



Speed Skating - a background

By David Morgan

Speed skating, or rather, short track speed skating, has been a part of my life for sixty years. Of course, when something has been a part of your life for so long the question: what do you leave out?

While I've been involved since only 1947, our sport has been evolving in Australia and other countries since the early 1900s.

Early developments

The first question to be resolved is: how come a country like Australia, which is geographically not noted for long cold freezing winters or high mountain ranges where freezing conditions occur naturally, been able to develop skaters at all? Never mind that we have had world champions, and won an Olympic Gold medal at Speed Skating.

Possibly, Thomas Sutcliffe Mort may have been an unwitting contributor to the development because of his interest in the carriage of meat products from his pastoral operations to the Sydney market. In the 1860s, this led to his development of a freezing works to freeze the meat to preserve it over the long trip to the market place in Sydney.

First artificial indoor skating rink

Shortly after Mort's development of freezing machines, an event in London was taking place which would revolutionise ice skating sports world wide. This was the opening of the London Glaciarium, the first artificially frozen ice skating surface in the world. It opened in January 1876 but closed by the end of that year. Designed by John Gamgee, it was situated behind the old Clock House in Kings Road, Chelsea. The ice surface was 40 feet x 24 feet. The rink was for use only by subscription for "noblemen and gentlemen under certain conditions". The *Illustrated London News*, of May 13, 1876, showed men and women dressed in high fashion of the period skating to an orchestra situated in a balcony over one end of the rink.

Start of artificial Ice Skating Rinks in Australia

By 1904, Australians were taking this new technology to their hearts, and the much larger ice rinks which had by then been developed were opening in Australian cities. The first in Adelaide in 1904, was closed a year later, then Melbourne in 1906 and Sydney in 1907, all co-incidentally called "Glaciarium". The Melbourne and Sydney

Glaciariums each lasted until the 1950s, and were the centres of development of ice skating-based sports in this country.

Our First Winter Olympian

Our first Winter Olympian was a Speed Skater, **Kenneth George Kennedy**, from Sydney.

Kennedy represented our country at the 1936 Winter Olympics held at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Germany. He had, like most of the serious skating fraternity of the time in this country, a good base of training in all of the skating disciplines, Figure, Speed and Ice Hockey.

He travelled to England in 1935, and competed in the British Indoor Speed Skating Championships, winning the quarter and half mile titles, establishing new record times while doing so.

This opened the opportunity for him to be nominated for the Olympic Winter Games, which was indeed a serious challenge.

In those far off days, the only internationally recognised Speed Skating was under the control of the International Skating Union, and their rules were based around competitions known today as "Long Track". This used a skating track that was 400 metres around one lap. (About the size of an athletics track on a field like the Olympic Stadium at Homebush.) In actual dimensions, a Long Track rink requires at least three times the area of one Short Track rink.

Also, all the Olympic Skating sports were contested on outdoor naturally frozen ice. Air temperatures are much lower than inside an artificial rink

Long Track is based around the concept of competition against the clock, rather than racing skater to skater. As you could imagine, the techniques for this type speed skating were very different from the ones that Kennedy, and his contemporaries in Australia and the UK, had been used to. In Indoor, or Short Track, because first skater across the finish line is the winner, the winner only has to go as fast as necessary to

defeat the other competitors in the race. In the Long Track sport, you are timed, so if you aren't the last skater to be timed, you have no idea of what time you have to skate to win the event. This, coupled with the vastly bigger surface on which the skaters skate, means that entirely different techniques need to be used to win an event.

Kennedy was on his own at these Olympics. This is always a difficult situation for an athlete, never mind that the conditions at these Olympics were totally different from any that he had previously experienced. He had no easy task to perform as well as he did. There were 52 competitors at the 1936 Games, and Kennedy's results were 29th in the 500 metres, 33rd in the 1500 metres and 33rd in the 5000 metres. He did not skate in the 10,000 metres.

Subsequent Olympic developments

World War II intervened in any further development by our speed skaters, but by 1949 we had several men and a couple of ladies who were adventurous enough to venture to Europe, specifically to Norway, to test their ability on the Long Track circuits.

Many events were held in the months from late November to late February in such countries as Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands. The results that they achieved were used to nominate the best for inclusion in Winter Olympic teams from 1952 onwards, or to qualify them for inclusion to skate for Australia at the World Championships.

The most successful of this group was a Melbourne skater called **Colin Hickey** who represented us at the Olympics three times, 1952, 1956 and 1960.

Hickey's time of 41.9 seconds for the 500 metres in 1960 was good enough to place him 7th in the Games. That was our best performance at Winter Olympics until 1976, when another Melbourne skater, **Colin Coates**, skated into 6th place in the 10,000 metres at the Innsbruck Games.

Coates incidentally, holds the record for the greatest number of Olympic Winter Games competed at by anyone – he represented us six times from 1968 to 1976.

Recognition of Short Track by the International Skating Union

While the development of Long Track skaters was considered to be most important, since it

represented our skaters only chance to represent their country at Olympic Games, or World Championships, there were some of us, in Australia and in several other countries, who felt that the need existed for the International Skating Union to recognise and regularise our sport as practised on the smaller indoor ice rinks.

Such countries as England, New Zealand, USA, Canada, Belgium and Japan had numbers of competitors who participated in Indoor Speed Skating racing. During the 1960s and early 1970s there were several young Australian skaters who visited the USA and England and competed very satisfactorily in events in those places.

We were fortunate that an Englishman, Ernie Matthews, was the GBR delegate for Speed Skating to the ISU congress during this period. He, with the assistance of several others, notably Jean Hackly from France, Jean Grenier from Canada and Ryohei Ishikawa from Japan, was successful in persuading the ISU Congress to introduce Short Track as a separate discipline to the ISU's range of ice sports. This meant that a set of rules, applicable world wide, could be introduced, and then with more effort, that the sport could become an Olympic Games event.

During the 1970s we had several visits from teams of skaters from overseas to compete at the Australian Championships. At various times, from about 1975 through to 1980, visiting skaters came from USA, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain, Japan and Belgium.

In 1978 the first ever World Championship in Short Track Speed Skating was held at Solihull in England. **Jim Lynch**, a Sydney skater, was the winner of the Men's division.

Short Track at the Olympic Winter Games

In 1988, the Short Track discipline was introduced at the Calgary Winter Olympics as a demonstration sport, and in 1992, it became a full Olympic event.

At the 1994 Lillehammer Olympics, Australian won its first ever medal at Winter Olympics, when our men's Relay team won the Bronze medal in the 5000 metre Relay event.

Still on the Olympic scene, at the Salt Lake City Games in 2002, Steven Bradbury was successful in winning Australia's first ever Gold Medal at a Winter Olympics, when he survived a series of

Speed Skating - a background

falls by other competitors in the final, to become the last man standing and winning the 1000 metres Gold Medal.

World Championships for Short Track

On the World Championships scene, Australia became the first, and to date, the only country outside the northern hemisphere, to be given the honour and responsibility by the ISU, to conduct a senior World Championship in a skating discipline. Macquarie Ice Rink in Sydney was the venue, and the Men's relay team capped off the final day of the championship by winning the Gold Medal.

Australia is one of only a handful of the 60 member countries of the ISU who have competed at every World Championship since the first one in 1978.

What of the future?

Short Track Speed Skating is continually evolving, as it has been all through the years of my time with the sport.

My only wish is that the young people coming into the sport here in Australia will have as much fun and enjoyment as I have in my years of involvement.