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FEATURE-Alpine skiing-World-Nepal team want skis and respect

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Reuters

(Repeats feature first moved at 0002 GMT)

By Manuele Lang

VAL D'ISERE, France, Feb 6 - Nepal has two giant slalom racers raring to go at the world Alpine ski championships -- all they need now are some skis.

When they arrived at the world championships, Shyam Dhakal and Subas Khatri discovered that their skis did not meet the requirements imposed by the International Ski Federation (FIS) for the competition.

No money for new skis was forthcoming from the Nepal Ski Association, said the team's coach Richard Morley, so the Himalayan nation's first appearance at the world championships now depended on charity.

"A local shop offered to lend us some skis but we're not sure they will be legal. It's very frustrating when you see that some of the guys from leading ski countries just use their training skis a couple of times and just throw them away," Morley told Reuters.

Morley, a British businessman and former skier, launched the Nepal Alpine skiing team a decade ago at the request of the then ruler King Birendra.

MOUNTAIN BOYS

With a bit of time and money, Dhakal and Khatri, who must go through qualifying to get places in next Friday's giant slalom race, could earn the respect of fellow skiers, Morley said.

"They are mountain boys with as much guts, commitment and potential as mountain boys from Switzerland or Austria. They just need the training facilities."

The 56-year-old Englishman first gave Nepal a taste of international ski racing when he took his adopted son Jayaram Khadka to the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics to compete in Nordic skiing events.

Jayaram's adoption had made headlines when it was repeatedly rejected by the British government for seven years before the new Labour administration cleared it in 1997.

Since Salt Lake, Morley has started his own training camp for Nepalese skiers in Les Arcs, a resort in the same valley as Val d'Isere. He has three skiers at the camp -- Dhakal, 27, Khatri, 22, and Urtam Rayamashi, 16, who joined the team last year.

Morley is realistic that Nepal's Alpine skiers will never compete with the major nations.

"This is not the world championships, this is the First World championships. We're only here to make up the numbers," he said.

"Why don't we have our own world championships for the Third World nations? In football, you have second divisions."

SKIING POTENTIAL

Seventy-three countries are competing in Val d'Isere from this week. Under current regulations, the small nations are allowed to take part only in the giant slalom races and they are obliged to go through qualification.

"It's an unfair game. It's like having a guy walking up a mountain and the other going to the top by taxi and saying I've won," Morley said.

His racers do not have dedicated pistes to train on in Les Arcs and ski amid recreational skiers. At the world championships, they are given accommodation by the FIS only on competition day.

Morley believes that Nepal has great skiing potential but adds: "Probably not in Alpine skiing. It would be an ideal spot for Nordic skiing. A modern Nordic skiing complex, at 4,000 metres high, would be a fantastic facility for the ski world."

For now, he keeps his mobile phone to hand, hoping to get a call from a ski maker or another team offering help for next week's race.

(Editing by Clare Fallon)

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