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Ethiopia's Robel with a cause at Turin Olympics

By Gideon Long

PRAGELATO, Italy, Feb 8 (Reuters) - With his black skin and long dreadlocks, Robel Teklemariam stands out from the other cross-country skiers at the Turin Olympics.

But next Friday, he will line up alongside them for the men's 15 km classical race to become the first Ethiopian to compete at the Winter Olympic Games.

"It's definitely historic for Ethiopia and it means a lot to me personally," Teklemariam said after training at Pragelato, venue for the cross-country events.

"It's an honour for me to race at this level in a sport that I love and for a country that I'm very proud to be from."

Ethiopia has produced many fine Olympians down the years but almost all of them have been long-distance runners.

Teklemariam says that might change as many Ethiopians, having left their troubled homeland in recent decades, take up other sports in their new-found homes in Europe and America.

"I know Ethiopians that live in Sweden, Italy, Germany and the U.S. and they all ski," he told Reuters as he stood among the mountains in the bright Italian sunshine.

"The world is not the same as it was even 10 or 15 years ago. It's not out of the norm any more to have someone racing in an event that doesn't necessarily exist in their home country."

Teklemariam himself is part of the Ethiopian diaspora.

Born in the East African country in 1974, he left with his mother at the age of nine and was brought up in New York and then in nearby Lake Placid, which had staged the 1980 Winter Games six years earlier.

It was there he fell in love with skiing.

"Alpine skiing, cross-country, I got caught up in it all," he recalls. "For me, leaving New York City and going to Lake Placid was a blessing."

"I've always loved the mountains. My mum says I was intrigued by them in Ethiopia even at the age of two or three."

Since leaving university, Teklemariam has taught snowboarding and Alpine skiing in the United States, and considered trying to qualify for the Super-G at these Games.

But he opted to concentrate on cross-country skiing to avoid the risk of an injury which could have ended his Olympic dream.

As the only Ethiopian here, he practices alone, with only the snow, the forests, the mountains, an MP3 player and a set of silver headphones for company.

"Sometimes I'll listen to Ethiopian music, sometimes to reggae, hip-hop, classical or house music," he says. "It just depends on the mood I'm in."

The 31-year-old still has extended family in Ethiopia -- his father helped set up the national ski federation -- and he also has relatives in northern Italy who may come to see him race.

"I'm not necessarily expecting to win a medal. I'm a realist," he said. "My goals are for further down the road. I want this Olympics to open my eyes and hopefully the eyes of other Ethiopians.

"Ethiopia is my heritage, my country and it's who I am."

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