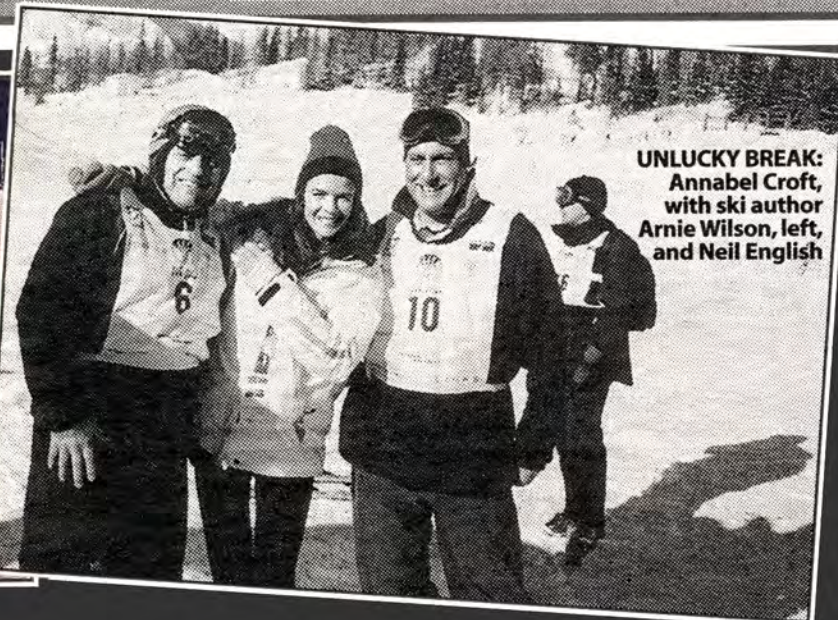


OUT OF ACTION:
Racing driver
Jacques Villeneuve
was laid low by flu
in Villars



UNLUCKY BREAK:
Annabel Croft,
with ski author
Arnie Wilson, left,
and Neil English



Double trouble

...or how Annabel Croft and Jacques Villeneuve came a cropper in the Alps

By Neil English

GUEST celebrities at two major events in the Alps recently had their dreams of becoming downhill ski racers wiped out by illness and injury.

In the Swiss resort of Villars, Formula One ace Jacques Villeneuve was hit by a vicious bout of flu on the eve of a 24-hour ski race for charity.

Over the Italian border in Courmayeur, instead of seeing former tennis star Annabel Croft take on 260 bulls and bears from the City of London in the annual City Ski Championships, I found myself signing her plaster cast!

Jacques founded the 24-hour ski race in Villars four years ago with friend, mentor and business associate Craig Pollock.

The event, Formula Charity, has gone from strength to strength, raising hundreds of thousands of pounds for children's charities in Switzerland.

Among the 900 contenders this year were many British teams braving the -17C night temperatures and the stresses of skiing for long periods.

The idea is to field a team with a minimum of four skiers and ski non-stop for 24 hours on a specially prepared piste. The more laps you do, the more money your sponsors pay.

Jacques and Craig's teams have included racing drivers Damon Hill, David Coulthard and Mika Salo. Other big names, including violinist Vanessa Mae, French tennis star Henri Leconte, Austria's Olympic ski ace Franz Klammer and singer Dannii Minogue, have also taken part in the event in one of the most beautiful ski areas in Europe.



HIGH TIME: Ski fan Vanessa Mae

This winter, however, Jacques was struck down just before the start. The 32-year-old struggled to a Press conference and gave his support to the 150 teams of contenders at the race start.

Looking pale, he told me: 'I feel so bad that if I go out and ski all night it will probably finish me off.'

'I'm passionate about this event, so it's hard not to race. But I have important training sessions coming up in Formula One and I have to get to bed and shake this thing off.'

This year the event raised £142,000 and the laps completed would have circumnavigated the globe.

Villars tourism director Guy Chanel said: 'This race is something special; so many people lend us their time and

expertise because they recognise the good cause and like the spirit of the event.'

In Courmayeur, Annabel Croft was due to compete against scores of teams from the City of London's most prominent financial institutions who take part in a giant slalom in the Italian resort each year. Sadly, she fell during race training, tried to break her fall with her hand and fractured her wrist.

Annabel, 36, took her role as guest celebrity very seriously, attending a race clinic the day before the contest to get a few tips on skiing through gates from former British ski champion Konrad Bartelski.

That night at a pre-race day dinner, Annabel described how she fell: 'I must admit I'm not the world's best skier and I like the comfort of picking where and when I make a turn.'

'So suddenly having to turn where race gates are was quite a challenge. I lost control, went down - and here I am in plaster feeling stupid. I feel such a wimp as I wanted to have a go at those City boys.'

'All through my tennis career I was lucky and avoided injury - I can't believe this has happened.'

The mother of three young children, Annabel was out with husband Mel, a former America's Cup sailor, to support the race day which was blessed with good snow and wonderful blue skies. Tommy Moe, the 1994 men's

downhill Olympic gold medallist, travelled from his home in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to set a course time for everyone to chase, although few came close to his blistering speed.

With recent heavy stock market losses and slashed bonuses, tensions were high and competition was fierce among the City teams.

But at a gala dinner after the event, where key sponsors were Swiss International Airlines, Veuve Clicquot and Fat Face clothing, so many prizes and medals were awarded that everyone seemed a winner. I was pleased to pick up a medal for Fastest Journalist after shaking off stern competition.

Next year Jacques will be back racing in Villars - and I hope Annabel's painful experience will not deter her from trying again too.

STAYING THERE

The only catered chalet in Villars, Chalet Les Martins (0041 244952854), is run by English chef Lucinda Martin and her ski instructor husband Olivier and enjoys a superb location near ski lifts, piste and town centre. For value and comfort, I recommend the three-star Bouton d'Or in Courmayeur, run by charming husband-and-wife team Andrea and Patrizia Casale (0039 0165 846729, www.hotelboutondor.com). For more information on holidays in Villars and Courmayeur, contact Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111).