

A Spectator's Guide

The Track

There are three lanes on the 400m track at the Olympic Oval. The inside lane is used to warm up before a race or to cool down after one. This five metre wide lane is in constant use. The middle and outside lanes are known as the inside and outside competition lanes and each measures four metres.

The Equipment

Speed skate blades range from 38 – 45cm in length and are about 1.25mm thick. The high-tempered, carbon steel blade has very little rocker to allow gliding in long, straight lines. Hand sharpening, a procedure which takes 15 to 20 minutes per pair, ensures a slicing 90 degree angle to minimize ice resistance.

Clap skates have revolutionized the sport. The skate separates at the heel when the skater extends the leg in finishing their push. This leaves the blade in contact with the ice longer, maximizing potential power.

Speed skaters minimize air resistance by wearing tight fitting skin suits with aerodynamic hoods made of various lycra and coated fabrics.

The Technique

Maximum force is attained by adopting a low air resistance crouch position. The lower the crouch, the more the leg can extend to the side during the push, thus lengthening the time spent applying force to the ice. The clap skate permits skaters to push with the toe, thus utilizing their calf muscles more efficiently and generating more speed. Clap skates also prevent the tip of the blade from digging into the ice and more importantly, they let the blade stay in contact with the ice longer. A distinctive clap sound identifies skaters using the clap skates properly and maximizing power.

Long Track Events

Women compete in the 100m, 500m, 1000m 1500m, 3000m and 5000m distances. Men compete in the 100m, 500m, 1000m, 1500m, 5000m, 10 000m distances. The Team Pursuit event made its debut at the Torino Olympic Winter Games with 2 teams of 3 skaters each racing to be the first to complete 6 laps for women and 8 laps for men.

The Start

Starting lines are located at various points around the oval. The 1500m, 3000m and 5000m races have staggered start lines in order to equalize the distances in the first partial lap (called the opener). The skater who starts in the inner lane has a shorter corner for the opener.

Skaters receive two commands (“go to the start” & “ready”) prior to the gun sounding.

Both skaters must be motionless for 1 – 1.5 seconds following the second command before the starter will fire the gun. A false start is charged to a skater if :

- a) they take their position before the “ready” command or
- b) once in position they move before the gun sounds.

Technical Tips

The Officials

The chief official at a speed skating competition as stipulated by International Skating Union rules is the referee, who oversees the draw, determines when to resurface the ice and monitors the races. Other key officials are:

Starter: ensures a fair start;

Timers: provide manual back-up to the electronic timing system;

Judge: determines the finish placings;

Lap recorder: keeps track of the lap count and passes the information onto the competitors, ringing a bell to indicate last lap;

Track stewards: maintain the line markers and watch for skating inside the markers;

Recorder: keeps track of race results and prepares the final standings.

The Rules

Except during the crossover, skaters must keep to the right of their lane markers. When entering a corner, the gliding skate (bearing the skater's weight) must remain outside the markers. Failure to stay on the outside may result in disqualification.

The Crossover

Skaters must change lanes every lap on the backstretch in a designated crossover zone. The skater moving from the outside lane to the inside has the right-of-way since they have covered a longer distance and technically are ahead.

The Pairings

The pairings and start order are decided the evening before the races and determined by a random draw. This is to ensure that skaters of comparable ability are in the same pair. Separate draws are held for each distance raced.

The skater starting in the inside lane is identified by a white armband, and the skater starting in the outside lane is identified by a red armband.

Spectator Requirements

It is only at the start that fans are required to be silent. Once the gun goes, feel free to cheer on your favorite competitor!