



FIS Alpine Ski World Cup



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Pride and passion collide at the colorful men's GS qualifier

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Georgia's Iason Abramashvili placed 15th in the qualifiers, photo © Agence Zoom

The first qualification race of the 2009 World Championships was run today in Val d'Isere, France. The men's giant slalom qualifier saw 105 competitors from 57 countries vie for the final 25 starting spots in tomorrow's championship race.

Russian Alexandr Horoshilov took the top spot with a time of 2:34.70 after two runs. Croatian Danko Marinelli finished second, a little more than a second off the pace, and Great Brittan's David Ryding finished third.

Athletes came from far and wide to the event, as it plays an integral part in many of their roads to next year's Olympics in Vancouver. Jackets reading Iran, Mexico, Nepal and Brazil, to name a few, roamed the finish area.

A strong sense of camaraderie between the "small countries" was apparent, as cut-throat competition took a back seat to cheering each other on.

Mexican representative, 50-year-old Hubertus Von Hoehenlohe brought some color to the event with a custom-made suit complete with painted on side arms. "I'm having fun, this is great. We have this hotel up in the ClubMed with 45 nations. I've never seen so many nations in my life and we can discuss our problems and make a difference to change something," said Von Hoehenlohe. "It's even good for the children in front of the TV, if they have so many countries they will learn where they all are. I have to get out a map sometimes."

Racers and coaches alike beamed with the pride of representing their countries on one of ski racing's biggest stages. The racers smiling faces out shined the third-hand helmets and shabby suits that many of the athletes happily donned.

While all the championship races, including today's women's GS, are being held in the main Val d'Isere area, the aspiring men GS racers were pushed two kilometers down the road to the O.K course finishing in the neighboring village of La Daille.

Most of the racers arrived on a free shuttle from the main base of the resort, walking past the twin Dodge duleys with New Hampshire plates that pull American Bode Miller's trailers, plastered with his image.

Nepal's ski team was in attendance with two young racers from the country's warrior caste. Shyam Kumar-Dhakai, who was selected to the team thanks in part to balance skills learned through kickboxing, finished 55th of the 61 total finishers. "It's wonderful for them to be in the World Championship along side so many other nations and for their nation to be here and properly represented," said Richard Morley the Nepal Ski Team's team manager. "I think any sporting achievement allows a country to have some self-respect. I think this is very important for poor nations who feel very much the forgotten people of the world."

Saturday's slalom qualifier will be Kumar-Dhakai's first slalom race. Today was the third day Kumar-Dhakai and teammate Khatri Subash skied on their new skis from Dynastar.

Brazilian Jhonatan Longhi was ten hundredths of a second from rubbing elbows with the big boys in 26th place. "I am happy to represent Brazil because it's a big nation, but there are only three or four racers from Brazil and I want to have a great World Championships here," said the 20-year-old racer who winters in Alta Badia, Italy.

It wasn't all smiles and rainbows at the base of the hill. Senegal Skiing Federation president Lamine Gueye openly confronted International Ski Federation (FIS) president, Gian-Franco Kasper for all the media to hear.

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Gueye fired a laundry list of complaints at Kasper concerning what he saw as unfair treatment of smaller countries by "big ski racing."

"It's not the world championships anymore, it's just the big countries feasting in the sumptuous dining room of Bellevarde while the small nations eat a sandwich in the kitchen," Gueye told Reuters. "In 1992, Val d'Isere gave brilliant proof that it was possible to hold a great ski festival on Bellevarde with 133 skiers at the start. It was again the case in Bormio at the worlds in 2005 with 120 skiers involved."

The 48-year-old former racer was the first black Winter Olympic skier in 1984 at the Sarajevo Games.

Kasper defended the organization's stance, telling Gueye that his frustrations go beyond the World Cup outsiders. "It's the same for the big nations, the money is not in the industry anymore," said Kasper. "I can think of many of the top nations that have the same problems with financing, but we still have so called qualification races at the World Championships on the same ranking list. I think this is very important for the athletes. Our obligation is to give the best athletes the best possible conditions and the most difficult conditions because we look for a world champion."

Gueye distributed black armbands to male and female racers who wore them in support of his beliefs.

The fastest 25 men from today's race will be added to the list of 50 who were pre-qualified for Friday's giant slalom.

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