



Let's get him now

Short Track Speed Skating

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At first glance short track speed skating may look like the old roller derby shows seen on TV back in the late 1950's, and into the early 1970's. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. This Olympic level sport is governed by rules that eliminate the pushing, shoving and poor sportsmanship seen in the earlier derby events, all of which were encouraged in the name of entertainment.

The rink



Imagine tearing across a sheet of ice at 50 km/hour (30+ miles/hr) on long skating blades only a millimeter thick. A sharp curve looms ahead and into that turn other skaters will attempt to cut you off and leave you behind in a cloud of ice shards. When craving speed, a little danger and lots of strategy: welcome to the thrill and spectacle of short track speed skating.

Short track speed skating is a different sport from long track speed skating. Long track skaters race the clock. In short track, four to six skaters race each other to the finish line, jockeying for position while maintaining speed and balance. Short track is pack-style so the ice gets crowded. The possibility of wiping out or colliding with other skaters looms at every turn. Short track skaters must wear hard-shelled helmets, cut resistant clothing, gloves, neck guards, knee and shin pads to protect themselves from dangerous falls and the possibility of someone's skate-blade spilling blood.

The short track speed skating events are constructed in heats where skaters are eliminated and the heat winner(s) are advanced to the next round, eventually leaving a small handful of skaters who compete in the finals and the first person across the finish line wins.



The start

Short track has a worldwide following. While many countries have short track teams, the sport is very popular in China, Korea and Canada. Since the 2002 Winter Olympics, worldwide interest in this fantastic sport is catching on in Australia, Great Britain, Italy, the USA and across the globe.

Racing occurs in 4 distances: 500m, 1000m, 1500m and 3000m. In most competitions, skaters race the 1500m on day 1, 500m on day 2, 1000m on day 3. The 3000m is raced the last day with the 1000m.

Getting to the final is a matter of avoiding elimination in the preliminary heats, quarters and semis. Usually the first 2 skaters plus an additional 1-4 skaters advance to the next round. Those 1-4 skaters are 3rd place finishers with the fastest time. For example, say there are 10 races in the

preliminaries. The top 2 finishers in each of the 10 races advance. Then they'll rank all the 3rd place finishers by time. The top four times out of the 3rd place finishers get to advance also.

Short track racing is a great spectator's event for any photographer. The ice used is generally a hockey rink set up for this purpose. The lower boards and padding are left in place, but the protective glass is removed to improve the ability for the audience to clearly watch the action. Because of the restricted area, bleachers are often set up right against the outside of the boards. Such viewing sites are located around the complete area. These arrangements bring the observer very close to the action.

Given its layout, short track speed skating is an action packed sport ideally suited for the



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*Heading
for the wall*





A very close race

photographer that might have trouble getting around or tire easy. Simply find a bleacher location that serves your purpose, sit and wait for the action to show up. As with most sports similar to this, the corners will often times produce the best images. It is possible to stay in one single location shooting for hours. With the oval skating surface the action passes the same spot about every 30 seconds or so.

Camera equipment does not need to be very elaborate. Digital cameras are best because of their ability to take multiple frames per second. It is this feature that will help stop action and allow one to pick out the best possible composition. Cameras that work in the 5/fps (continuous high speed) or faster are best. The rink is often lit with strong lighting that floods the racing surface well. As a result high priced fast speed lenses are usually not needed. With a few adjustments to the ISO speed of the sensor you will be able to work around various situations. This photographer likes

Two close-up



shooting a 70-200 mm f/2.8 lens. The focal length is dialed into about 120mm and the sensor is set for ISO 400. Shutter speed and exact aperture are set at the event depending on the conditions at the time. The great thing about shooting with digital is the number of images that you can take in a very short period of time. The rink action is fast and things happen quickly. When skaters enter the ideal area the camera must be ready to go. A skater's fall or unique angle as they race through the corners happens quickly

Panning the action is also critical. It will maintain the sharp focus on the racer and yet produce a slightly blurred background. This helps with the feeling of movement in the final image. More often then not, this slight background blur is enough to make an average photograph into a great one. Practice makes perfect. Do not expect to fill the card with award-winning pictures. They will require close review and weeding out. It is not uncommon to get only 10% good images with about 4 percent of those that could be exhibition quality. That is about 4 pictures per one hundred shot.

One final word of caution, the room you will be in is very large and contains a large surface of man-made ice and refrigeration systems to keep the rink hard. The cold generated from the refrigeration system and ice itself will often put the air temperature near 50 degrees. Since the idea is to maintain the surface of the ice the room temperature can't be raised to be more comfortable. Remember to dress in layers to stay warm. A thin set of gloves will also help keep the fingers from getting stiff. If you start feeling a chill go out of the rink area to warm up. No need to be uncomfortable or possibly get sick.

Check out the hockey rinks in your area and get a schedule as to when they might host a short track event. It is worth seeing and photographing. It is a subject matter that gets little attention yet gets a fair amount of attention at a judging. Go see exactly what this sport is all about. ■