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## **Joe Soucheray: Red Bull Crashed Ice skaters are in the right place - they'll need some prayers**

By Joe Soucheray

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On Wednesday afternoon, December 29, 2011, workers erect scaffolding that will support the race track for the Red Bull Crashed Ice World Championship, which will take place near the Cathedral of St. Paul January 12-14, 2012. The event makes its long-awaited US debut in the opening race of the 2012 edition. Saint Paul, Minnesota, will host the first round of competition on January 12-14 as the world's best downhillers break the ice in North America. (Pioneer Press: Chris Polydoroff) (Chris Polydoroff)



Jeff Casemore, left, of Hugo, Minn, and Chris Cameron of New Zealand attach siding to a portion of runway near the top of steps at the Cathedral of St. Paul.

The skeletal ramp for the Red Bull Crashed Ice thrill skaters is built so close to the Cathedral of St. Paul - and, in fact, plunges down its front steps - that at first look I thought maybe penitents were going to be shoved out the side door and thrown onto the chute. Those of us who attended confession in the halcyon days of rigidity and trepidation would not have put it past them.

Father Joe Johnson, the rector of the cathedral, said he has had people wondering if he would try the course.

"I walked it," Johnson said. "If they want me to skate it, they want a new rector."

Johnson had just returned from a sound check, and not at the pulpit, but for the event, set for Thursday through Saturday. The construction around the cathedral the last week or so has been more hectic than tearing up the town for light-rail construction. I asked him how the Cathedral got in cahoots with an Austrian energy drink company.

"The mayor's office called us last summer and asked for our help," Johnson said.

Well, marketing is everything these days, and Cathedral Hill does make for an incredible launching point.

I can't imagine presenting the event to Archbishop John C. Nienstedt, but he went along with it, too, extracting a promise from the organizers that they would provide shuttle buses to get people to Mass.

"These Red Bull people have bent over backward for us," Johnson said.

So will the competitors, maybe literally. The 100 skaters who have qualified for the

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event will start atop a ramp at the north side of the Cathedral and end up, ideally alive, oh, I don't know, maybe in Hastings. They have to negotiate hairpin turns and jumps and other death-defying improbabilities, dropping 131 feet, costumed primarily as hockey players, with helmets, shin pads and skates.

I will say this for Red Bull: They have dreamed up some of the most attention-grabbing gimmicks in the world of quasi-sports that nobody can actually see.

That might be a bit uncharitable. I suppose if you get there early enough and get a good spot, you might be able to see something, but I am a veteran of the Red Bull Flugtag in 2010, when competitors in homemade flying contraptions launched themselves off a ramp on Harriet Island. We saw bits and pieces of that from Kellogg Boulevard, which was like looking, through the wrong end of the binoculars, at a bee trying to land on a distant flower.

"That's when the organizers fell in love with the city," Johnson said. "They saw Cathedral Hill and started planning."

The Flugtag drew an estimated 90,000 people. I would suspect that was on the low side. I hadn't seen that many people downtown since maybe the 1950s, when St. Paul was still a center of commerce.

And if they are predicting 75,000 or so for the Crashed Ice competition, I bet that will be underestimated, too. Not only does Red Bull excel in coming up with the damndest things, but they come up with the damndest things that tend to draw as many people as possible.

On New Year's Eve, Red Bull sponsored a fantastic jump across a portion of San Diego Bay by Robbie Maddison, on a motorcycle, and Levi LaVallee, on a snowmobile. It was record-setting. LaVallee, from Longville, Minn., almost killed himself last year practicing for that jump, and when I asked him if he got at least \$1 million for the New Year's Eve success, he demurred.

"I got a lifetime supply of Red Bull," he said.

That event, too, looked like it was attended by maybe 2 million people.

Chris Coleman, who got this Crashed Ice ball rolling, is reported to have agreed to skate the course.

Who is next in line in succession, the city council president?

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