for take off



Just keep the rope out of the chain

Skiers of all ages take part in the antics



As in speedway, the guys who make the holeshot have the biggest advantage

'WE DID IT'



RIDER: David Sams (24) from Gosau
SKIER: Patrick Demmel (23) from Gosau
BIKE: KTM 300 EXC TPI

"We are both members of the organising club 'Off-road Team Rabenkogel'. This was my second year in this event and Patrick's fifth. We arrived early in the morning to compete in the MX Open Category and it was freezing cold. All the teams got to inspect the track and adjust tyre pressures depending on the snow conditions. Very low pressures are typically used (around 0.5 Bar) with specialised super-soft snow tyres. Spikes are not allowed. When our turn arrived we got into position and waited for the start line to be released. I gave full gas and Patrick put weight onto the back of the bike to help with initial traction. We tried to hit the first turn in front so as not to get too muddled up with the others. The skier is very important throughout the race and by pulling down on the rope in the corners he assists with traction and stability. Without the skier you cannot ride the course anywhere near as fast."

You can hear the roar interspersed with snippets of excited commentary bouncing off the Dachstein mountains all along the valley. It's Skijöring day in Gosau! One of the craziest spectacles you'll ever see. In this normally quiet resort in upper Austria, riders and skiers have assembled from all over the country and further afield to throw themselves - often quite literally - into the snow on dirt bikes whilst towing intrepid skiers hanging onto knotted ropes. What could possibly go wrong? Skijöring originated in Norway

hundreds of years ago when the Sami harnessed reindeer to tow them across vast snowy expanses. By 1912 Skijöring behind horses had become popular in Switzerland and France and by 1928 it appeared in the Winter Olympic Games at St Moritz. Since then it has been known to use dogs, snowmobiles and cars. But it's only when you use bikes and add in a speedway circuit and a kamikaze vibe that it really becomes exciting.



BY GEOFF TOMPKINSON
Photojournalist with a focus on all things motorcycle

The Holzknacht Skijöring Gosau is wildly popular and you need to arrive very early if you want to park anywhere nearby - we parked at Zecafe a mile or so away and had an excellent breakfast before walking alongside the river to get there. The circuit itself is roped off for a modicum of public safety and decked with sponsor banners. Each heat consists of six rider/skier pairs fighting it out for three laps of the

oval, if they last that long, and the event is broken down into multiple categories based on engine size and age of bike. Riders and skiers are limited to 100 pairs and ranged in age from seven to 58 this year. The course was assembled a few days earlier in a vacant field with snow flattened by a piste machine. It starts off smooth enough but rapidly decays to a mogul-studded obstacle course as the day progresses and the classes move through engine sizes to the final Open Motocross Category. A heat is about to start. The six riders assemble shoulder to shoulder in front of a taut rope

● 'A roar of engines whips up an instant white blizzard'

stretched as a start line marker. The skiers shuffle into position behind and grab their tow lines. Once they are all settled the course safety guys step to the side

and the engine note increases in anticipation. All eyes are on the start line rope. Someone pulls a lever and it flies up and clear. A roar of maxed out engines raises an instant white blizzard as rear tyres snake and spin, searching for traction. Skiers tighten grips in anticipation of the coming lurch as they are obliterated from view by the flying snow. Traction is found, lines jerk tight, an avalanche of men and machines breaks free and tears en masse down the start straight. Initial fallers scatter left and right picking themselves up

and searching for dislodged skis as the cloud dissipates. Whichever team is in front after the first bend has a very good chance of staying there for the rest of the race. Enthusiasm and competitiveness are immense with the riders throttling their bikes around the corners with such abandon that the skiers are whipped around even faster and often end up alongside or slightly ahead of the bikes, making it difficult to be sure who is really towing who. The skiers actually do a lot more than just hang on - it's their job to do the braking and

stabilisation in the corners. Crashes are the norm with bikes and skiers wiping out in huge clouds of snow. The fallers scramble frantically like MotoGP riders desperate to get back in the saddle, all too often mistiming their re-entry into the fray causing an even worse multiple pile-up. Amazingly, serious injuries are rare and the worst casualty is usually the knotted rope when it gets wound around the rear wheel. An old saying goes: 'It's not whether you win or lose - it's how you play the game' and Skijöring is a perfect example of that. I was enjoying the spectacle so much

I can honestly say I never even noticed who won in the different heats. Frivolity is the order of the day and, as this is also carnival season in Austria, many of the teams are decked out in fancy dress. One team competing in matching black and white furry cow onesies. At 5pm, after an interlude of beer and sausage sandwiches, punctuated by parachutists from Red Bull, the racing is over. Trophies and prizes are awarded and after some celebrations peace descends once again on the Gosau valley. It will only take one good snowfall to erase all evidence it happened at all. **MCN**

YOU CAN DO IT

All you need to do is turn up with a bike and a skier to tow. The entry fee is only €30 but you would need to book a place as soon as the dates are announced as all places are typically taken within 24 hours. Local motocross teams take most of the places immediately. Next year's event will be at the end of January or beginning of February. The exact dates will be announced at www.rabenkogel.at