

INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION

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Event 6 of 6

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Essent ISU World Cup Allround Speed Skating Championships – Heerenveen (NED) Day 1

Ireen Wüst (NED) and Koen Verweij (NED) are leading after the first day of the Essent ISU World Allround Speed Skating Championships. After two distances (500m and 3000m) Wüst leads by a margin of 1,768 points. That equates to 5.31 seconds in Sunday's 1500m. Yuliya Skokova (RUS), second, and Olga Graf (RUS), third, face a mission impossible.

Verweij faces a tougher job than Wüst. He and teammate Jan Blokhuijsen are the top two candidates for the world title. Verweij can improve his leading position in the 1500m but Blokhuijsen is a strong fighter and better at the longest distance, the 10,000m. Havarð Bokko (NOR), also a strong miler and last season's runner-up, is third.

Spring was in the air this week in Heerenveen (NED), with outdoor temperatures reaching 15 degrees. And the audience in the covered Thialf rink provided a warm welcome for the skaters, who are tired after the long Olympic season. Fourteen countries sent skaters to the competition. The notable absentee was Germany. Once dominant, the Germans did not take part for the first time in 60 years, dating back to when the Ladies' and Men's competitions were held on different rinks.

Men

Without defending world champion Sven Kramer (NED), who was recovering from a double surgery on his respiratory tract, the competition was more open than in recent years. The Dutchman, won the allround world crown a record six times, expects to be back in training in two months. So, for this year at least, it is time for a new champion.

The Dutch, backed by a capacity crowd of 10,000, expected an interesting battle between their home favourites Jan Blokhuijsen and Koen Verweij. However, Bokko, Sverre Lunde Pedersen (NOR) and Bart Swings (BEL) were seen as serious outside contenders.

Blokhuijsen and Verweij had predicted that the initial 500m could be very important. Konrad Niedzwiedzki (POL) proved to be the best sprinter in the group of 24 allrounders (35.91). Niedzwiedzki is a regular on the podium at the shortest distance in international allround competitions. Bokko and Verweij shared second place (35.95). Blokhuijsen lost a few tenths when he tipped the ice with his hand on the first corner to finish in 36.41. Pedersen made the top ten, while outsider Swings finished 12th.

A newcomer, Nils van der Poel (SWE), set Thialf on fire in pair two of the 5000m. Van der Poel, at 17 the youngest competitor, set a personal best of 6:28.68 in a highly emotional fight with Wouter Olde Heuvel (NED). Van der Poel, who got his name from his Dutch grandfather, is a big hope for Swedish speed skating. Things were got serious when Blokhuijsen and Denis Yuskov (RUS) took to the ice in pair nine. Yuskov, skating in Blokhuijsen's slipstream on the back stretch, seemed to have the better chances. But Blokhuijsen came back to win in 6:17.78. Pedersen, Swings and Bokko could not beat this time in the next pairs. Only Verweij, in pair 12 against Jan Szymanski (POL), came near: 6:19.69.

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“Everyone is tired now,” Verweij said. “It is the last competition of the season. So it is not hard to stay focused. I know I have that brilliant 1500m. I was not too many hours on the ice the last week. When it's March, you have to train smart not hard.”

Ladies

With Martina Sablikova (CZE) and Claudia Pechstein (GER) missing, Ireen Wüst stands alone as the favorite to win the world title. If the 27-year-old Wüst succeeds, she will be crowned for the fifth time. If she does so, there are still worlds to conquer. Gunda Niemann-Stirnemann (GER), who reigned in the 1990s, took the allround gold a record eight times.

Wüst had a good start in the 500m in a field of only 22 competitors. She won the first distance in 38.66. The Russian Ladies Yuliya Skokova (39.00) and Yekaterina Shikhova (39.13) finished second and third.

That first win gave her confidence to attack her own track record in the 3000m. Wüst opened with a 29-second lap, the only one in the Ladies' 3000m competition. She missed the record (3:58.68), set in 2013, by only 15 hundredths of a second (3:58.83). Teammate Yvonne Nauta was happy enough to claim second place (4:03.20) and Olga Graf (RUS) was a lucky third (4:05.51). Nauta was five seconds slower than Wüst.

Neither Nauta nor Graf can cope with Wüst over 1500m. They won medals at the longer distances at the Olympic Games in Sochi. “All right, this is allround,” said Graf. “My 3000 and 5000 are good, I know. But today I was so happy with my 500m. For the first time in my career, I finished under the 40-seconds mark (39.92).”

Dutch newcomer Irene Schouten had set the best time before the ice preparation (4:07.08). Nauta (4:03.21) and Diane Valkenburg (NED) (4:05.89) bettered that time in pair eight. Wüst already knew in the morning she had work to do. It looked all very smooth and easy but it wasn't. “You know, all those people are coming to see me. As a gold medalist I have to show them something. That's why I went for the track record.”

Essent ISU World Cup Allround Speed Skating Final – Heerenveen (NED) - Day 1

Women's 500m

1	Ireen Wüst	NED	38.86
2	Yuliya Skokova	RUS	39.00
3	Yekaterina Shikhova	RUS	39.13

Women's 3000m

1	Ireen Wüst	NED	3:53.83
2	Yvonne Nauta	NED	4:03.20
3	Olga Graf	RUS	4:05.51

Standings

1	Ireen Wüst	NED	78,665
2	Yuliya Skokova	RUS	80,433
3	Olga Graf	RUS	80,758

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Men's 500m

1	Konrad Niedzwieckzki	POL	35.91
= 2	Havard Bokko	NOR	35.95
= 2	Koen Verweij	NED	35.95

Men's 500m

1	Jan Blokhuijsen	NED	6:17.78
2	Koen Verweij	NED	6:19.69
3	Denis Yuskov	RUS	6:20.15

Standings

1	Koen Verweij	NED	73,919
2	Jan Blokhuijsen	NED	74,188
3	Havard Bokko	NOR	74,564

For details of the Essent ISU World Cup, including complete results see www.isu.org .

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