Schulting continues rich European form as Russia's Ivliev upsets with 500m gold

The Netherlands' Suzanne Schulting picked up where she left off at last year's ISU European Short Track Speed Skating Championships by claiming two golds on the first day of finals at the 2021 edition of the event. Russia's Konstantin Ivliev took the European Men's 500m crown, winning his first individual medal at a senior Championships and his first-ever international gold.

A lot has changed in the world over the past year but on the first day of finals at the ISU European Short Track Speed Skating Championships in Gdańsk, Suzanne Schulting showed her dominance in the sport remains intact.

Twelve months after the Dutch Olympic champion won a clean sweep of gold medals at the 2020 European Championships in Debrecen, Hungary, she defended her 1500m and 500m titles in Poland.

"It's absolutely great to be back, it's absolutely great to be racing again and it's such a great feeling to see all of the other competitors," the 23-year-old said.

"I really love Short Track Speed Skating and I'm super happy with my two gold medals today."

It was Schulting's first international Short Track appearance since the World Cup stop in Dordrecht, Netherlands, in February 2020 but she believes the break has only made her stronger.

"I did some long track competitions this pre-winter and did some competitions before the Europeans, which went quite well. I've been racing a lot, maybe that is why I'm as good as I am right now," she said.

"I have more speed than last year and I think you can see it in my times on 500m that I'm able to skate faster and that helps me through the whole race. I'm more stable and I think you can see it in my 1500m and also in my 1000m. When I jump away, I set my speed really high and I think that's perfect. I feel stronger than ever."

In the Championships' first final, Schulting won the 1500m title comfortably, 0.331 seconds ahead of silver medalist Anna Seidel – the German's best result at any senior Championships, having claimed European bronze over this distance last year. Russia's Sofia Prosvirnova took bronze this time.

In the 500m final, Schulting fought it out with home hope Natalia Maliszewska and won by 0.124s.

"I was nervous," Schulting said. "I think it was a quite important day today. It was two really important distances, especially the 500m where everything is always so close and you have to race really well to get the golds, especially with Natalia."

The two skaters hugged on the ice after the final.

"I think that Natalia is such a great skater and also such a nice person. I really love to race against her," Schulting said. "I really want to win but if Natalia would've won I would've also been happy for her, to win in her home country."

Maliszewska, who won the European 500m title on Schulting's home ice in Dordrecht, Netherlands two years ago, celebrated her silver like a victory.

"This silver medal is a big win and I'm totally amazed and happy," the 25-year-old said.

"Even though we didn't have that many people here I have felt so much support from my friends and family. I think that my dad had a heart attack because he was really happy that we are skating in Poland. Everything that we did here is amazing."

The men's 1500m final became a Russian affair. Semen Elistratov took his third Championship title in the event, having won gold at both the Moscow 2015 World Championships and the 2017 European Championships in Torino. His teammate Denis Ayrapetyan took silver, ahead of the Netherlands' Sjinkie Knegt, who picked up the bronze after a push from fifth position in the closing four laps.

Knegt's medal was his first in an individual event since his return to the sport after a two-year absence caused by injury and the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's great to come back like this, on a big international level. I'm very happy with the bronze medal," the 31-year-old said.

"I tried to believe in myself, that I still could do it, and I think that kept up the positive motivation to keep training every day. I'm happy it paid off today. It has to get better and I know it can be better but for now a bronze medal was good. Hopefully I can build on this to the next competition."

The 2019 European 1500m Champion – and last year's overall No.2 – Hungary's Sandor Shaolin Liu, started the final in the front but fell further back in the scrum and never managed to get a last push in and had to settle for fifth place. His brother, Shaoang Liu, who took 1500m silver in 2019 and won the gold on home ice in 2020, got a penalty in his quarterfinal and missed the chance to defend his title. The brothers were later both eliminated in their 500m semifinal, failing to repeat their first and second place in the 2020 event.

In Saturday's biggest upset, Russia's Konstantin Ivliev took the European 500m crown, winning his first individual medal at a senior Championships and his first-ever international gold.

The 20-year-old's previous individual senior career-best was a 500m 17th place in a World Cup competition in Calgary, Canada in 2018.

"I feel so happy," Ivliev said. "I want to say thank you to my coach and to my parents. After the competition I will celebrate with my parents at home."

After skating the first lap in 6.83s, Ivliev took a lead which he kept until the finish line.

"I had a fast start and then I was fast in the corners so that the opponents couldn't attack me," he said, admitting that there had been some nerves before the final.

"After the semifinals, my head was too full of thoughts about medals. I think it is bad to think about the medals before the race."

The 500m final was also a milestone race for Italian silver medalist Pietro Sighel. The 21-year-old won his first-ever senior Short Track medal. The Netherlands' Itzhak de Laat claimed bronze.

"It shows to me that I'm still good," de Laat said. "I've been training well and I'm at least as good as I was last year. It's only bronze but it's a good start for the season."

On the final day of action at Gdansk's Hala Olivia arena, Europe's best Short Track speed skaters will fight for medals in the 1000m, 3000m Superfinal as well as the 3000m and 5000m Relays.

Where to Watch
Viewers will be able to watch the ISU European Short Track Speed Skating Championships 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. For further information regarding the ISU European Short Track Speed Skating Championships, including the announcement and entry list please visit the dedicated ISU Event Page.

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