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Hamar, Norway

Leerdam and Dubreuil hold narrow leads after first day of Sprint Championships

Jutta Leerdam and Femke Kok set up an exciting battle for the title on the first day of the ISU World Sprint Championships in Hamar on Thursday. After Kok had won the 500m and Leerdam the 1000m, the youngsters from the Netherlands were only 0.07 points apart, with Leerdam on top.

In the men's competition Laurent Dubreuil made his mark in the 500m and Thomas Krol hit back in the 1000m. With a solid third place, Dubreuil managed to limit the damage in the 1000m and the Canadian heads into the second day as leader in the ranking. Krol is second and Kai Verbij third.

Kok wins 500m with superb full lap

[Femke Kok](#) (NED) started the tournament by winning the 500m in 37.78 seconds. All other skaters in the top five of the first distance had a faster opener but none got anywhere near Kok's staggering full lap of 27.13s.

"It was far from flawless," Kok said. "I had a couple of big mishits at the start of my 500m. It was a bad opener but in the end it was enough to win. I was really happy with my full lap and that gave me a lot of confidence for the 1000m."

[Vanessa Herzog](#) (AUT) finished second in the 500m. With 10.57, the 2019 European Sprint Champion opened 0.06s faster than Kok but her full lap was 0.32s slower. Poland's [Kaja Ziomek](#) and [Andzelika Wójcik](#) had superfast openers in 10.38s and 10.35s but ended up tied for third in 37.94s.

[Jutta Leerdam](#) (NED) was not able to match the explosive power of the 500m specialists. "My 500m felt completely off," she said. "When I finished I looked at my coach and I thought, I did not get any stroke right." Leerdam finished in 38.11 trailing Kok by 0.32 seconds. "Three tenths is a lot," she said. "But considering how (bad) I skated, it's not too bad after all."

Leerdam takes control in 1000m

Leerdam was able to make amends in the 1000m, winning in one minute, 14.88 seconds. "I had to switch focus quickly and I managed," she explained. "I did not dare take too many risks because I lacked the feeling in the 500m, so I took more time, skated more in control and often I skate faster because of that."

Leerdam was the only woman to skate faster than 1:15 in the 1000m. Kok came second in 1:15.68 and [Kimi Goetz](#) (USA) took third place in 1:15.89. Kok had not skated a 1000m since claiming silver at the European Single Distance Championships in January.

She failed to qualify for the event at the Olympics, where she solely focused on the 500m. "I had to get used to it again (the 1000m)," she said. "The way I skated my full lap in the 500m had given me some confidence heading into the 1000m. I'm happy with my race but I hope to go a little faster tomorrow."

Small gap

Despite conceding 0.80s in the second distance, Kok only trails Leerdam by 0.07 points halfway through the tournament. The difference equals 0.07s in the 500m and that gave Kok a confidence boost heading into the second day. "It's close and Jutta cannot afford to make any mistakes. It's sprint, so it's always tight. I think I can gain a lot in the 500m."

Leerdam was also confident heading into the second day. "(The gap is small) but last year at the European Sprint Championships I was second after the first day and I had to make up everything on the second day. The final distance (1000m) on the second day is my favourite distance and it's not for most sprinters, so when I'm still in a good position after three distances, I can skate my 1000m in control again."

Two-horse race

Herzog came fourth in the 1000m and sits third in the ranking. Kok thinks that Herzog will probably not be able to fight for the title. "I think it's between us two (her and Leerdam)," she said. "But we cannot afford to make any mistakes. We have to skate two more races and we'll see where that leaves us at the end of tomorrow."

Dubreuil strikes in 500m

[Laurent Dubreuil](#) (CAN) hit hard in the first race of the men's sprint tournament. After his disappointing fourth place in the shortest distance at the Olympic Games in Beijing, the Canadian showed why he's on top of the World Cup ranking, winning in 34.58 seconds. Dubreuil could even afford a false start and little mistake in the final corner, which he managed to correct with a short-track reflex, keeping balance with left hand on the ice.

[Tatsuya Shinhama](#) (JPN) had the fastest opener of the field in 9.56s but the title defender from Japan was a little slower in the full lap than Dubreuil, coming in second in 34.71s. Behind Shinhama, three more skaters managed to set sub-35s times in the 500m. [Piotr Michalski](#) (POL) came third in 34.79s, Verbij fourth in 34.83s and [Wataru Morishige](#) (JPN) fifth in 34.89s.

Dubreuil did not want to compare his Olympic 500m race with the World Sprint Championships in Hamar, saying: "[Gao Tingyu](#) (CHN) and [Cha Min Kyu](#) (KOR) were not here today and Wataru Morishige got sick this week. The three guys who beat me at the Olympics were not here or sick, so the level is a bit lower. But that's normal because to skate here you have to be good at both (500m and 1000m)."

Descending from the Olympic high

Apart from being one of the best 500m skaters in the field, Dubreuil also knows how to skate a superfast 1000m, which he proved with a silver medal in Beijing.

It had taken him a couple of days to get back into gear for the World Championships and he said: "It's tough to go from the high of the Olympics and there's a down after. Training was actually very bad last week. No energy and no drive or desire to go training. I took a couple of days for myself in Oslo, just visiting. It was nice to think about something other than skating and unwind a bit. And after that, it's the World Sprint Championships, if you can't motivate yourself for that, you've got a problem. In any other season it would be my main goal. I would rather win this than a world singles (title)."

Krol's debut

[Thomas Krol](#) had a similar feeling winding down after the Olympic Games, where the Dutchman celebrated a 1000m gold and a 1500m silver medal. "I even thought, let the season be over now, but this is my first World Sprint Championships and that's just super cool. When I got on the ice today, I just wanted to perform."

And that's exactly what Krol did. With a time of one minute, 8.16 seconds, the Olympic Champion broke Shinhama's 2020 track record by 0.12s.

His pair mate and Olympic bronze medalist [Håvard Lorentzen](#) (NOR) finished more than half a second later in 1:08.82. With Dubreuil third in 1:08.85, the same three men stepped up to the 1000m podium as in Beijing, with Lorentzen and Dubreuil trading places.

New boots for Verbij

[Kai Verbij](#) (NED) took fourth place, just like he had done in the 500m earlier in the afternoon, and climbed to third place in the ranking. The 2017 World Sprint Champion skated on new boots. "My body still has to adapt," he said. "Being third in the ranking is not too bad. You would expect Laurent (Dubreuil) to increase the gap (in the 500m), but you never know. I might have a better day and he could be worse tomorrow."

Putting the pressure on

Krol is 0.18 behind Dubreuil in the ranking and Verbij 0.30. "He deserves to be on top," Krol said. "He's so strong in both distances and my 500m is just a bit too mediocre (to be competitive in a sprint competition)." The Dutchman did not want to bow his head after the first day already, however, saying: "Dubreuil will probably increase the gap in the 500m. I hope to be able to control the damage, and for him as a pure sprinter, the final day may be tougher than for me."

Dubreuil was happy about his position. "Obviously I would have wanted to be a bit more ahead but to be first after the first day with a couple of tenths to spare, that's good. It's up to me in the 500m tomorrow to widen the gap, and put the pressure on him (Krol)."

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