



Ski jumpers Ahonen and Janda neck and neck

By Gideon Long

PRAGELATO, Italy, Feb 5 (Reuters) - Finland's Janne Ahonen and Jakub Janda of the Czech Republic are the clear favorites for the Olympic ski jumping titles but, on the eve of the Turin Games, there is little to choose between them.

The two men have dominated the World Cup season, opening up a commanding lead over their rivals, but neither has managed to shake off the other.

As if to underline how closely matched they are, they finished neck and neck last month in the prestigious Four Hills tournament, in which competitors jump at four different resorts in Austria and Germany over the space of a week.

Ahonen won on two of the four hills and Janda on the other two. Remarkably, when style points were taken into account, both finished with an identical points tally and the title was shared for the first time in the event's 54-year history.

"It's incredible," Janda said afterwards. "But a share of the joy means there is twice as much joy."

Ahonen, 28, has the experience, having won the World Cup title for the past two years, but Janda, a year younger, has wrested the initiative from him this season, winning five World Cup meetings to the Finn's two.

Ahonen is refusing to surrender though, and heads to Turin in fine form having twice finished on the podium at a World Cup meeting in the Polish resort of Zakopane last weekend.

Among the other competitors to watch are Ahonen's compatriot Matti Hautamaeki, who took a bronze and a silver in Salt Lake City in 2002 and also suggested a timely spike in form by winning both jumps in Zakopane.

Norway's Roar Ljoekelsoey is a medal contender, as is Adam Malysz of Poland, who won silver and bronze at Salt Lake.

Ski jumping is one of the most spectacular events at the Olympics. Competitors hurl themselves down steep ramps and fly through the air for over 100 metres at speeds close to 100 km per hour (68 miles per hour).

At the last Olympics, Switzerland's Simon Ammann struck gold in both the normal and large hill events, but has done little to suggest he can retain his title.

He failed to make the podium at the 2003 and 2005 world championships and is languishing in 16th place in this year's World Cup standings.

The Swiss challenge at Pragelato, 80 kms (50 miles) from Turin, is more likely to come from Andreas Kuettel, fourth in the current World Cup.

China will make its Olympic ski jumping debut in Turin, while Japan's Masahiko Harada will make a national record fifth appearance in the Winter Olympics at the age of 37.

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