

## For Germans in Davos, skiing is serious business

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### ***Some elites go all out to win Burda Cup; Mr. Ricke's 'ringer'***

*By Marcus Walker*

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While India and China viewed for attention this week at the global conference of government and business leaders here in the Swiss Alps, the toughest competition was 900 meters higher – among Germans on the ski slopes.

Some of Germany's top corporate executives, bankers, consultants and lawyers – as well as a few journalists and non-Germans – traded their power suits for ski suits yesterday to race down a giant-slam course. German publisher Hubert Burda, the organizer of the Burda Ski Cup, hired 30 Swiss ski instructors to tutor his 80-plus elite participants on the nuances of the course – as well as an Alpine folk band to play at the awards ceremony.

Like everything at the World Economic Forum, an annual meeting of some 2,300 chief executives, politicians, media figures and Hollywood stars, the race brings together ambitious highfliers who like to win. Among this year's favorites: previous winners Alexander Dibelius, head of Goldman Sachs Group in Germany, and Herbert Henzler, vice chairman of Credit Suisse Group's advisory board and former head of McKinsey & Co. in Europe.

"I'm taking part just for fun," said Nikolaus von Bomhard, chief executive of Munich Re AG, the world's biggest reinsurer, as he waited in line for the chairlift. But among Germans, fun can be serious business. They started the current tradition 15 years ago out of dissatisfaction with the more-informal ski races that were being put on by the economic forum itself. "It was lousely organized. They didn't keep precise time," said Jürgen Grossmann, owner and chief executive of steel group Georgsmarienhütte GmbH, and one of the founders of the event.

Like many sporting contests, the Burda Ski Cup has its share of lore and intrigue. For many years, Mr. Henzler, a veteran consultant from southern Germany and a keen skier and mountain climber, won the cup. But in 2004, the journalist entrants blanked Germany's corporate titans, finishing in the top three places. Last year, the mostly young journalists were put in a separate class, giving the mostly middle-aged bosses a clearer shot at winning.

A widespread conspiracy theory is that Mr. Henzler asked for journalists to be kept separate. Mr. Henzler himself denies lodging the protest but endorses the decision: "It's like marketing: You need segmentation. In fact, they should also separate out people who don't have a wife and children," he said.

Still, Mr. Henzler lost out last year anyway – to Mr. Dibelius of Goldman Sachs. The former heart surgeon, who became one of Germany's top investment bankers, has been involved in many of the biggest mergers and acquisitions in the country's history, including telecom group Mannesmann AG's takeover by Vodafone Group PLC of Britain in 2000. Just before the start of the last year's race, Mr. Dibelius stripped down to an aerodynamic racing suit, revealing his highly toned physique, still the talk of the slopes this year.

And Mr. Henzler's humiliation was compounded by also finishing behind a Swiss interloper, publisher Rolf Dobelli, owner of online archive getAbstract.com. But Mr. Dobelli was mysteriously classified as a journalist when the results were announced, handing second place to Mr. Henzler. "I don't know what happened," Mr. Dobelli said.

This year, Mr. Dibelius, again sporting a body-hugging outfit, used his smooth style to finish in a mere 52.63 seconds, several seconds faster than Mr. Henzler and other corporate rivals, including Deutsche Telekom AG Chief Executive Kai-Uwe Ricke.

But than an unknown skier in red, one of the last racers of the day, sailed languidly down the course, showing off with two needless turns after the final gate – finishing nearly a second faster

than Mr. Dibelius, to steal the title. Amid mutterings of "Who is he?" from other contestants, the skier's identity was revealed: a second-echelon manager at Deutsche Telekom, dispatched as a secret weapon by Mr. Ricke to beat out Goldman Sachs and McKinsey.

Mr. Ricke, grinning gleefully on the chairlift, acknowledged his act with *schadenfreude*. "I am really going to enjoy the price-giving this year," Mr. Ricke said. "Those guys are going to be so embittered." The ringer, Christopher Schläfer, head of the development at Deutsche Telekom, is a native of Austrian ski resort Saalbach-Hinterglemm near Salzburg. For his part, Mr. Schläfer said afterward that he was "a little embarrassed" about how he demonstrated his superiority with the extra turns at the end.

At the medal ceremony, held by tradition in the Weissfluhjoch restaurant on the mountain's summit, the band in traditional Alpine garb entertained the racers over a hearty lunch as Messrs. Grossmann and Henzler, among other corporate chieftains, took turns at the microphone to lead sing-along renditions of German folk songs. Mr. Dibelius insisted he wasn't disappointed by his defeat. "If we had a prize for the fastest outfit, he would have won," said Mr. Grossmann as he handed the Goldman Sachs banker his silver medal.

In the women's category, Charlotte von Bomhard, wife of the Munich Re CEO, won in 59.69 seconds, a time that put most of the male contestants to shame. In the journalists' segment, this reporter won in 56,7 seconds. Last year's winner, Jörg Eigendorf, the economics and finance editor of German newspaper Die Welt, came in second and upheld the spirit of the event. "Don't worry, I will find a way to get you disqualified," he joked.

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