

Killy Happy With Sochi Progress

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Killy, left, has participated in Olympic Games preparations since 1988. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

KRASNAYA POLYANA, Krasnodar Region — Three meters of fresh snow disrupted Sochi's plans to run the first test events for the 2014 Winter Olympics this week, but former Olympic ski champion Jean-Claude Killy still gave the Russian resort a pat on the back.

"I have to be fully satisfied with what I've seen," the Frenchman, who chairs the International Olympic Committee coordination commission for the Sochi Games, said when he visited the resort this week.

"I don't know if there ever was an Alpine event that was not affected by the weather in some way, whether it's held at Val d'Isere, Kitzbuehel, St. Moritz or anywhere else in the world."

A men's Europa Cup downhill had to be postponed for 24 hours and a Super G race was canceled because of the heavy snow, but the disruption did little to diminish the enthusiasm of the athletes, officials and fans.

"We had three meters of fresh snow that hit the area in the last few days," said Markus Waldner, the race director for the International Ski Federation responsible for the Europa Cup.

"It was crazy."

Killy, however, was quick to point out that Sochi's overall plans were going well.

"We've come here almost every month and the progress we've seen is unbelievable," he told a small group of reporters at a luxury hotel in Krasnaya Polyana, a ski resort that will host all the outdoor Olympic events in 2014.

Greatest Achievement

"I have to say that never before were the games awarded to a country where 85 percent of the infrastructure had to be built from scratch, so this [progress] must be considered as the greatest achievement in the history of the Olympic movement.

"Now we have 40 percent of the construction completed, and by the end of this year it will be 70 percent completed."

Killy said the 2014 Olympics would leave a long-lasting legacy for the whole region. "The image, the effects of these games — the roads, tunnels or sewerage system, for example — will be felt for the next 100 years."

Asked by Reuters whether he considered the Sochi Games his personal project, having spent so much time in the region, he said, "Well, it's going to be my grave."

"No, just a bad joke," Killy added with a big smile.

The Frenchman, now 67, won three gold medals in the 1968 Winter Olympics and also competed in the 1964 Games. He served as co-president of the 1992 Albertville Games in his home region and has helped coordinate every Winter Games since 1988.

Killy said he had no doubt that the 2014 Olympic downhill course, designed by Swiss former world and Olympic champion Bernhard Russi, would satisfy every top skier.

Russi "has worked for five years on this slope. I've known him for 25 years, he's a great course designer and has designed downhills everywhere in the world," he said.

"It's an extremely challenging course and the biggest problem is to control the speed of the skiers because safety is a paramount concern for everyone.

"The piste probably will have to be modified, you must make it sharp enough. It's like a suit that you try several times before it fits."

Killy was asked if the skiers would also have to adjust to a different kind of snow in the subtropical environment of Sochi, a resort on the Black Sea.

Best Snow

"Mr. Putin told me Sochi has the best snow in the world and I have no reason not to believe him," he said, referring to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was largely responsible for Sochi's successful bid to host the games.

Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev were among the visitors this week to Krasnaya Polyana, some 40 kilometers from Sochi.

Environmental groups have expressed concern that the games could have a negative effect on rare species in the region, and Killy said he would address their worries by inviting film actress turned animal rights activist Brigitte Bardot to Sochi.

"I've known her for many years and I know that she has worked hard to save snow leopards from extinction, so if we ask her, if the Russians ask her nicely, she will come," he said.

Killy also touched on the subject of Sochi hosting a Formula One Grand Prix. The resort has signed a seven-year deal with Formula One supremo Bernie Ecclestone to stage a Russian Grand Prix from 2014, but the IOC is looking into the possibility of postponing the first race by a year because it could interfere with the Winter Olympics.

"I don't think it should be a problem if we push it to 2015 but it is also possible to have the race in 2014 if we all agree," Killy said.

"I think the decision will come at the end of April."

He also encouraged Russia to open up its borders to the West, especially after the world's largest country was awarded the right to host the 2018 football World Cup.

"We sincerely hope that by 2018 we could come to Russia without a visa," he said.

Just before leaving the hotel to join Putin and Medvedev on the slopes, Killy was asked whether he would try the downhill course himself.

"I'm not sure. I haven't skied [competitively] for 20 years," he said. "Besides, I have to find the right boots first."

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