

Press release

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Korea versus Japan in ladies' 500m

It will be Korea versus Japan, Sang-Hwa Lee versus Nao Kodaira, in the ladies' 500m on Sunday. Lee is the two-fold Olympic champion defending her title on home soil, but Kodaira has reigned the shortest speed skating distance with an iron fist over the past two seasons, winning in each of her last 15 World Cup appearances.

Second nature

Earlier this week, Kodaira entered the ladies 1000m as a favorite too, after having skated a new world record in Salt Lake City last December, but the 31-year-old had to settle for silver behind Jorien ter Mors (NED). The Dutch skater was able to pull through in the final lap, whereas the pure sprinter from Japan just barely held on to her pace. "I think I gave it a 100%. I never gave up to really reach the goal. My skating was just not gold medal, that's it. I still have a chance in the 500m," she said.

In the 500m the reigning world champion won't be bothered by an agonizing final lap, it's just launching the rocket over the first 100m straight and hammering out a single full lap in an all-out explosion of power. It's Kodaira's second nature.

The 500m is Lee's second nature too. The defending champion, who celebrates her 29th birthday next Sunday, could follow the footsteps of Bonnie Blair (USA), winning a third consecutive Olympic 500m title. The American took gold in 1988, 1992 and 1994. She would be the first lady to win the Olympic 500m on home ice.

Slowly catching up

Lee won the 2012, 2013 and 2016 world title, but she suffered from a chronic knee injury last season and had to settle for silver at the 2017 World Championships at the Gangneung Olympic Oval. Kodaira beat her in a track record time of 37.13, which is 0.15 faster than Lee's Olympic record from Sochi 2014. Lee's 2013 high altitude Salt Lake City world record of 36.36 is not in sight at sea-level Gangneung.

Lee grabbed five silver medals behind Kodaira in this season's World Cup, but she set her sights on one race only. "I don't worry," she said after at the Stavanger World Cup in November. "We have so many World Cups. It's just practice, and the Olympic Games are still far away." Lee is confident, that she can beat Kodaira: "Last year I couldn't catch her because I was injured, but now it feels different. I don't need to do anything special, just concentrate on my own race. She's fast, but I'm slowly catching up."

One-off

The 500m used to be decided over two races, in which each skater had to start both in the inner lane

and the outer lane once. At Pyeongchang 2018 this is brought back to one race only. Kodaira starts in the fourteenth pair and drew the inner lane versus Czech European sprint champion Karolina Erbanova. Lee drew the outer lane in the 15th and penultimate pair versus Kodaira's compatriot Arisa Go.

Vanessa Herzog (AUT) starts in the inner lane of the final pair against Angelina Golikova (OAR). The Austrian, who won her first World Cup gold in Erfurt in January, could become the second female speed skater from Austria to finish on an Olympic podium, after Emese Hunyady who took bronze (3000m) in 1992, and gold (1500m) and silver (3000m) in 1994.

Heather Bergsma (USA) drew the outer lane versus Min Sun Kim (KOR) in the ninth pairing. The American won the ladies' 500m world title in 2015, while Brittany Bowe (USA) finished second. Bergsma and Bowe have claimed nine and seven medals respectively in all events at the ISU World Single Distances Championships, but have yet to win a medal at the Olympic Winter Games. Bowe starts from the outer lane and will face Japan's Erina Kamiya in the 11th pairing.

Men's Team Pursuit quarter finals

Prior to the ladies' 500m competition on Sunday, the Men will skate their quarter final races in the Team Pursuit. The semis and the finals will be held on Wednesday. The four fastest teams from the quarters will advance to the semifinals. The two fastest losers will race in final C for fifth and sixth places, and the two slowest losers will race in final D for seventh and eighth places. The winners of the semifinals will race in the gold-medal race and the losers of the semifinals in the bronze-medal race.