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Jan Farrell: 'Speed skiing starts at 120mph - anything less is just skiing'



British thrillseeker Farrell will on Monday bid to break the world indoor record

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Jan Farrell is the latest in a long line of British eccentrics with an infatuation with speed. In his case it is the non-motorised form. He goes down hills on planks of carbon fibre at twice the legal limit for British motorways.

Farrell competes in the minority sport of speed skiing. Anything under 120mph is dismissed as simply skiing. He clocked a career-best 143.946mph during a world-record attempt at Vars in Switzerland, breaching the 60mph barrier from a standing start in 3.4 seconds, the equivalent of a Porsche 911 Turbo.

On Monday, just for a laugh, he will attempt the first of two

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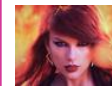
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world records this year, in this case to reach 70mph indoors. The record is held by Austrian Klaus Schrotthammer, who got up to 104.44kph (a tad over 64mph) in Landgraaf four years ago.

The "hill" in Amnéville, France, is, at 620 metres long and 35m wide, one of the biggest indoor ski slopes on the planet, with a vertical drop of 80m. But it was not designed for speeds that will get you a ticket on the M25.

Farrell's second challenge, pencilled in for autumn, is to set a new mark skiing down a sand dune. "A Dutch guy hit 92kph in Namibia. To go more than 60mph on sand will be interesting. You have to use a hard wax on them [the skis], which we think will do the job. The sand works like ball bearings, not gliding but rolling at a microscopic level, like skiing in slush."

The hardest part of the sport is stopping. Since it takes at least 500m to stop, courses are no longer than a kilometre, taking 15 seconds to negotiate. "There are mountains that have longer runs but not the braking zones you need when travelling at 150mph," Farrell says.

Farrell, the son of a philologist, moved from the Lake District to northern Spain at five, learning to ski in the Pyrenees. He gave conventional Alpine skiing a crack, but ultimately it proved just too conventional for our hero, who finished sixth in his first season on the World Cup circuit in the S1 category.

When I point out that I reached the heady velocity of 45mph in Tignes last winter, Farrell laughed. "That's not even warm-up speed for us. We start training at 60 to 70mph and work up from that. We say that speed skiing really starts at 120mph. Anything less is just skiing."

So what does it feel like to hammer downhill at such speeds? "In theory tracks are flat and groomed but in practice anything above 100mph feels like a mogul course.

"It's not so much the skis flapping as the body. You hit bumps a couple of inches high and the undulations make your body rock. I put a microphone inside the helmet. It's very loud but I don't actually hear anything on the way down. It's like the whole world stops and I get to experience my skiing from outside my body."



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