

INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION

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ISU European Speed Skating Championships– Minsk (BLR) Preview

For the first time the ISU European Speed Skating Championships will be held in the Republic of Belarus. This year's tournament will be held in Minsk, Belarus' capital and largest city, on 9-10 January, 2016. It could be the last time that the European Championships consist of the big combination (Men) and the small combination (Ladies). In, 2017 the event will see the removal of the 10,000 m (Men) and the 5000m (Ladies) which will be replaced by the 1000m.

Seven-time-champion Sven Kramer (NED) is favorite to win the Men's tournament, whilst Ireen Wüst (NED) and Martina Sáblíková (CZE) are expected to fight a tough battle for the Ladies' gold.

Competition format

Unlike the World Cup, in which skaters race for single distance titles, at the European Championships performances in four distances add up to the final ranking. Times are calculated based on the 500m, for example the 1500m time will be divided by 3. In Minsk there will be a traditional two-day-competition, starting on Saturday with the Men's and Ladies' 500m followed by the 5000m for Men and the 3000m for Ladies. On Sunday racing resumes with the 1500m, and the 8 best ranked skaters after 3 distances qualify for the final distance: the 5000m for Ladies and the 10,000m for Men.

Kramer the man to beat

Sven Kramer will attempt to win a record extending eighth European Championship title, having surpassed the mark of six by countryman Rintje Ritsma (NED) in Chelyabinsk, Russia, last year. Kramer has won these Championships in each of his last seven participations. When he was absent in 2011 and 2014 Ivan Skobrev (RUS) and Jan Blokhuijsen (NED) won the title.

Kramer has recorded eight podium finishes at the European Championships (Gold 7 - Silver 1) and is tied with Clas Thunberg (FIN) in second place on the multi-medalist table. Thunberg collected his medals between 1922 and 1932. Only Ritsma (1994-2003) has earned more medals, with a total of ten (Gold 6 – Silver 2- Bronze 2). Kramer has also won 17 individual distances at the European Championships, which has him tied with Clas Thunberg for the tournament record.

Apart from fellow Dutchman Jan Blokhuijsen, who returns after not defending his title last year, Norway's Sverre Lunde Pedersen is one of Kramer's main rivals for this year's European title. He could become the first Norwegian skater to win these Championships since Johann Olav Koss (NOR) 1991. Pedersen participated five times and he has finished no higher than fourth and no lower than seventh in this competition.

Another big contender is Bart Swings (BEL). While the Dutchmen were competing in their national Single Distance Championships between Christmas and New Year's Eve, the Belgian quietly prepared at a training camp in Portugal. Swings aims to become the second skater from Belgium, after Dutch-born Bart Veldkamp (BEL) who won silver in 2001, to claim a medal at the European Championships.

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Denis Yuskov hopes to follow Ivan Skobrev's 2011 example to take the title to Russia again. He took the bronze medal last year and he showed good form with two 1500m World Cup victories this season. Yuskov's allround aspirations are based on his speed in the 500m and 1500m, whereas Kramer relies on his endurance racing.

Last year's silver medal winner Koen Verweij (NED) will be absent in Minsk. The Dutchman failed to qualify for the first four World Cups this season and decided not to race in any further major competitions this season in order to come back strongly next year.

Home country Belarus will have one participant in the Men's tournament: Vitaly Mikhailov. He will aim to improve the best previous performance by a skater from Belarus at the European Championships, a 15th place by Vitali Novichenko in 1997.

Sáblíková has to fight again

After her 3000m World Cup win in Heerenveen last December Martina Sáblíková admitted that she had missed the competition of Ireen Wüst. Her Dutch rival had failed to qualify for the first four World Cups due to a pre-season accident which led to a concussion. Sáblíková said: "I've been on the top for ten years now and Ireen was always there as my main rival. I miss the fights, but Ireen will be back."

In Minsk Wüst returns to defend her European title. Both Wüst and Sáblíková can equal Anni Friesinger-Postma (GER) and Andrea Ehrig-Schöne (GDR) on five European Championship overall titles, which still leaves them far behind record holder Gunda Niemann-Stirnemann (GER), who won a total of eight titles.

Wüst won the title in 2008 and in the last three years. She can join Ehrig-Schöne (1985-1988), Niemann-Stirnemann (1989-1992) and Friesinger-Postma (2002-2005) as the only women to have won the European Championships four editions in a row.

Martina Sáblíková won the overall title in 2007 and from 2010 to 2012. She finished on the overall podium every year since her first victory in 2007 bar one, as she finished fourth in 2013. The Czech lady's allround strength is mainly based on her endurance capacities, whereas Wüst relies on her middle distance power with a strong 1500m and 3000m. Whenever Sáblíková had to contest a 5000m at the European Championships, she won it (10 victories in total), but she did not qualify for the 5000m in 2003 and 2004.

Since 1999 only German (Gold 8 - Silver 9 - Bronze 2), Dutch (Gold 5 - Silver 7 - Bronze 12) and Czech (Gold 4 - Silver 1 - Bronze 3) Speed Skaters have finished on the overall podium at the European Championships. Svetlana Bazhanova (RUS) was the last skater from another country to finish on the overall podium, claiming a bronze medal in 1998. The last winner from another country was Emese Hunyady (AUT) in 1993. Olga Graf (RUS), who finished fourth last year, hopes to follow the footsteps of compatriot Bazhanova.

Marina Zueva (BLR) and Tatyana Mikhailova (BLR) will defend the home nation's honor. In 2015 Zueva finished in 12th place, the best ever result by a Belarusian at the European Championships.

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A noteworthy absence is that of 43-year-old Claudia Pechstein (GER). The three time European Champion (2009, 2006 and 1998) wants to focus on the long distances at the World Single Distance Championships in Kolomna (RUS) on February 11-14.

Additional information

[ISU Speed Skating Media Guide](#)

Results: <http://www.isureresults.eu/>

Live Stream on [ISU Skating Channel](#) NB: geoblocking may be required in certain territories

Twitter: [@ISU_Speed](#)

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