

INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION

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Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games **Speed Skating Ladies' 3000 m**

The female speed skaters had their first race today. Ireen Wüst (NED) won the 3000m, celebrating her third gold medal in three consecutive Winter Olympic Games (3000m 2006, 1500m 2010 and 3000m 2014 respectively). The 2010 Olympic Champion Martina Sáblíková (CZE) won silver and Olga Graf brought Russia the first medal of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games.

Half way through the 14 pairs Julia Skokova (RUS) was in the lead and skated the best 3000 m of her life, with a new personal best time of 4:09.36. Most skaters were slower than their personal best times and just like in the men's races on the first day, many skaters did not manage to skate an even race up to the end. After the ice preparation Dutch Annouk van der Weijden was the first to open below 20 seconds, and had a fast first lap of 31.3, letting her laps go up gradually. She missed her personal best by only two seconds, finishing in 4:05.75. In pair 10, Olga Graf (RUS) and Jilleanne Rookard (USA) skated. Graf started with a modest 20.77, but then she had a very even race. Her laps were 31.5, 31.6, 31.8, 31.8, 31.7, 31.7 and finally a 32.3. This brought her to an astonishing 4:03.47, not just the first personal best of the Olympic Speed skating tournament by almost a second, but also a new Russian record, improving Vysokova's 4:04.18. This resulted in an explosion of cheers from the home crowd and the time was close to the track record and enough to be finish on the podium and win the first medal for Russia at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games.

Immediately after Claudia Pechstein (GER) and Ida Njåtun (NOR) raced. Pechstein was predicted as a medal contender as she won the distance in 2002. Pechstein started faster than Graf at 20.21 and had that followed by a 30.9 lap. Njåtun started even faster, and had 31.2, 31.4, 31.8 laps, and after 1400m, there was only a gap of a quarter of a second between them. Then Ida slowed to 32s and finished with two 33.4 laps, reaching 4:06.73, just behind Van de Weijden. Pechstein continued with one more 31.8 lap, but then it became hard. Laps of 32.5, 33.1 and 33.2 dropped her right behind Graf, as she finished in 4:05.26.

Martina Sáblíková then took to the ice and did what was expected of her. 20.38 and 31.0 was not as fast as Pechstein, but she then found a steady pace she followed to the end: 31.6, 31.8, 31.6, 31.6, 31.7, 31.9. It brought her to 4:01.94, half a second below the old track record that Wüst had set the previous year.

Sáblíková's pair mate Katarzyna Bachleda-Curus reached 4:06.73, the same time as Njåtun, but was later disqualified for crossing the line twice with her skate, a rule that was recently re-enforced.

Then Wüst raced. She had the fastest opening of all, 19.31, and a 30.3 lap, and many feared that this would mean a tough finish, but she went on with 31.2, 31.5, 31.6 and 31.4 increasing her lead on Sáblíková to almost 3 seconds with two laps to go. Her times dropped only a bit, to 32.1 and 32.7, and she took back the track record again, 4:00.34, only 2 seconds behind her personal best. The only person left who could have challenged Graf's bronze was Antoinette de Jong, a Dutch junior skater, however the pressure got to her and she did not technically skate well. The 18-year-old finished ranked 7th in her first Winter Olympics Games in 4:06.77.

Claudia Pechstein, fourth place commented: "Did I start too fast? You have to try everything at Olympics. I just could not find my technique, but finishing fourth at age 41 is not bad, is it? The ice is different from training, when I could easily do 31 laps. Olga Graf raced the race of her life, and the first two places were beyond aspiration anyway. It is ok, only the last laps were tough. I do not feel as old as I am, only in the last few laps. I am optimistic about the 5000m."

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Olga Graf, bronze told to the press: "I would not say that I feel a lot of emotions right now. The only feeling is that I am tired. I heard the crowd cheering for me and I did not expect such support from the audience. When I realized that I broke my personal best, it was an incredible feeling, I skated better than in Calgary." Martina Sáblíková, silver said: "I am so very happy with the silver medal, as the times for other skaters this year were really fast, so it made me afraid, but I tried to focus on my results and I am happy for silver." Ireen Wüst, gold commented: "I had 3.58 in my mind, which I thought was possible. But I could see already yesterday that there were difficult conditions, a lot of guys died in the end. My team mate saw that and told me "don't do crazy stuff". I knew that but still my first laps weren't that good, it is hard to hold yourself back, but after 4, 5 laps I went for it. It was tough, but I focused on myself, I had seen Sáblíková's time, but I did not realize it. I feel disbelief and relief. It is surreal that I managed to get a gold medal again in my third Olympics. I am also relieved, as I experienced huge pressure. I wanted to win, and so did 17 million Dutchies at home."

Men 500 m Preview:

Tomorrow, the men will skate the 500m. There are several skaters who could win a medal, and it is much harder to predict this distance, which is so explosive and minor mistakes can make all the difference. Skaters skate two 500m races, one starting inner lane and the next starting in the outer lane. Strong nerves are a requirement. Tae-Bum Mo (KOR) won the title in 2010, and is the main favourite, but he has tough competition of world sprint champion Michel Mulder (NED) and his twin brother Ronald, as well as World Cup winner Jan Smeekens (NED), and from Russia Artyom Kuznetsov and Dmitrij Lobkov, from Japan Keiichiro Nagashima and Joji Kato. Then there are Daniel Greig (AUS), Tucker Fredricks and Mitchell Whitmore (USA) and Jamie Gregg and Gilmore Junio (CAN), and possibly Pekka Koskela (FIN).

The Olympic record in this distance is 34.42 on the fast ice of Salt Lake City.

For more information, full entry lists and results please see: www.sochi2014.com and www.isu.org

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