

January 12, 2020

Heerenveen, the Netherlands

## Swings breaks Russian-Dutch dominance with first ever Belgian gold

Bart Swings (BEL) broke the mold in the final event of the ISU European Speed Skating Championships in Heerenveen. Before the men's Mass Start all 13 titles had gone to the Netherlands or Russia, but in the final event Swings won an historic first ever international speed skating title for Belgium. Earlier on Sunday the Netherlands had taken Team Pursuit gold and Pavel Kulizhnikov (RUS) had retained his European 1000m title with a spectacular track record.

In the first men's event of the day, the Dutch pursuit team of Marcel Bosker, Sven Kramer and Patrick Roest beat Norway in the second of three pairings, setting a championships record of 3:40.63.

Bosker, who had not skated any individual distances in Heerenveen, led out the last lap to drag Roest and Kramer to the line. He said: "Sven and Patrick did not have the best of legs, which didn't come as a surprise already having skated one [Kramer] and two [Roest] individual events. Therefore I'm glad that I was able to pull those lap times down in the final part.

"We had planned it that way. They both took a 600m stint in the middle part, while I had done 400m beforehand to close with a 600m stint, and if you manage to take the lap time down by 0.6 seconds in the final lap, that's well done."

Bosker's final stint broke Norway. Sverre Lunde Pedersen, Håvard Bøkko and Halgeir Engebretsen managed to keep up with the Netherlands for half of the race, but eventually finished in 3:43.39, enough for the bronze medal.

Russia took silver, skating 3:42.48 in a surprise line-up, with Denis Yuskov replacing Ruslan Zakharov to skate alongside Aleksandr Rumyantsev and Danila Semerikov.

Yuskov's last Team Pursuit appearance before Sunday's showdown had been at the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. He was happy to be back: "I felt good, I'm in shape so it's great to skate the Team Pursuit," he said.

Semerikov, who had won the Team Pursuit World Cup with Zakharov as third man, welcomed Yuskov back: "It was no problem to skate in a new line-up. The strongest skaters should skate and Denis has shown that he's a good skater before."

### Indomitable Kulizhnikov takes third gold

Kulizhnikov won his second individual gold and his third in total this weekend after the team sprint on Friday and the 500m on Saturday, in retaining his 1000m title on Sunday.

The Russian rocket hammered out 1:07.09 to break Duchman Kai Verbij's track record by 0.39 seconds. Kulizhnikov had the fastest opener at 16.24 and continued to clock a 24.84 first full lap. Apart from Thomas Krol (24.97) none of the other skaters were able to dip below 25 seconds in their first full lap.

No-one else was able to match Kulizhnikov's final full lap of 26.01 seconds either. Again Krol came closest with 26.31, the Dutchman finishing in 1:07.82 to take silver and leaving world champion Verbij to settle for bronze in 1:08.38.

"I had sort of estimated that I would not be able to skate those times," Verbij, who went out in the final pairing, said, before paying due respect to Kulizhnikov: "He has outclassed us [the Dutch] today and it doesn't even look like he's making an effort."

Kulizhnikov played down his record-breaking performance. "Before the race, I did not feel strong enough to beat the record. It was an intense weekend and I was tired after the Team Sprint and the 500m. I just decided to skate good, nothing special," he said.

Krol, who had won Friday's 1500m, had mixed feelings about picking up the silver. "Not so long ago, skating 1:07 was quite something, you would have won any race doing that. And now I'm almost disappointed. Not with my own race, I skated my best time ever in Thialf [Stadium], but there was an indomitable Russian on the ice today," he admitted.

### **La Brabançonne rings out for Swings**

The joyful Thialf crowd had already heard the Dutch national anthem eight times and the Russian anthem five times since Friday evening when the men's mass start bunch entered the rink for the final event of the European Championships on Sunday. Never before in history had La Brabançonne, the Belgian national anthem, been played at a major international speed skating tournament. Bart Swings changed all that.

The Belgian silver medalist at the 2018 Olympic mass start had set his sights on the title and the race unfolded perfectly for him. "The speed was high [throughout the race] and therefore it was not easy for Jorrit [Dutch contender] [Jorrit Bergsma](#) to try one of his jumps," he said.

"He had to close a gap with some six laps to go, but the pace did not go down afterwards, which again played to my advantage. For me it would have been a dilemma to chase or not if Jorrit had attacked with two or three laps to go. That would have cost me in a sprint with guys like [Livio Wenger](#) (SUI) and [Arjan Stroetinga](#) (NED)."

Italy's [Michele Malfatti](#) (ITA) tried to escape from the bunch, but was caught by the pack, led by Bergsma, with one lap to go and it all came down to a chaotic sprint in the final lap.

Swings was perfectly placed for the sprint, and kept Stroetinga at bay on the final straight. The Dutchman took silver and Semerikov claimed bronze.

"My first title on ice," Swings said. "It's my most beautiful medal after my Olympic silver. I started ice skating because of the Olympics [Swings is a multiple European and World Champion in inline skating], so that's definitely the most precious one, but winning gold means a lot too."

A disappointed Stroetinga agreed. "Silver is better than nothing, but it's also the first loser," he said. "In the penultimate corner I was well positioned behind Swings, but then Livio Wenger came in between and I lost contact a bit. At that moment I knew it was going to be difficult."

### **Dutch ladies sweep the board on final day**

The Dutch ladies recorded a clean sweep of gold medals at the ISU European Championships in Heerenveen on Sunday. Antoinette de Jong, Ireen Wüst and Melissa Wijfje started the final day retaining the Team Pursuit title for the Netherlands. Jutta Leerdam added the 1000m gold with her

first major international title, and Irene Schouten wrapped up the day seizing mass start gold, with Wijfje bringing home the bronze in the same event to put a cherry on top of the orange cake.

The Dutch ladies took on Russia in the second of three pairings in the Team Pursuit and they left no doubt as to which was the stronger team. Wüst, De Jong and Wijfje gained a couple of tenths of seconds at each 200m split during the first 800 meters and maintained their advantage throughout the rest of the race to finish in 2:57.97.

De Jong (NED) was relieved. "Finally I got off the ice with a good feeling, which is positive for me after the past couple of weeks [in which she failed to qualify for an individual event at the European and World Championships]," she said.

"It was difficult to have to wait for a whole weekend. Of course I wanted to start in the individual distances too, but for me personally this is a nice boost."

De Jong rated her Team Pursuit medal lower than she would have done with an individual medal, but she still took the event very seriously.

"People may say it's a circus act, but this is a real event. It's been there for a long time, it's on the Olympic programme every four years."

Russia's World Cup-winning trio of [Elizaveta Kazelina](#), [Yevgenia Lalenkova](#) and [Natalya Voronina](#) also took the event seriously, but they couldn't keep up with the home team and had to settle for silver in a time of 2:59.04.

Kazelina was satisfied with their performance. "During the race I felt that this was one of our best races, but the Dutch team was very strong. All of them are in good shape. But the gap is not so big. We will work to close the gap," she said.

Belarus turned out to be best of the rest. Skating 7.49 seconds slower than the Dutch ladies, [Marina Zueva](#), [Yeugeniya Vorobyova](#) and [Tatyana Mikhailova](#) reeled in the first ever medal for Belarus at a European Championships. Poland fell 0.25 seconds short of the podium.

#### **First title for Leerdam**

[Jutta Leerdam](#) (NED) also had to sit and wait for the whole weekend before taking to the ice, but for different reasons: her coaches told her not to skate Friday's Team Sprint and Saturday's 500m because of a groin injury.

Her patience was rewarded on Sunday with her first major international title. The 21-year-old sprinter hammered out a personal best of 1:13.67 beating pair-mate [Daria Kachanova](#) (RUS), who also skated a PB of 1:13.90.

The two moved to the top of the leaderboard with just two more pairs to come and none of the final four skaters were able to come close to their times. [Yekaterina Shikhova](#) (RUS) had already set 1:14.48 in the sixth pairing to win the bronze medal.

Leerdam was not hampered by her groin during the race. She said: "It was a bit tricky because I could have worsened the injury. There is a small rupture in my groin muscle, but I wanted to take the risk because I knew I was good."

She did not know quite how good she was until she crossed the finish line, however.

"I felt that it was a good race, but I didn't know I went that fast. I heard the speaker saying that I was a second ahead [of the fastest time so far]. I wanted to gain more or at least keep the advantage, but it was really messy in the final 50 metres.

"If I hadn't had that mis-stroke on the final stretch I might have skated a track record. That's a pity, but I'm super happy with the title."

#### **Schouten wins 'by the book'**

Irene Schouten (NED) already has having two World titles in the mass start to her name, but sealed her first European title on Sunday, dethroning [Francesca Lollobrigida](#) (ITA).

Schouten thanked team-mate [Melissa Wijfje](#) (NED), who controlled the first half of the race and almost ran away with the title herself. With four laps to go Wijfje decided to attack all by herself and stayed ahead, only to get caught by Schouten and Lollobrigida in the final few meters.

"This one was by the book," Schouten said. "Everything went according to plan and to take not only gold, but bronze too, in front of this crowd in Thialf, that's just awesome."

Wijfje was happy not just to have contributed to Schouten's win, but also to win a medal for herself.

"I've helped with many of Irene's victories and those feel like victories for me too, but winning a medal myself is even better. This is bronze with a golden edge."

Wijfje admitted she had attacked with the intention of going for the win herself. "You always have to believe that when you attack," she said.

Schouten waited to see how things developed in the bunch. "I relied on my experience and I saw the gap closing in a little. If I would have held back any longer, the Italian [Lollobrigida] would have reeled her in."

On the final straight, Schouten sprinted to victory with Lollobrigida following her lead. Both skaters passed Wijfje, who secured the bronze just ahead of Russia's Kazelina.

#### **Where to Watch**

Viewers will be able to watch either via their national broadcaster / channel and for countries where there are no broadcasters, the ISU will offer a live stream on the [Skating ISU YouTube Channel](#). You will find the full list in the [Where to Watch news here](#).

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