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British Ski Cross Series Sets The Tone for Future Events

British Ski Cross Series Final, Round 5: SNO!zone, Milton Keynes

Following a rollercoaster ride of events that made up the debut season of the British Ski Cross Series, a surging wave of hard-core competitors hit the final stop on the 21st September. Sno!zone Milton Keynes played host to Round 5, the last stage of the all conquering British Series that had already smashed its way through courses in the South, Leeds and Scotland.

With the bravery, confidence and levels of riding of each surviving competitor building event after event, the Final showdown at Sno!zone Milton Keynes had one aim. In a sport where limits are pushed day after day, the Hype Events Staff looked to see just how far, how fast, and how big these young British hopefuls would be willing to go.

Going into the Final Round of the Series it was still all to play for. The Overall Title had become a two horse race with #83 Marek Benhke and #67 Max Baggio separated by just 4 points. In the age groups Max Hardy trailed Kenny Morton, needing a win to pip the British Team skier to first place while the injured Jasmin Taylor would need to score points to hold off the talented #32 Danielle Freeze.

With the attendance at the Series growing event after event, the finale at Milton Keynes saw the biggest and most diverse line up in the start area yet. The British Ski circuit has embraced the new sport, with competitors of all abilities coming from both freestyle and alpine backgrounds and competing as equals. Throughout the summer, across the five venues, spectators, officials, sponsors and press have been treated to an explosive array of speed, skill, balance and determination, mixed with a hefty amount of eye watering crashes for good measure. The Series has, in the words of one sponsor *“shown just what British Skiing is capable of producing at grass routes, when the support is there.”*

As Round 5 kicked off the hundred odd spectators gathered around the Milton Keynes viewing area were not disappointed. Following in the tracks of previous rounds, an unbelievably high quality display of talent and passion unfolded before their eyes with competitor after competitor laying down faster times and raising the atmosphere in the Alibi Riders lounge.

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While the Alibi Riders Lounge displayed its usual chilled persona and the DJ's dropped some memorable tunes, the view from inside the bar areas was as welcoming as ever. The brightly coloured sponsors banners adorned every wall and Atomic supplied their usual rider support with demo skis and equipment advice. The story inside the dome was a more frightening tale however. With a course made up of tight, banked turns, two double sets of camel bumps and a 8 metre gap jump the riders were always only a skis length away from disaster. Luckily the increasing levels of adrenaline bouncing around the start gate dispelled any fears as skier after skier impressed their peers with riskier and more dangerous lines. As the time trials ended, the form book stayed true, with Benhke and Trotter sitting atop the pile, separated by just hundredths of a second. This along with notable performances from Shaun Blyth, Victoria Bell, Denzil Davies and Michael Brain reminded those leading the packs that there would be no let up in the 4 way fight towards claiming the final trophies of the Series.

As the highly charged four person knock out rounds kicked off, the pressure started to build. The twisting, turning course had been hard enough in Time Trials, but with 3 other athletes alongside, pumping tunes in the start area and the knowledge that this was the last chance to catch the eye of the Snow sport GB Team scouts, things really moved up a gear.

In the Youth age group final, #67 Baggio was looking not only to take his 5th category win but also stake his place in the Super Final to secure the points he needed to take the Overall Title. Alongside him stood Jack Gower, Sam Allen and Peter Glasgow, who had all wowed the crowds on their way to the final despite all competing in their first Ski Cross Event. As the gate dropped it was clear Baggio would need all of his experience as he found himself involved in a serious four way battle. As Allen and Glasgow tussled for 3rd place, Baggio and Gower pulled ahead by a ski length and hit the 8 metre gap jump together, crashing onto the landing and through the line side by side. As the pair picked themselves up, video feedback was called into action, before the win was given to Baggio, giving him a clean sweep of Series wins and pushing him on closer towards the Overall Title. As the mightily impressive Gower congratulated his fellow competitor, and Allen and Glasgow crossed the line still slugging it out, Rick Hutchings from event sponsors Natives was able to take time to reflect on the skills of the victor Baggio. *"He's an absolutely fantastic little skier and there's definitely big things to come from him in the future"*

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Not wanting to be outdone by the all out action of the Youth Final, the Female finalist took their spots in the start gate for the last Female race of the Series. Pre-event favourite Jasmin Taylor had already been eliminated in the semi finals after a stunning run by #70 Alex Houston, which left the Female final and the Series Title up for grabs. Across the duration of the Series the #115 bib of Victoria Bell had gradually become a more and more threatening sight, and in the final she proved not only not only as a fierce competitor but a worthy winner. Straight out of the start gate she made her intentions clear, paying little respect to age or experience as she skipped past first Houston and then Freeze to claim a much deserved and celebrated victory. Freeze, while disappointed in not taking the win, kept her focus to achieve her pre race goal of finishing in second place, giving her enough accumulated points to take the Female Series Title from Taylor. Over the duration of the Series the Female category had grown to become one of the most competitive, and Snow Sport GB Team Manager Ian Findlay was quick to pay tribute to the talented female line up. *“We already have two World Class female athletes lined up to represent GB in Sarah Sauvey and Emily Sarsfield, and hopefully this Series has provided us with a couple more athletes that can join up with the Womens Team at an International Level.”*

In the Senior category Max Hardy's transformation from university skier to International athlete continued. The York based student has set his sights on a career in skiing following graduation and his hot streak of podium places finally exploded with a 1st place in the final event. Whilst the final race of the season saw absences from British Team members Kenny Morton and Matt Bruton, Hardy proved that he was willing to fight to beat those that were there. He took an emphatic victory ahead of the always improving Denzil Davies and Tom Pritchard, collecting enough points with his victory to snatch the Senior Series Title away from Morton.

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In the last and most hotly contested age group Final of the day the rapidly developing rivalry of Trotter and Benhke moved up another gear as the two duelled, tussled and battled for the full 160metres of the course. While Jake Mills, 4th, and Michael Brain, 3rd, displayed some superb skiing in their first Finals of the Series, the race was only ever about the #6 and #83 bibs of Trotter and Benhke. As the crowds squashed against the viewing windows, the future stars of British skiing found themselves caught in their very own battle, not for the prizes or the money, but for the respect of their peers. At no point in the series had a race been this closely contested, with Trotter using everything he had to keep Benhke at bay and Benhke enjoying a large period of time with his ski tips riding across the tail of Trotters Salomons. After what seemed like a life-time of miraculous skiing, displaying a master clash in balance and edge control, the pair hit the gap jump, colliding in the air and still uncertain as to who fate had favoured. At the end of it, luck went with Trotter, who felt his left ski touch down first, allowing him to reach across the finish line and take the victory ahead of the despairing lunge of Benhke. Although the win for Trotter wasn't enough to take the Junior Title from the consistently impressive Benhke, the fact that he had been pipped by his rival for the Junior slot in the Super Final meant so much more. With Max Baggio lined up already, Benhke would need to rely on Trotter to ensure that Baggio didn't record the top 2 position he needed to win the Overall Series Title.

As the category winners lined up for the Super Final, the tension in the Alibi Riders Lounge was unbearable as Overall Series leader Benhke could only sit and watch. A top two for Baggio would give him the Overall Title. A win for Hardy would give him the Senior Title. The fact that this Super Final was for cash, a stack of prizes and the huge British Ski Cross Series Trophy was the last thought in any of the athletes minds. After dominating the last Milton Keynes event the sensible money was surely on Trotter, but in these pressure cooker conditions the crowd sensed anything could happen. As the DJ cut the music and the MC introduced the line up, the start gate dropped. All four competitors exited the gate like men possessed, with no single athlete willing to give an inch. As the four battled into the first corner, the inevitable happened and contact was made. First Baggio collided with Trotter, as he tried to squeeze inside the line, then Trotter into Hardy as he tried to clear space for himself. In the resulting carnage, the #115 bib of Bell shimmied her way through the mess to emerge from the first corner slightly ahead of Hardy, while Baggio and Trotter both hit the second bank on their sides to lose a ski each. Hardy, aware of the ensuing chaos behind him took the opportunity to attack, snatching the lead back from Bell over the

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camel bumps and aiming himself firmly towards a career first victory. Baggio and Trotter were both back on their feet and, despite only being on one ski each, back on course, with the young #67 aware that he needed to catch Bell to take the Overall title. As the crowd inside the Alibi Riders Lounge roared, Hardy took the final jump to victory, with Baggio and Trotter both displaying great skill to close the gap on Bell. However it was too little, too late, as Bell took the final jump, landing safely for second place, whilst Baggio gamble ended with him crashing off the kicker gifting third place to Trotter. Hardy had done enough under difficult conditions to take the Senior Title, Baggio had again displayed his undeniable talent to catch the attention of the Snow Sport GB scouts and Marek Benhke had held on to his Overall Series Lead, thanks to a little help from his greatest rival, #6 Martin Trotter.

As the crowds gathered for the after event party and celebrated with the Series winners, who happily collected their prizes courtesy of the Events generous sponsors, it was obvious that the debut season of the British Ski Cross Series had been an undeniable success. While the Series highlighted several names to watch for the future, it was crystal clear that the real winner had been the sport. As one spectator commented afterwards *"It's been a long time since I watched an event that kept me on the edge of my seat for a whole day, and where the skiers taking part genuinely felt that this was their event. They want to win these races more than anything, but they are happy just to be here with their peers and to be part of something new. This is what our sport needs and at last it seems its what the skiers have got."*

So while the day belonged to the sport, to the athletes and to the winners, the real thanks must go to the sponsors. The British Ski Cross Series would not have been possible without its highly supportive sponsors, and it is with their help that the sport will continue to grow. And that can only be a good thing, because judging by the talent on display and the passion in the hearts of the competitors this year, Marek Benhke is going to have his work cut out to defend his British Ski Cross Series Title next year.

The event was sponsored by: SNO!zone, Atomic Skis, d3o, futur-3, Oakley, Head Skis, Alibi Pretox, Natives, Ski Club Great Britain & Metro Snow.

For results from all rounds of the British Ski Cross Series visit <http://www.hypeevents.co.uk> or email info@hypeevents.co.uk