

INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION

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ISU World Sprint Speed Skating Championships – Seoul (KOR) Preview

The 47th World Sprint Championships in Seoul give the world's best sprinters a taste of Korea two years before the 2018 PyeongChang Olympic Winter Games. Seoul hosts the World Sprint Championships for the second time in history after Jeremy Wotherspoon (CAN) and Monique Garbrecht-Enfeldt (GER) took the titles there in 2000.

The United States lead the all-time medal table of the World Sprint Championships with 20 gold medals, ahead of Russia (combined with the Soviet Union) with 15 and Canada with 10. Korea is seventh on the list with a total of seven titles.

With defending champions Pavel Kulizhnikov (RUS) and Brittany Bowe (USA) Russia and the United States have an excellent chance to extend their lead in the medal table, but it's not going to be an easy ride.

Competition format

The Championships are held over a two-day period, with the skaters racing one 500m and one 1000m each day. The times on those distances are then converted to points using the same log system and the skaters are ranked according to the least amount of points. Entry quotas are determined partly by results from the World Sprint Championships 2015 and partly by results achieved during the ISU World Cup Competition to be held in Stavanger (NOR) on January 29-31, 2016.

Bowe faces US, Dutch and Chinese challenges

Bowe can become the first female skater to win successive World Sprint Championships since Garbrecht-Enfeldt won three in a row between 1999 and 2001 and she can also become the third female skater from USA to win back-to-back World Sprint Championship titles after Sheila Young-Ochowicz (USA, 1975-1976) and Bonnie Blair (USA, 1994-1995).

Last season, Bowe became the seventh female skater to win all four races in a single World Sprint Championships. Only Bonnie Blair achieved this twice. Having won four 1000m World Cup races this season Bowe looks ready to defend her title, but Jorien ter Mors (NED, 2) and Heather Richardson-Bergsma may think differently.

Ter Mors won one of two 1000m World Cup race in Stavanger (NOR) in January and became World Champion in the 1000m at the ISU World Single Distance Championships in Kolomna (RUS) only two weeks ago. The Dutch woman could become the second Dutch Sprint World Champion after Marianne Timmer (NED) won in 2004.

Richardson-Bergsma already claimed one gold (2013), one silver (2015) and one bronze medal (2014) in the ISU World Sprint Championships and she was second in the 1000m and fifth in the 500m at the World Single Distance Championships two weeks ago.

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Bowe, Richardson and Ter Mors lean more on their 1000m strength than on their 500m in the sprint classification, but the shortest distance is of equal importance. Although Sang-Hwa Lee is the only female skater from Korea to win a World Sprint Championship (2010) and she is the reigning world champion in 500m, she will not compete on home ice.

Hong Zhang is another good 500m skater and the Chinese lady can also skate a solid 1000m. She claimed a total of nine podiums in 500 and 1000m races (World Cup and World Single Distances Championships). Seven of these came in the 500m (Gold4-Silver3-Bronze1). In 1000m events she claimed one silver and one bronze. Zhang will participate for the fifth time in the World Sprint Championships an event in which she claimed two medals, bronze in 2012 and silver in 2014.

Zhang's compatriot Yu Jing has won the World Sprint Championship twice in her career and can become the fifth female skater to win this championship at least three times. Although Yu won two 500m World Cup races this season, she finished only eighth at the World Single Distance Championships and she was disqualified in the 1000m.

Kulizhnikov aims for more silverware

In the men's tournament Pavel Kulizhnikov (RUS) eyes a back-to-back world title two weeks after becoming the first man to win the 500m and 1000m at the same World Single Distances Championships. If he wins, Kulizhnikov would become the eighth man to retain his Sprint World title following Eric Heiden (USA), Igor Zhelezovski (URS/BLR), Sergei Klevchenya (RUS), Jeremy Wotherspoon (CAN), Erben Wennemars (NED), Lee Kyu-Hyuk (KOR) and Michel Mulder (NED).

Last year, Kulizhnikov won three of the four distances at the Championships in Astana (KAZ). Only Eric Heiden (in 1979) and Igor Zhelezovski (in 1992) managed to win all four at the same Sprint Championships.

Among Kulizhnikov's main challengers are fellow Russians Ruslan Murashov (RUS) and Aleksey Yesin (RUS). The former clocked the same time as Kulizhnikov in the first 500m at the most recent World Single Distances and ultimately won a silver medal in the 2 x 500m. Yesin is the bronze medalist from last year's World Sprint Championships. Should the Russian threesome ascend the podium, it will be the second time that a country sweeps the podium. Soviet Union managed that in 1975.

Korea won six World Sprint titles in the past, four of which were won by retired Lee Kyu-Hyuk. The others were won by Bae Ki-Tae (KOR) and Kim Yoon-Man (KOR). Korea's current hopes are put on Tae-Yun Kim's shoulders. The 22-year-old sprinter is ranked 20th in the current 500m World Cup and 13th in the 1000m World Cup however.

Canada will try to land their first World Sprint title since 2003, when Jeremy Wotherspoon made it five Canadian victories in a row. With Alex Boisvert-Lacroix, who won 500m bronze at the World Single Distance Championships, they have a strong contender.

Michel Mulder, World Sprint Champion in 2013 and 2014 will not be taking part in Seoul. The Dutch are pinning their hopes on Kai Verbij (NED), Ronald Mulder (NED) or Kjeld Nuis (NED) to become the fifth Dutchman to win this competition.

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