



Press release

24 February 2018

Olympic Speed Skating competition concludes with novelty

Mass Start makes its Olympic debut on the final day of the Speed Skating competitions at the Gangneung Oval on Saturday. Whereas all the other events in Speed Skating have a time trial format, the Mass Start is a pack race over 16 laps. The first skater to the line wins. "It's different", said Annouk van der Weijden (NED). "It skating with the head more than skating with the legs."

Semifinals and final

On Saturday both the men's and the ladies' competition will be held, with semi-finals and finals with 24 competitors in the semifinals, 12 per heat. The maximum number of participants per country is two. If a country decides to enter two skaters, they will be placed in different semifinal heats. Of each semifinal race, only the first eight qualify for the final.

First to the line wins

In the Mass Start, the first skater to the line wins, but there's more to it, because there will be three intermediate sprints, after 4, 8 and 12 laps. The first three skaters in each intermediate sprint will gain 5-3-1 points. The points awarded in the final sprint are 60-40-20. Therefore the top-three finishers will always be the top-three ranked skaters, but from rank 4 downwards, intermediate sprint points determine the classification. Skaters without intermediate sprint points, are ranked behind the one who did gain points, according to their order of finish.

In the final, the classification of the semifinals will be visible on the skaters' helmets. The winner of semifinal 1 gets number 1, the winner of semifinal 2 gets number 2, the second ranked skater of semifinal 1 gets number 3, the second ranked skater of semifinal 2 gets number 4, and so on.

Tactical racing

Mass Start all comes down to who finishes first. As simple as it may seem, pack races do require a different mindset than the traditional individual Speed Skating races. Annouk van der Weijden likes both formats: "The traditional long track is my second nature. You focus on technique and timing, everything has to be perfect. For a Mass Start, those things don't matter too much. You just have to be in shape, it's not about timing or precision, it's more about tactical racing."

In the ladies' 5000m at the Gangneung Oval last week, Van der Weijden came fourth by a heartbreaking 0.19 second margin. She's happy to get another shot at an Olympic medal. "It was tough to get myself back on track. I just had to accept it, there's nothing I can change about that result anymore. If I would not have put the disappointment aside, I might screw the second chance."

Van der Weijden enters the Mass Start together with team mate Irene Schouten. They expect to both qualify for the final in which they will have a chance to play out team tactics. Schouten, the 2015

world champion and an eight-time World Cup winner, is the stronger sprinter of the two. They don't want to say too much about their tactics before the race. "We don't want to reveal too much to the opponents", said Van der Weijden. "We have a race plan, but it's not too strict. You can plan many things, but you never know what the others will do. We have to be alert and we have to communicate well during the race."

After having won 7 out of 12 Speed Skating golds in PyeongChang, the Netherlands are favorite to win the Mass Start too. This might affect race tactics for the other teams. "The others will always look at me when I make a move," Schouten said. "But I don't think Ivania Blondin (CAN) and Francesca Lollobrigida (ITA) will plot against us and give up their own medal chances."

Blondin and Lollobrigida are also two medal favorites. The Canadian won the 2016 world title and she has eight World Cup wins to her name, while the Italian, who won three World Cup races, took the European title in January. Like Lollobrigida, Ayano Sato (JPN) and Claudia Pechstein (GER) won a World Cup race this season and the home crowd will cheer for Bo-Reum Kim (KOR), who won last year's world title at the Gangneung Oval.

Home favorite

In the men's event Seung-Hoon Lee (KOR) is the main favorite. The 2016 world champion, who has 13 World Cup wins to his tally, was absent after being injured in a crash in the Team Pursuit at last year's ISU World Single Distances Speed Skating Championships. He's the man to beat when it comes to a pack sprint. Lee won two World Cup races this year, and Italy's Andrea Giovannini also grabbed a World cup gold.

Joey Mantia (USA) won last year's world title crossing the line solo after a breakaway. With a fourth place in the 1000m on Friday, the American skater showed great form and, as a former inline skating champion, he feels at home in a pack race. "The mass start is right in my wheelhouse," he said in December. "For me it's the ace up the sleeve. I always feel comfortable going into the mass start. I feel like I can win anytime. No matter what happens in the 1000m or the 1500m, I'll always have that Mass Start trick, even when the skating doesn't connect. If I don't feel hundred percent, I can still make things work in the Mass Start. I feel confident enough in my skating if I step to the line, that I can win a field sprint."

The Dutch will field an unusual pair for the Mass Start. Multiple Olympic medalist Sven Kramer (NED), who won the 5000m at PyeongChang 2018, but failed to take the much-desired Olympic 10000m title for a third consecutive time, hopes to make amends in the Mass Start, although he usually never skates in international Mass Start events. His team mate and friend Koen Verweij, who finished in a disappointing 9th place in the 1000m on Friday, never won a major international Mass Start race either. His best World Cup result this season was 6th place in Salt Lake City.

For more information, schedules, full entries and results please refer to the [ISU website](#) and the [official website](#) of the Olympic Winter Games in PyeongChang.