

Press release

17 February 2018

Visser comes, sees and conquers

Esmee Visser came, saw and conquered in the ladies' 5000m at the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018 on Friday. The 22-year-old held two-fold Olympic champion Martina Sáblíková (CZE) off a third consecutive title in a track record time of 6:50.23. The 30-year-old Czech took silver and Natalia Voronina (OAR) grabbed bronze.

"This was also a big surprise for me", Visser said. "I knew I was good, but I never competed against the big women. For this season my goal was to qualify for my first World Cup race and I raced in the Stavanger B Division, so I was happy to have reached my goal already. My long term goal was the Beijing Olympics in 2022. I never thought about this."

Training with men makes up for fast lap times

"But when I qualified for this, and when I got here, then I wanted the highest possible. Training went well and then you start thinking to yourself, there's something possible here and that made me nervous. That's the pressure I put on myself."

That pressure did not seem to bother her at all. Visser took the ice in the first pairing after ice resurfacing versus Misaki Oshigiri (JPN). She started cautiously, but continued clocking low 32 second lap times until the 4600 split, finishing with her only plus-33 lap in 6:50.23, which was 2.25 seconds faster than the track record set by Sáblíková at last year's World Championships.

Visser explained how she was able to skate those steady lap times: "I'm training with men in my team for the first time this year and they have various levels. One skates 6.25 (in the 5000m) and another 6.58. I can skate in their draft and I won't let go. In that way I can skate 27 second laps, which I would not be able to skate by myself, and that makes it possible for me to maintain those 32 laps on my own."

Coach Remmelt Eldering (NED) also made his Olympic debut, and couldn't believe his eyes either: "I feel like crying now", he said after the race. "This is very emotional. I saw how she went and I thought oh boy, oh boy..."

Pechstein and Blondin don't get it

After Visser's track record Claudia Pechstein skated versus Ivanie Blondin (CAN) in the fifth and penultimate pair. They both started at a slightly faster pace than Visser in the first 600m, but they never managed to maintain low 32 laps and their early lead quickly vanished. Blondin finished in 6:59.38 to end up fifth and Pechstein came eighth in 7:05.43. The 45-year-old veteran, who will turn 46 on 22 February still doesn't even think of quitting. "No, why?" she said. Pechstein even thinks she



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can still be around in Beijing: "You never know. Nobody my age tries to be on ice as fast as me. Maybe I get another chance to win a medal."

With a little help from friends

Sáblíková and Voronina concluded the competition and Visser knew that she had at least conquered a bronze by then. "Even if I would have come third with 6.50, I would have been happy", she said. But being in the lead, she sought distraction not to have to watch that final nerve-wrecking race and she kept herself busy facetimeing with her training partners, who were back home in the Netherlands.

Meanwhile Sáblíková and Voronina kept each other busy in an effort to jump that 6:50 bar. The Olympic Athlete from Russia took an early lead and the defending champion followed closely. Voronina had been lonely at the Gangneung Oval, without her regular team mates from Russia and Sáblíková had taken her by the hand. "When I saw her on the ice I felt bad because I know what it is to be alone and nobody wants to train with you, so I said if you want you can skate behind me. I could help her that way and she helped me in the race today. She skated very well."

Despite skating very well, the two did not managed to keep the small advantage they took over Visser in the first laps. Sáblíková, who had been hampered by a back injury throughout the season, was pleased to take silver in 6:51.85. "In November I went through so much pain that I did not even think I would be able to skate here, so now I'm really happy. Nobody can imagine how I feel today."

Voronina said she felt empty after her race, because she endured a difficult and lonely time in Gangneung without her teammates and her regular coach. "It was very hard for me without my coach, Pawel Abratkiewicz (POL). I would have needed him at such a competition but unfortunately he was not invited. A big thank you to Martina. The competition with her really helps a lot in the race. She was the only one who offered to help me in this situation, when I was alone and I had nobody to skate with."

Agony for Van der Weijden

Voronina's joy meant agony for Annouk van der Weijden (NED), who ended up in a heartbreaking fourth place. The 31-year-old Dutchwoman had been in a medal position throughout the whole competition, after having skated a personal best of 6:54.17 in the first pairing. Voronina knocked her off the podium by a mere two tenths of a second.

"This feels terrible", Van der Weijden said. "My race was good. I've skated a personal record, I was at my best when I had to, I've shown what I could. If you would have told me that I would be able to skate 6:54 at the beginning of this season, I would not have believed you. But I would surely loved to have that medal, that's painful, especially because the gap is so small."