

January 22, 2021

Heerenveen, Netherlands

Canada's ladies surprise and Dutch young guns come of age in Heerenveen Team Pursuits

Canada's ladies started their international speed skating season with a big surprise in Heerenveen on Friday. [Ivanie Blondin](#), [Valérie Maltais](#) and [Isabelle Weidemann](#) won their Team Pursuit, skating the second fastest time ever at Thialf Stadium in 2 minutes and 56.71 seconds. In the men's competition the Netherlands started their 2020/2021 World Cup campaign with gold in the Team Pursuit as veteran captain [Sven Kramer](#) led youngsters [Chris Huizinga](#) and Beau Snellink past Olympic champions Norway by more than a second.

Canada ladies spring a surprise

In the ladies' Team Pursuit, Netherlands had to settle for silver on home ice in 2:57.04, while Norway followed more than two seconds later in third.

"We're all very surprised for sure," Canada's Weidemann said with a big smile after her team's immaculate race. The North Americans had a lot of adversities to overcome in their run-up to the shortened 2020-2021 season. Like so many others around the globe, they were prevented from training together by Covid-19 measures in the summer and they were prevented from getting back to the ice as quickly as they had wished by mechanical troubles at the Calgary Olympic Oval.

"Obviously we haven't had a lot of time on the ice," Weidemann said. "We did some training camps at different places, also on natural ice in Red Deer. It was freezing cold, but we were looking at every opportunity we had to put on our skates and get on the ice. But really, the most training we've done is the past week-and-a-half right here."

Weidemann's teammate Blondin agreed, after she also smoothly qualified for Saturday's Mass Start final, coming second in the first semi-final heat on Friday. "I wasn't expecting what happened today," said Blondin. "It's a big relief for all of us. We hadn't raced together yet. We weren't allowed to train together in the summer and due to the malfunction in Calgary we had no ice."

After much hesitation Blondin decided to travel to Hungary in December to join husband and speed skater [Konrad Nagy](#) (HUN) to train in Europe. "We flew over on December 14 with our dog, because we don't know how long we're going to be in Europe. I trained with the Hungarian short-track team and also on the long-track rink at Inzell for a week-and-a-half."

For Blondin, the Team Pursuit is this season's main focus. "I'm not skating the 3000m and the 1500m at the World Cup," she said. "I told the team that the Team Pursuit is my number one and the Mass Start number two. I just don't feel ready for the other distances. I will skate a 1000m on Sunday, just to get the feeling of an individual race."

[Ireen Wüst](#) was satisfied to take silver behind the Canadian surprise. "I think we did well," the Dutch anchor said. "It was the first time we skated in this particular line-up."

Wüst was joined by [Carlijn Achtereekte](#) and [Melissa Wijfje](#). “It’s a pity we didn’t win, I think we could have,” she said. “We were pretty close, we set a good time, which says a lot about [the ice conditions in] Thialf and about ourselves.”

Japan has been almost unbeatable over the past few years in the ladies team pursuit, but Wüst thinks that the Dutch ladies are able to get to at least a similar level.

“Japan is not here, so we don’t know what they would have done, but we look at our own route. Competition is the best training and the World Cup races are good opportunities to try different things, it’s not the Olympics. Next week I’ll skate with Antoinette [\[de Jong\]](#) and [Irene Schouten](#). I really like the Team Pursuit and if we put in a little more effort, I think we could win Olympic gold.”

Kramer leads Dutch youngsters to victory

The Netherlands men kicked off the World Cup 2020/2021 series with a gold medal in the Team Pursuit in Heerenveen on Friday. Veteran captain Sven Kramer led youngsters Chris Huizinga and Beau Snellink past Olympic champions Norway by more than a second, with Canada only 0.08 seconds behind in third. In the semi-finals of the Mass Start, Austrian prodigy [Gabriel Odor](#) qualified for the Saturday final.

After Poland got DNF behind their names because [Artur Janicki](#) fell in the final lap of the second Team Pursuit pairing versus Belarus, Norway faced New Zealand in the third pairing. The Antipodeans also got a DNF because [Kierryn Hughes](#) crashed out of the race, but the Norwegians were unruffled. The experienced [Sverre Lunde Pedersen](#), who anchored his country to Team Pursuit gold at the 2018 Olympics, guided youngsters [Peder Kongshaug](#) and [Allan Dahl Johansson](#) to a time of 3 minutes and 41.62 seconds.

Getting ready for the next pairing versus Italy, [Sven Kramer](#) took a look at the scoreboard. “The Norwegians were pretty fast today,” he said. “We have also won World Cups in 3:42 or 3:43.” With Kramer himself putting in a couple of strong laps drafting up front, the Dutch finished in 3:40.33 to pip Norway to second.

“A very good result in the first World Cup,” Kramer said. “It was the first time we skated in this line-up.” Dutch national coach Jan Coopmans has a wealth of good skaters to choose from for his line-up and he has put together a team of five to pick three for every race. [Marcel Bosker](#) and [Patrick Roest](#) did not skate this time. “The more depth we’ve got the higher we can peak,” Kramer said. “Marcel and Patrick got rest because they skated a tough European Championships last week. We prepared well with the whole team and two weeks ago we already skated a training race in today’s line-up.”

Canada had a far from ideal preparation for the current, shortened World Cup season. Covid-19 restrictions and a malfunctioning Calgary Olympic Oval forced the team to train on natural ice in Red Deer. Despite the difficulties running up to the Heerenveen Hub, the team came out well. Without world 10,000m champion [Graeme Fish](#), who decided not to travel to the Netherlands, [Ted-Jan Bloemen](#), [Jordan Belchos](#) and 20-year-old newbie [Connor Howe](#) finished in 3:41.71 in the final pairing to take bronze.

“A good race,” Olympic 10,000m champion Bloemen said. “We worked together very well, carried each other to the podium really. This was Connor’s first ever Team Pursuit and to skate like he did...for a 1500m specialist to bring the lap-times down halfway and hanging in there towards the end. That’s something we can build upon for the future.”

Before his first international race of the season, Bloemen had wondered what form he was in, but he was content afterwards. "It's good to be on the podium after only a week and a half on this ice, but we still have to wait and see what this means in individual distances," he said.

"Our preparations have not been ideal. We've trained outdoors a lot, and indoor was mostly short track. It's nice, but you don't really get that speed-skating feeling. I really love the technique, gliding and using the least possible energy to go fast. That's not possible on natural ice. This ice, it feels like coming home."

Young gun among the usual Mass Start suspects

In the men's Mass Start semi-finals the usual suspects qualified easily for Saturday's final, but Austrian Gabriel Odor smoothly joined them.

The 20-year-old first-year senior, who won the junior Mass Start world title in 2019 and took silver at the junior World Championships yesterday, was happy but not surprised. "Last year I already came tenth when I skated my first Mass Start in the senior World Cup, so this is my second time," he said.

"It's different and the gap between the juniors and the seniors is pretty big. In the juniors the Mass Start only comprises of ten laps and at senior level it's 16. And there's these very strong guys like [Jorrit Bergsma](#) (NED) and [Bart Swings](#) (BEL). They make the pace and sometimes it's really hard to follow them."

Odor did not let his admiration interfere with his ambitions, however, and took on the challenge, battling Bergsma in the second intermediate sprint. "It was really close," he said. "I thought he was a little more ahead and I stopped already, but then I saw that it was still really close."

Odor missed the three points at this sprint, but managed to collect points at the next intermediate sprint to qualify for the final anyway. He is ambitious, but does not expect to win yet: "There's always a chance for a good result in the Mass Start, but I don't put any pressure on myself."

Where to Watch

Viewers will be able to watch the ISU Speed Skating competitions that will take place within the hub either via their national broadcaster / channel and for countries where there are no broadcasters, the ISU will offer a live stream on the [Skating ISU YouTube Channel](#).

All the information is available in the [Where to Watch](#) which will be updated after each competition. The individual announcements and entry lists will be published under the respective events as soon as they are available. For further information regarding the ISU Speed Skating Hub please visit: <https://www.isu.org/heerenveen2021>.

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