

The Olympia Bob Run – St. Moritz, Switzerland (1928)

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The ‘Olympia Bob Run’ track is approximately 1,720 metres long with an elevation difference of 130 metres and an average gradient of 8 %. As far as this track is concerned, use of the word ‘approximately’ to describe its length is very significant, because the track handmade re-built every winter, which introduces slight differences in curves and gradients, depending on the quality of the snow and the temperatures during construction. This means it is not really possible to compare performances over the years. The 19-curve track starts in St. Moritz in the backyards of the famous Kulm Hotel and finishes in Celestina. As a unique structure, the ‘Olympia Bob Run’ is the only natural bobsleigh track in the world that is used for international competitions; it is also referred to as the ‘largest snow sculpture in the world’.

The track was originally built by members of the St. Moritz Bobsleigh Club, which was created in 1897, and is therefore the oldest bob club in the world. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, bobsleigh and other kinds of luge sports were very popular for tourists the Engadin and more broadly the Alps in the winter, also bearing in mind that skiing was then still a very adventurous sport and other sliding sports were probably more accessible. The ‘Olympia Bob Run’ track was created officially during the winter of 1903–1904, and officially adopting its ‘Olympic’ name during the 1928 Winter Olympics, which took place in St. Moritz. Also, before the First World War, it was not the only track in St. Moritz, as reports from those years sometimes described the existence of more than ten tracks in St. Moritz only, with other towns in the region also offering some tracks for tourists, sportsmen and sportswomen. This tradition was maintained until the interwar period, with several brochures from the St. Moritz tourist office still showing a broad choice of tracks all around the municipality, from the short slopes around the Palace Hotel to the hills towards Champfèr, around Suvretta House, the famous hotel.

In some ways, it was the hosting of the Olympic Games in 1928 and in 1948 – which would give the track its name, ‘Olympia Bob Run’ – that would made it the most important track, then regularly hosting World Championships and other international competitions. By 2021, the Olympia Bob Run track had hosted 21 bobsleigh and skeleton World Championships and one luge World Championship, and in 2023, St. Moritz will stage its 22nd bobsleigh and skeleton World Championship. Skeleton being the version where the athlete has its head in the front of its sliding device and luge being the one with the foot in the front.



Aerial view from the Olympia and Cresta tracks with St. Moritz-Dorf in the background (1940).

Photo: © Unknown, Dokumentationsbibliothek, St. Moritz

Track modifications have been introduced several times since the 1948 games, especially in the last four turns after Bridge Corner, to enhance safety and extend braking zones to adapt the track to the higher speeds reached by the bobs toward the end of the run. The handmade track is re-built every winter by the same team of Tyrolean ice-workers, using over 15,000 cubic metres of snow and almost as much volume of water. The track construction generally begins around the last Friday of November and lasts for three weeks of intense work for the team of fifteen workers. The building of the track adheres to several traditions including a division of work, such as starting after the Sunny Corner, first finishing the bottom of the track and then doing the upper section. Also, after completion of the track, the work is not yet over and the team of ice-workers spend the whole winter – split into smaller teams, each being responsible for its part of the track – maintaining the track on a daily basis. What makes the track ‘natural’ is the absence of a concrete structure underneath the ice – like for the all the other bob tracks in the world – and the use of only two ingredients: water and snow. Of course, underneath the ice, several turns are based on hard structures, such as for the Sunny Corner or the Horse-Shoe Corner, the latter being based on natural stones, continuously reinforced while changing the radius of the turn to ensure the best security for the athletes. Interestingly, the second picture shows Horse-Shoe Corner still without a hard structure under the ice making, the manual building process even more impressive.

In the 1970s, the addition of guest rides to the winter programme took the track back to its ‘tourist roots’ and added a new highlight to the already very broad offering of St. Moritz during the winter season. Besides the ‘Olympia Bob Run’ track, there is also the ‘Cresta Run’ track, also natural and probably a bit older than the ‘Olympia’ – although this is an open issue – but used for skeleton only. It is interesting to note that the 1928 and 1948 Olympic Games in St. Moritz were the only two Games before 2002 to hold competitions for skeleton, using unique expertise in building natural ice-tracks, only based on snow, water and hard work. Nevertheless, although the ‘Olympia Bob Run’ track is unique worldwide, it should be stressed that bobsleigh is still a niche sport, even in Switzerland where the number of pilots with a licence to drive a bob is melting away like snow in the sun every spring.

Thus, the construction of the track is a marvel, an incredible feat, that begins all over again every winter, and literally brands the ‘Olympia Bob Run’ as a unique structure in the history of modern sport. The track contributes to the reputation of St. Moritz and highlights both a unique legacy of two editions of the Winter Olympic Games and a very old tradition of promoting tourism.

REFERENCES

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Horseshoe corner with a bob and spectators near the track (1955)

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