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ISU European Short Track Speed Skating Championships 2018 – Dresden

Day 1

An exciting day's action ended with Dutchman Sjinkie Knegt winning both men's events and Italy's Martina Valcepina springing a double surprise to do the same in the Ladies competition.

Valcepina (ITA) steals show with maiden short track gold

Six-time overall European Champion **Ariana Fontana** is hotly tipped to be the overall star of the ISU European Short Track Speed Skating 2018 in Dresden, but the first medal of the weekend went to a teammate.

Valcepina has impressed this season, taking bronze over 500m at the Audi ISU World Cup events in Dordrecht and Seoul, and she added to her reputation with a fine skate at the EnergieVerbund Arena on Saturday.

Fontana had been leading the race and looking comfortable, but a collision with Ekaterina Konstantinova (RUS) put the pair out of the race.

Valcepina still had Netherlands duo Suzanne Schulting and Yara van Kerkhof to deal with, but skated brilliantly to beat off the challenge. Schulting took silver and Van Kerkhof bronze.

"I am so happy," said Valcepina after the race. "This is my first win like this. I didn't see the crash. I am very sorry for Ariana, because she was doing well, but I am so happy to do well."

Sofia Prosvirnova (RUS) won the B Final.

Knegt (NED) keeps cool in heat of battle to claim 1500m gold

Knegt looked as relaxed as a man out for a casual skate when he took to the ice on Saturday afternoon, even taking time to wave to his young daughter in the crowd while on the start line.

But the Netherlands athlete showed real focus after the starting gun went off, coming through a dramatic race to win the men's 1500m.

With reigning Olympic champion Victor An (RUS) having crashed out in the semi-final, Knegt still had to deal with the challenge of Semion Elistratov (RUS), who shadowed him through much of the race.

But after France's Sébastien Lepape fell in the tussle for position during the final laps, Knegt increased his speed to finish ahead of Elistratov. Thibaut Fauconnet (FRA) took the bronze.

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"I feel happy and relaxed and in good form," said Knegt after the race. "I even took a moment to wave to my daughter in the stand, just before the start. I could hear her shouting 'come on dad', so I gave her a smile."

"Sometimes skating can look easy, but it isn't. I train very hard."

Roberto Pukitis (LAT) won the B Final.

Knegt edges out rival in 500m to make it a double in Dresden

Knegt and Victor An are both used to winning, and the two skaters have both got their eye on gold medals at the PyeongChang 2018 Olympic Games. So there's no doubt their head-to-head on the Dresden ice in the 500m final was something of a dress rehearsal for next month.

It was the Netherlands racer who prevailed, though – by a couple of skate inches in a photo finish. It was his second gold medal of the day, having earlier dominated the 1500m.

A tactical race that built up to a frantic finish was highly exciting for the German crowd. It certainly excited Knegt, too.

"I was very pleased to just beat Victor to the line, because I know it's an event he is targeting at the Olympics," said Knegt. "The tactics went well.

"It was a more tactical race, and I think it needed to be, because the first two races had all just been about pure speed. I saved something for the end. I wasn't going at 100 per cent until those final two laps."

An took the silver medal, with France's Thibaut Faconnet in third place.

The B final was won by Vladislav Bykanov (ISR).

Valcepina upstages Italian teammate Fontana for second time

When Valcepina beat Fontana earlier in the day to win the Ladies 1500m gold, it could partly be put down to luck: Fontana had crashed out in the final laps.

Nobody was more surprised than Valcepina. "I can't believe it, it's a big surprise", she said after securing her first major speed skating title.

But Valcepina added a second title in quick succession. She finished ahead of six-time overall European Champion Fontana fair and square in the 500m, looking powerful throughout and possessing a great burst of speed on the final straight.

"I wasn't expecting to win at all, so I'm really happy," she said. "My tactic was to start at the front and go all out. I wanted to just keep steady and stable, go as fast as I could, and hope it worked.

"It's great being with Ariana and racing against her. We've been on the same squad for eight years, so we know each other very well."

Can she surprise herself further and add a third gold tomorrow in the 1000m? "It's not my best distance, but I'll do my best," she said.

Fontana was second, with Lara van Ruijven (NED) third. The B final was won by Suzanne Schulting (NED).

(ends)