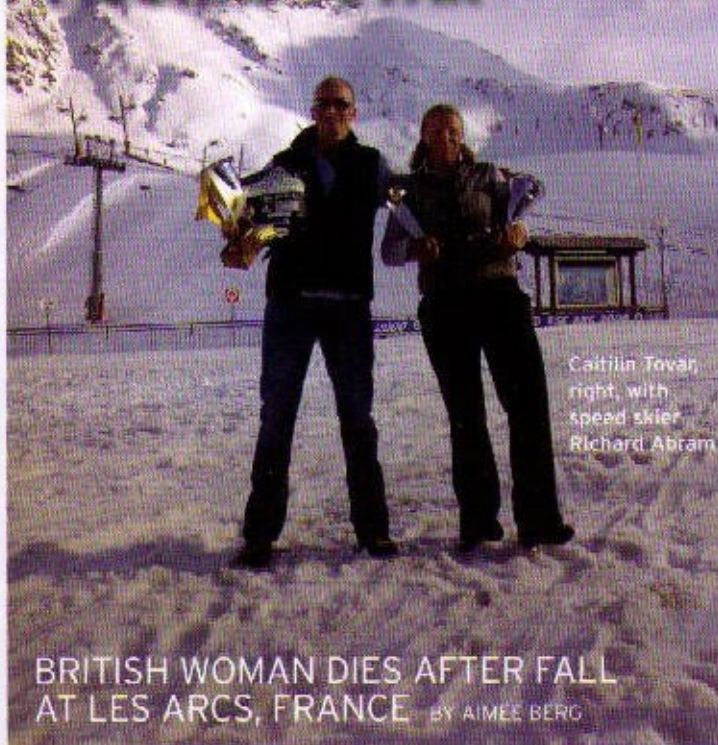


SPEED SKIING MOURNS TOVAR



Caitilin Tovar, right, with speed skier Richard Abram.

BRITISH WOMAN DIES AFTER FALL
AT LES ARCS, FRANCE BY AIMEE BERG

SPEED SKIING, THE FASTEST non-motorized sport in the world, came to a quiet halt on April 21 at the "Flying Kilometre" at Les Arcs, France, as funeral services were held for Great Britain's lone female speed skier, Caitilin Tovar. Tovar died of head injuries on April 17, two days after falling at a professional race. Two years ago, Italian racer Marco Salvaggio suffered a similar fate there.

Tovar's accident occurred at the annual Pro Mondial, a professional (non-FIS-governed) race that many athletes were using as a tuneup for the 2007 FIS World Championships, held in Verbier, Switzerland, the following week.

British teammate Nigel Brockton witnessed Tovar's accident from the top of the men's start. He saw Tovar "making her way, slowly, to forerun the women's semifinal course inside the netted area of the track. As Caitilin approached the level of the start and attempted to traverse into position," he said, "she lost her balance and began to slide away from the smooth prepared track, through the net, and onto the mogul field adjacent to the speed course."

As Tovar slid, Brockton said the father of Sanna Tidstrand, who holds the women's world speed record (150.73 mph), "chased down the slope and almost succeeded in arresting her fall but she slipped from his grasp."

Tovar lost both layers of her helmet during the fall, said Les Arcs' race director Jean-Jacques Laplace. (The aerodynamic outer shell is designed to break away on impact, and the impact-resistant protective part normally stays firmly in place.) Nonetheless, Laplace said Tovar was conscious and breathing when she came to rest, about 900 meters down the slope. She was taken by helicopter to a hospital in Grenoble, lapsed into a coma, and died Tuesday, April 17, with her mother, Hella Tovar, at her side.

At the April 21 service, Salvaggio's parents consoled Hella and John Tovar, who had come from Cornwall, England, along with Tovar's sister, Claire, 27, and brother, David, 26, to spread Caitilin's ashes along the course.

The Tovars were deeply moved by the Italians' presence. "They knew our grief," Hella Tovar told *Ski Racing*. "We are extremely sorry to have lost our children but as they said, 'This is sport. That is the risk one takes.' Caitilin is a

girl who always sailed close to the wind. This time, maybe too close. I hope no blame is to be appointed and that we learn from it."

An investigation is under way to determine whether additional safety rules should be implemented. Additionally, Hella Tovar left Caitilin's helmet with race organizers for analysis.

Typically at professional speed skiing races, single netting is used on the side of the course — as opposed to two or more layers of netting that is standard in alpine downhill racing — because skiers reach far higher speeds. The single net is designed to slow, rather than stop, a speed skier because stopping abruptly at 150 mph could be far more dangerous.

Tovar had lived and worked at Les Arcs for the past few years and had celebrated her 32nd birthday with colleagues and clients just two days before her fatal accident.

She learned to ski when she was 20, and later taught skiing in Andorra and Australia. She decided to dedicate herself to speed skiing last spring and received her FIS license to compete internationally on Feb. 9.

"This tragedy has cast a pall over the discipline and over what is virtually 'a family' of athletes and organizers," said Dick Taplin, chairman of the FIS Speed Ski Committee.

"It was a cruel, cruel day," Brockton said. **SR**