

**Watles, ITA** - After a well-earned holiday break following an action-packed December highlighted by the first-ever Cross Alps Tour, the Audi FIS Ski Cross World Cup gets back underway this weekend with back-to-back races in Watles, Italy.

December was one of the busiest months ever for the ski cross World Cup, with the compact Cross Alps Tour schedule packing six competitions at four resorts into just fourteen days as the men and ladies of ski cross battled to earn the title of Cross Alps Tour champion. At the end of the final Tour event in Innichen (ITA) it would be Marielle Thompson (CAN) and Jean Frederic Chapuis (FRA) standing atop the standings.

As the Tour stops were also World Cup events, with World Cup points up for grabs, Thompson and Chapuis both hold impressive leads over the rest of their respective World Cup field, with Thompson's 475 points putting her 151 ahead of Heidi Zacher's (GER) 324, and Chapuis holding a 77 point advantage over Filip Flisar (SLO), 359 points to 282.

However, while Zacher and Flisar both sit in second on the Audi FIS Ski Cross World Cup leaderboard, those two athletes roll into Watles as the hottest skiers on tour, after they both took back-to-back victories in Innichen to close out the Cross Alps Tour.

Meanwhile, the Swiss hold the third overall position on both the ladies' and men's sides, with top Swiss lady Fanny Smith continuing to build momentum in her comeback season after missing all of 2015/16 with a shoulder injury, and top Swiss man Alex Fiva maintaining a pace that looks like it could lead to his best overall finish since taking the SX crystal globe in 2012/13.

This is the second season the ski cross World Cup will visit Watles after the stop was introduced to the tour in 2015/16, and for the second straight season Watles has been able to step up and add an extra race to the program after snow conditions elsewhere lead to a cancellation. With inadequate snowpack in Megeve (FRA), organisers and officials were forced to scrap the competition originally scheduled there for January 21 - though that decision was made easier by strong cooperation from the Italian Ski Federation and the Watles organisers.

At last season's back-to-back races in Watles we saw a diverse selection of athletes earn podiums on the new track, with five different ladies and fully six different individuals on the men's side stepping up for awards - including a Chapuis-lead French sweep of the men's podium on day one.

However, three of last season's podium winners on the ladies' side are currently sidelined with injury, as Anna Holmlund (SWE), Alizee Baron (FRA), and Andrea Limbacher (AUT) are all out of action. While all six of last season's men's podium winners will be competing and looking for repeat performances from last season, it will be up to some of the lesser-known skiers on the ladies' side to step up in Watles and challenge the dominance Thompson and Zacher have exhibited of late.

Competition in Watles gets underway with two rounds of qualification on January 13, followed by the first competition on January 14 at 11:00CET, and the second competition the following day, also at 11:00CET.