

INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION

HEADQUARTERS ADDRESS: CHEMIN DE PRIMEROSE 2 - CH 1007 LAUSANNE - SWITZERLAND
TELEPHONE (+41) 21 612 66 66 TELEFAX (+41) 21 612 66 7 E-MAIL: info@isu.ch

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Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games **Speed Skating Preview**

The first medal competition at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games for ISU sports takes place today in the Speed skating Adler Arena. The large 400m ice rink which is situated in the Coastal Cluster has a capacity of 8000 and is the equivalent of three football fields laid end to end, with the overall area of the three tracks equivalent to three ice hockey rinks.

There are 179 competitors from 23 countries listed and with six Ladies' and six Men's Speed Skating Events at the Olympics, Speed Skating is one of the world's most medaled Winter Olympic sports, but the race to the podium is high-paced and a hundredth of a second can separate gold from silver.

Today will feature the 5000m, where Sven Kramer is the favorite for the gold. The defending Olympic champion seldom gets beaten. He will skate in the 10th pair today and will set the pace before his closest rivals take to the ice. Jorrit Bergsma (NED) is a strong contender for a medal. Jan Blokhuijsen (NED) is another favorite and the Netherlands are hoping for a clean sweep in the first speed skating event at Sochi. Before the three Dutchman enter the Adler Arena, Ivan Skobrev and Denis Yuskov (RUS) will try to impress the home crowd. Skobrev took the 5000m bronze at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games and will hope to give himself a special present on his 31st birthday on Saturday. Whatever happens in the first 12 races, tension will be guaranteed until the final pair, when Seung Hoon Lee (KOR) takes on Patrick Beckert (GER) as Lee won the 5000m silver medal four years ago in Vancouver.

On Sunday, the ladies will race the 3000m. Reigning Olympic champion Martina Sáblíková (CZE) is back to defend her title however she will face strong competition from the 2006 Olympic Champion Ireen Wüst (NED) who has had a strong season. The 2002 champion Claudia Pechstein (GER) is also a medal contender.

February 10th sees the 500m for men with the reigning Olympic champion Tae-Bum Mo (KOR) as one of the contenders, Joji Kato and Keiichiro Nagashima (JPN) are also strong. World Sprint champion Michel Mulder (NED) and his twin brother Ronald, as well as Jan Smeeckens make the Dutch strong contenders too. Home favorites are Denis Koval and Dmitriy Lobkov. Australian Daniel Greig, will aim to bring his country the first ever long track speed skating Olympic medal. To win the 500m, a skater needs to race the distance twice, once in the inner lane and once in the outer lane, and often the winner of the first race has a hard time in the second race.

On February 11th the ladies will skate the 500m and Sang-Hwa Lee (KOR) will defend her title and is the main favorite. Alas Jing Yu (CHN) the 2013 World Sprint champion announced she cannot skate due to a hip injury. Other likely candidates are Beixing Wang (CHN) and Jenny Wolf (GER), both were medalists in the previous Olympics, and home favorite Olga Fatkulina should also be watched, just like Heather Richardson (USA).

The men skate the 1000m on February 12th and all eyes will be on Shani Davis (USA) who is the 2006 and 2010 Olympic champion in this distance. Others to watch are World champion Denis Kuzin (KAZ), Alexej Yesin (RUS) and Dutchman Koen Verweij, as well as Davis' countryman Brian Hansen.

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In the ladies' 1000m, Heather Richardson (USA) is the main favorite, and competition comes from her team mate Brittany Bowe, as well as World Champion on this distance, Olga Fatkulina (RUS) and Hong Zhang (CHN). Christine Nesbitt (CAN) had a poor season but still believes she is on her way back up there. Dutch Ireen Wüst is not one to underestimate.

The 1500m will be skated next weekend on Saturday (men) and Sunday (ladies). On fast ice the sprinters can do well and keep the speed into the last lap, but also the skaters for the longer distance will come forward, with a possible slow start but a fast finish. Among the favorites in the Men are Denis Yuskov (RUS), Olympic Champion Mark Tuitert (NED), Koen Verweij (NED) and Shani Davis (USA). Also allround champion Sven Kramer plans to race this distance. On the ladies' day, Ireen Wüst will be hard to beat. From Russia, Yekaterina Shikhova could do it.

After a day's rest, the longest distance is skated. In the 10,000m for men Sven Kramer will be craving for a win after being disqualified in 2010 because of a faulty lane-change. Defending champion Seung-Hoon Lee (KOR) has his work cut out and will have tough competition from Kramer's countrymen Jorrit Bergsma and Bob de Jong (2006 Olympic champion).

In the Ladies 5000m Martina Sáblíková (CZE) defending Olympic Champion is likely to retain her title. The 2010 silver medalist Stephanie Beckert (GER) will be competing but has not been as strong this season and team mate Claudia Pechstein will be looking to medal in this distance a long with Ireen Wüst.

Finally the Ladies' and men's team pursuit races will be skated over two days on 21 and 22 February. The first day's program will include the quarterfinal for both ladies and men and the semifinal for men. The semifinals for ladies and all finals (medal races and classification races) will be staged on the second day.

For more information, full entry lists and results please see: www.sochi2014.com and www.isu.org

For further information please contact:

Selina Vanier, ISU Media Coordinator
Telephone: +7 938 454 2132
email: vanier@isu.ch