

A Night AT THE

WHAT SOME PEOPLE WON'T DO FOR A WENGER WATCH

by Norma Buchanan

(Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles on interesting watch-related events throughout the wide world of watches.)

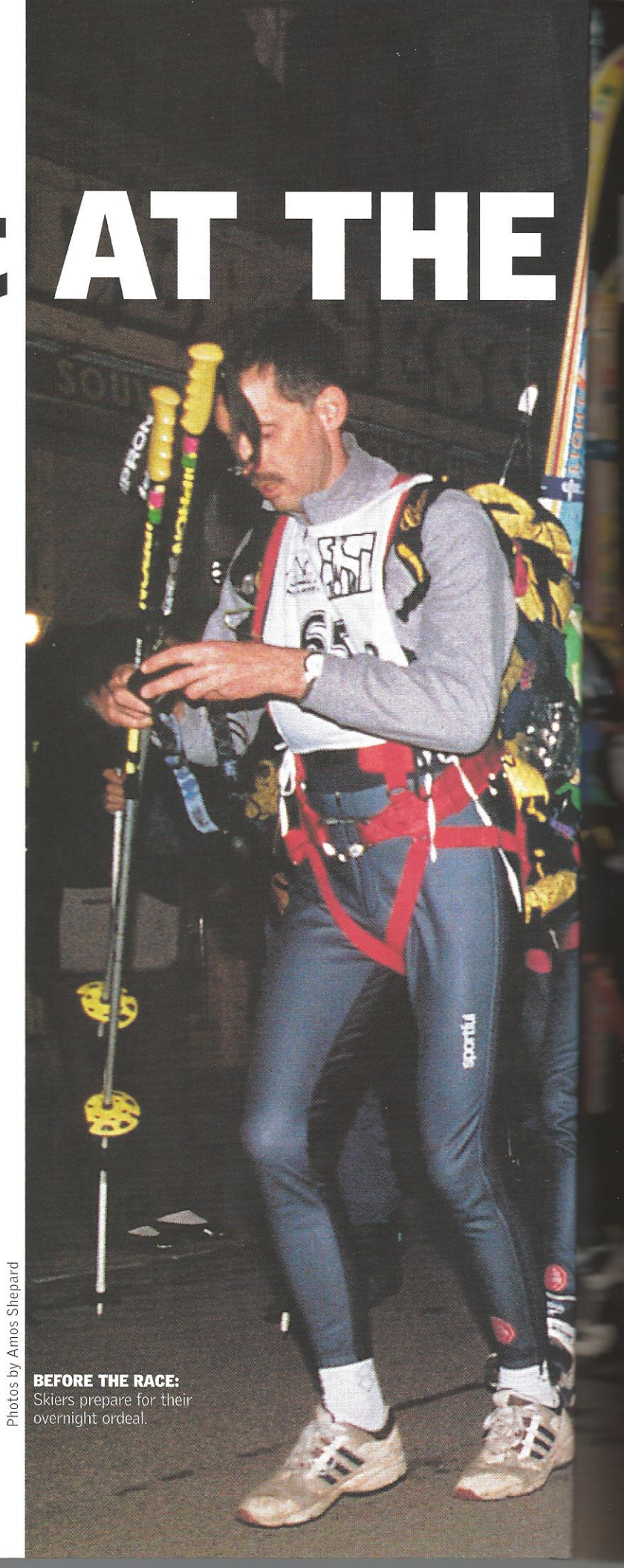
TELL MOST PEOPLE YOU'VE JUST BEEN to the Swiss Alps to see an arduous, overnight ski race called the Patrouille des Glaciers and they give you a blank stare.

"La Patrouille des Glaciers," you explain, is French for 'glacier patrol,' and it's one of the most famous sports events in Switzerland. It's also one of the most dramatic ones anywhere. In it, teams of intrepid skiers fight their way for hours over a grueling, often uphill course through the mountains. To make things even tougher, they cover most of the distance in the dark.

That "glacier patrol" has a military ring is no accident. The Swiss Army invented the race during World War II as a way of testing soldiers' endurance and is still in charge of the event today.

All but unknown in the U.S., the biennial race has but one ambassador here: Wenger, which manufactures pocket knives for the Swiss Army and millions of consumers worldwide, and also makes a line of Swiss military-themed watches. Wenger is one of 18 companies (except for Volvo, the others are unknown to Americans) that support the PDG by buying what the army calls "visitor packages" at above-market prices. These packages include hotel rooms, amenities and VIP race-side seating. Companies use the packages to treat guests to a glimpse of something they almost surely wouldn't see otherwise.

Wenger isn't exactly a household name in the U.S. The company's Swiss Army pocket knives sell here by the hundreds of thousands each year, but most consumers know them not by their brand name but by their red handles,



Photos by Amos Shepard

BEFORE THE RACE: Skiers prepare for their overnight ordeal.

RACES



Swiss-flag insignias and flip-out design. Nor do many people distinguish them from the knives made by Wenger's archrival, Victorinox, the other official supplier of knives to the Swiss Army. (Knife cognoscenti know that the Wenger insignia is a cross on a square field with rounded corners and sides, while Victorinox shows a cross on a six-sided shield-shaped field.)

Wenger watches, rugged and outdoorsy in keeping with the Swiss Army theme, came out just 10 years ago and haven't had time to gain wide consumer recognition.

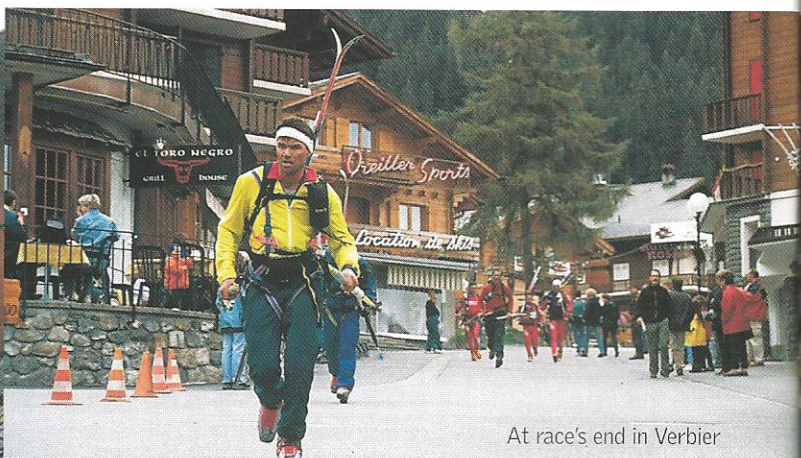
Wenger, of course, wants greater fame for both its watches and its knives, and thinks its tie-in with the

Patrouille des Glaciers will help. Given the current craze for extreme sports, the PDG is sure to win a bigger audience than it now has, says Peter Hug, head of Wenger Watch worldwide. "This can be like the Ironman competition in Hawaii," he said on the eve of this year's race, which took place May 5 and 6. Is he right? That remains to be seen. But the race sure has the requisite thrills and chills.

Up, Up and Away

THE PATROUILLE DES GLACIERS begins in the mile-high ski-resort town of Zermatt at the base of the Matterhorn, right at Switzerland's southern border with

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At race's end in Verbier

Italy. From there, the 984 skiers, three to a team, ski west and slightly north to the small town of Verbier, a distance of 33 miles. Including the distance added to the course by the steep inclines, they'll travel 62 miles (the racers will climb a total of 13,104 feet in altitude and descend 13,419 feet).

Some of the teams are made of military personnel, some of civilians. Swiss dominate the event, but skiers from all over Europe compete in it. (U.S. teams have entered in the past but there were none this year.)

Starting at an altitude of 5,300 feet, the racers climb to spots more than twice as high as they make their way along the twisted route through the bleak night, the path lit by miners'-style lamps affixed to their heads. The fastest will finish in 7 hours, others will take more than 17, and some will drop out due to exhaustion, injury, or defeat by bitter wind or cold.

Who's idea was this, anyway? you may well ask. First held in 1943, the PDG was devised by two Swiss Army captains from the 10th mountain brigade as a way to test the strength of soldiers charged with guarding Switzerland against a possible attack from German-occupied Italy. They wanted the race to simulate conditions the soldiers might actually encounter; hence they held it at night. The race took place again in 1944. By 1945, though, the Swiss had had enough of war-readiness training—the war in Europe was all but over by race time in April—and cancelled the contest.

It was resurrected in 1949 but for one year only. An accident that killed all three members of one team—superb athletes and favorites in the race—brought accusations that the event was unconscionably dangerous. (The three fell 100 feet into a narrow crevice in a glacier and were buried under six feet of snow. It took searchers, who were at first convinced that the team had gotten lost and made its way to Italy, eight



TESTING SOLDIERS' ENDURANCE AND IS STILL IN CHARGE OF THE EVENT TODAY.

days to find them. The shard of a ski at the mouth of the crevice was the only clue as to what lay inside.)

It wasn't until 1984 that the Swiss army revived the Patrouille des Glaciers once again, this time as a symbol of Swiss-military prestige and a means of keeping the Army top-of-mind among Swiss citizens.

The race's popularity has grown continuously. The number of competitors has nearly tripled since 1984. The military turns down hundreds of skiers who apply because too many skiers would make the event impossible to manage. (Two

other, shorter, races also comprise the PDG. Each is 16 miles long and stretches between the town of Arolla and Verbier. Together these two races have more competitors, a total of 1,380, than the more demanding main race.)

In the hours before the race, Zermatt swarms with soldiers and officers. About 900 army personnel help organize the race, man the race checkpoints, provide food and medical care and do everything else connected to the event.

As race-time draws near, the town takes on a holiday mien: banners go up, streets are decorated with lights, and a



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troupe of Swiss folk singers in traditional Swiss garb yodels its way through a series of PDG-related celebrations held in Zermatt's premier hotel, the Grand Hotel Zermatterhof.

The race has four start times: 11 p.m., midnight, 1 a.m. and 2 a.m., with the fastest racers slotted for the latest start. In the late afternoon, patrol members, their families and seemingly everyone else in town jams into the Catholic church—Zermatt is an overwhelmingly Catholic town—for an orientation meeting. The mayor of Zermatt gives a speech, the parish priest an invocation. A Swiss Army officer, the steely-eyed, white-haired Marius Robyr, who is the race's commandant, shows maps of the course on an overhead screen and reads the race rules aloud.

There are plenty of them, most aimed at ensuring the racers' safety. Competitors must check in at 10 checkpoints along the course; their arrival at each stop is recorded and news of it radioed into a control center in Verbier. Team

members must be linked to one another by rope on certain pre-specified sections of the course, and wherever else the officers in charge of the various checkpoints deem it necessary.

Racers must have their equipment checked before, during and after the race. Required gear includes an ice ax, snow shovel, radio, compass, altimeter (the altimeter can be incorporated into a wristwatch but the compass can't, the rules state, without explanation), head lights for each team member, along with "glacier glasses," a "mountain cap," a balaclava (a type of wool hat that covers



neck and ears), gloves, a chest-mounted beeper, set to the "emission" mode so rescuers can locate the wearer if he's buried in an avalanche, emergency rations, a first-aid kit, rope and harnesses. Teams must be toting all this when they cross the finish line or they'll be disqualified.

The skiers, of course, know the rules already. After all, they've been preparing for the race for a year or more with daily training sessions and trial runs over sections of the course.

What neither they nor anyone else in these pre-race hours does know, though, is the answer to one huge, looming question: what will the weather be like? It's not merely a matter of the racers' comfort. The Alpine winds can

shift so quickly they turn a peaceful mountain pass into a death trap in just minutes. The weather in this region is nearly impossible to predict. The army will postpone the race, even at the last minute, if wind, snow or rain makes the course unsafe. (One race years ago was even called off after it began because of an unexpected weather change.)

The afternoon before this Patriouille des Glaciers, rain threatens. Skiers file out of the orientation meeting not knowing if they'll race that night or not. That decision won't be made until two hours before the race.

Luckily the forecast improves. As 11:00 p.m. approaches, people line the streets and fill the cafes along Zermatt's Bahnhofstrasse, (railroad-station street) the town's main drag. The racers crowd into the equipment-checking station.

At 11:00, the starting-signal sounds and the first batch of skiers take off up the street, clump, clump, clumping their way along the Bahnhofstrasse, skis and other equipment strapped to their backs, fans cheering them on. This being May, and an unusually warm May at that, they'll have to run quite a way before they reach the snowy altitudes where they will put on their skis. When they do so, many will simply toss their running shoes away. Packing them up would cost them too much time—and who needs more to carry?

Three more groups of racers take off in the same man-





ABOVE: Peter Hug, head of Wenger Watch worldwide, in front of the Matterhorn. **RIGHT:** Wenger's commemorative Patrouille des Glaciers watch and knife

ner. Through the wee hours whoops and cheers follow the patrols up the street, urging them onward and upward into the mountains.

Verbier or Bust

ALL NIGHT THE SKIERS trek stoically from one checkpoint to the next. The highest is the second one, at Tête Blanche. It sits at an altitude of 12,000 feet. The rest of the route is just as brutal, as fatigue and pain make each leg of the course more agonizing than the one before. The name of the last checkpoint—Les Ruinettes—says it all.

Few people get to see the skiers during their night-long ordeal. A TV helicopter (the race is shown for six hours on Swiss television) follows the leaders. Weather permitting, other helicopters take magazine photographers up to points where they can be near the action.

Still others carry spectators up after sunrise for a few minutes of race-watching. The sights are amazing. At one point, a long line of racers, approaching the end of the course,

inch their way up an impossibly steep incline, looking like very determined ants climbing a vast snow bank. Moments later, another scene: a large clump of exhausted but impatient racers—the Swiss Army's white-with-red-accent ski outfits dominate the crowd—waiting to check in at a checkpoint. Seconds later, another sight: a row of skiers slide along parallel to the racers, but in the opposite direction. Are they helpers from the Swiss Army? Racers who are turning back en masse? Neither. It turns out they're die-hard PDG fans who have climbed the mountain to see the race up close.

Most spectators, though, await the racers in Verbier, where, as in Zermatt, they line the streets and sit at outdoor cafes to watch the spectacle.

Many don't realize that nearby, in a nondescript building few people would even notice, is the PDG's very sophisticated monitoring center. That's where, with the help of computers, each team's progress is meticulously charted throughout the race. It's also where locally famous meteorologist Philippe Jeanneret, the Willard Scott of Swiss TV, keeps minute-to-minute track of the weather.

At 9:04 a.m. the first team crosses the finish line—a trio of

Swiss customs officers winning their second PDG in a row. They beat their old time by about 10 minutes. As the minutes, then hours, pass, other teams make their painful way down a stretch of Verbier pavement and over the finish line. They hobble, they limp, some hold onto teammates for support. At the end, though, all the grimaces of pain turn into smiles.

Winners get no money for their victory. No seven-figure endorsement deals, either. But they do get glory—albeit of a low-key, Swiss variety. And watches—Wenger watches, of course, special commemorative Patrouille des Glaciers 2000 ones. ●

