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## **Schouten crowns herself Queen of the Oval as Swings takes historic gold for Belgium**

Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games

[Irene Schouten](#) (NED) crowned herself queen of the National Speed Skating Oval in the final race of the exhilarating Olympic Speed Skating tournament in Beijing. After winning two gold and a bronze medal already, she finished with another gold in the Mass Start on Saturday. In the Men's competition [Bart Swings](#) (BEL) took a historic first ever Olympic Speed Skating title for Belgium and the first Belgian gold at the Winter Olympics since 1948.

### **Every medal has a story**

"This is something I didn't dare to dream about," Schouten said. She reflected on her three titles, even forgetting to mention her bronze medal in the Team Pursuit: "Every medal has a story. The 3000m, there was a lot of pressure (on the opening day of the Games), in the 5000m I just had a very good race, and this Mass Start is very special because I've been skating this event for years now and we're one of the few teams (her commercial Team) who actually trains for this event."

The story of Schouten's Beijing 2022 Olympic Mass Start title already started in PyeongChang 2018, when she was left in frustration with a bronze behind [Takagi Nana](#) (JPN) and [Kim Bo-Reum](#) (KOR). This time she did not have to watch out for Takagi, because the title defender stranded in the semifinals. After having crashed in the Team Pursuit Final and wasting a gold medal foretold on Tuesday already, she crashed at the exact same spot, leading the pack in the final corner of her semifinal race in the Mass Start. Kim did qualify for the Final, but was not able to fight for the medals when the Final ended up in a bunch sprint.

### **Four years ago**

Schouten (NED) said she started her sprint at the very same spot she did four years ago, making pace heading into the final lap already. "I went early, and I thought, sh\*t, that's also what I did four years ago. But I have to make pace early in the sprint. I'm not the type of sprinter who's able to get up to full speed in 50m. I need more time to get to my top speed and then I can hold on for it pretty long. [Ivanie Blondin](#) (CAN) surged past me, but I had faith. (I thought): just enter the corner well, and my final straight is always good. Coming out of that corner, I sensed that I had more speed and that gave me such a tremendous feeling."

Schouten pipped Blondin to the line with [Francesca Lollobrigida](#) (ITA) taking the bronze. Blondin, who already collected a Team Pursuit gold on Tuesday, paid respect to the Champion: "She has been so strong these past two weeks, it is an honor to be on the podium with her (...) Me, Lollo and Irene have shared the podium so many times these past eight years, so it's nice, the three of us. I had an interview a couple of days ago and they asked who I'd like to be on the podium with, and I said Lollo and Schouten. It's been such a long battle between us."

### **Lollobrigida's pinnacle**

After already taking 3000m silver, Lollobrigida also took her second medal of the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games, which she labelled as the pinnacle of her sporting career. And her Mass Start story rooted in PyeongChang 2018 disappointment, having ended up fourth at the 2018 Olympic Games. "This is a competition (Mass Start) that I consider the start of my change. After the disappointment in Korea (Pyeongchang 2018 Olympic Winter Games) I wanted to quit (the sport) but then I decided to set new goals, and here I've achieved them (...). I don't know if there is an adjective to describe my experience here. It was unique, amazing, but also strongly desired and sought after. We have worked hard, with my team, my staff, my teammates and the federation who has been supporting me a lot. Two years ago with the Covid situation it was not easy."

### **Deserved win**

Before the final sprint a lot happened in the Women's race, with Canada's [Valérie Maltais](#), Belarusian [Marina Zueva](#) and [Magdalena Czuszczonek](#) (POL) setting up escape groups. Schouten's teammate [Marijke Groenewoud](#) (NED) countered some attacks in the beginning, but she crashed with five laps to go. "The Chinese Skaters just came between me and I just slipped away when they pushed me. It was not something I could have prevented from happening," Groenewoud said. Without the help of her teammate, Schouten managed to keep it together in the final sprint. "When Marijke crashed the plan fell apart because she would lead out the sprint for me," Schouten explained. "Sometimes you see a lucky one winning the Mass Start. This time – It may sound a bit conceited – but I think that I deserved that win, just like in the Men's race Bart Swings really deserved that win."

### **All due respect to Swings**

Whereas Schouten's teammate crashed in the Final, Swings (BEL) did not have a teammate at all in the Olympic Mass Start competition. The 2018 silver medalist faced an uphill battle against the Japanese and Dutch two-men outfits - [Riku Tsuchiya](#), [Seitaro Ichinohe](#) (JPN) and [Sven Kramer](#), [Jorrit Bergsma](#) (NED) – who tried to attack, with Austrian youngster [Gabriel Odor](#) also trying to escape the pack. None of the attackers managed to get very far. "We did not stand a real chance here", Kramer said. "Swings countered everything. All due respect to the winner."

### **Target on the back**

Swings (BEL) had felt the target on his back throughout the race. All the others looked at him whenever anyone tried to escape. "During the race I thought: is it really all up to me then? (countering all the attacks)." Before the race, Swings had contemplated different tactics: "Maybe I could get away with the Dutch, but there were four sprinters constantly watching my back ([Joey Mantia](#), USA, [Lee Seung-Hoon](#), [Chung Jae-Won](#), KOR, and [Livio Wenger](#), SUI). I tried to lead them go up front too, but it was all up to me, and then, to finally win that sprint... It's just a dream coming true."

### **Nemesis Lee Seung-Hoon**

In the final sprint, Swings (BEL) fought his 2018 nemesis Lee Seung-Hoon (KOR), who had edged him out for the gold four years ago in PyeongChang. "I went at 500m (from the finish line) and I knew I couldn't lose

pace after that. When Lee surged past me, I startled, but it turned out well for me. I could sit in his back, make pace and protect my position.” Coming into the final lap Swings took advantage of his specially prepared Mass Start Skates with more bend in the blades, to pass Lee on the inside in the corner. “(The new skates) definitely helped, it’s was my special trick today. I’ve been practicing on these skates every day in the past week.”

### **Korean delight**

Chung (KOR) and Lee (KOR) eventually took silver and bronze behind Swings’s back. “We anticipated that there will be many athletes who try to skate to the far front, just like in World Cups,” Chung explained. “And we thought Bart Swings will take the lead in the final lap, and he did. We took advantage of that, following him, just like we planned.” The two Korean Skaters became the youngest and oldest medalists in this event, as Chung was 20 years, 243 days old, while Lee was 33 years, 350 days old. “I won it together with Lee Seung Hoon, which makes it all the more meaningful and precious,” Chung said.

Lee already collected the 10,000m gold and 5000m silver in Vancouver 2010, the Team Pursuit silver in Sochi 2014 and the Mass Start gold and Team Pursuit silver in PyeongChang 2018. “This is so glorious,” he said. “This is my first bronze medal in the Olympic Games. I am so satisfied. I used more energy than I thought in the semifinals. If I hadn’t done that, I might have a chance to get gold. It’s a pity but getting a medal is more than enough for me. I can’t ask for more (laughs).”

### **Kramer’s swan song**

After having collected nine medals (4 gold, 2 silver, 3 bronze) in the previous four Games, Kramer concluded his final Olympic journey in Beijing empty-handed, coming 16<sup>th</sup> in the Mass Start. “To be honest, I’m relieved. It’s okay. It’s been a long journey, and I’m super proud of what I achieved. All good things come to an end.”

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