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FEATURE : Skiing minnows feel gulf in wealth at championships

AFP, VAL D'ISERE, FRANCE
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The world economic crisis seems to have given a wide berth to the majority of people gathered in the chic French resort of Val d'Isere for the World Ski Championships.

As people around the globe struggle financially, resort cafes still charge 16 euros (US\$21) for a toasted ham-and-cheese sandwich and realtors shamelessly ask for a bid in excess of 300,000 euros for a tiny three-room apartment.

Although skiing as a recreation has become increasingly accessible for millions of people worldwide, the sport remains expensive.

For the two-week championships here, the evidence of wealth is everywhere. The big skiing nations such as Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland have taken over hotels and throw free-for-all parties each night for those lucky enough to have bagged an entry pass.

It was at a sponsor's party, ironically, that American double gold medallist Lindsey Vonn sliced her thumb on the top of a champagne bottle — opened rather decadently with the edge of a ski.

But amid the deluxe boutiques in the quaint old village, there are a number of ski teams from four corners of the world struggling even to kit themselves out and find the money for lunch.

In Thursday's giant slalom races, a handful of Iranians lined up alongside ski racers from India, Mongolia, Mexico, Israel, Brazil and Colombia, just some of the 73 members of the International Ski Federation (FIS).

Their story is vastly different from the teams from the traditional cluster of European nations, Canada and the US.

Take 37-year-old Mongolian Changaa Bayarzul, for example. He has local ski instructor Jean-Luc Fabares to thank for kitting him out with two pairs of skis that conform to strict FIS regulations.

The Mongolian was a massive 105.41 seconds adrift of winner Alexandr Horoshilova of Russia in the race that took place on the "OK" slope, a bus ride away from the Belvedere piste that will be used for the main event.

Some of the skiers wore black armbands in protest at what they perceived as their belittling treatment by the FIS.

FIS president Gian Franco Kasper, however, was gruff in rebuffing nay complaint of maltreating racers from poorer nations.

"When the spectators ski better than the skiers, then there's nothing you can do," he said.

Richard Morley, who shot to prominence in his native Britain over his troubled application to adopt his son Jayaram Khadka, has been coach of the Nepal ski team for 10 years.

"The Nepal ski team is probably the world's poorest ski team from the world's poorest country," Morley said of his three-strong team.

Skiing was a way for his racers to escape extreme poverty and lack of opportunity in the Himalayan country, he added.

"Our boys were born in the mountain villages of Nepal ... To them this experience is like going to another planet," he said. "They're totally gobsmacked by it."

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