

A Brief History of Indoor Short Track

- by John Hurdis

(Wording in squared brackets [] added by the author after publication.)

Part One: Beginnings

While Canada and the United States of America can claim to have originated Indoor Short Track Speed Skating competitions in 1905/06, countries like Great Britain, Australia, Belgium, France and Japan deserve a great deal of credit.

Both the Canadian and Americans held mass start competitions on the now accepted oval track as early as [1906] and in later years the International Skating Union of America called the winners of these events "World Champions"! This was no doubt because the world governing body, the International Skating Union (I.S.U.), [based in Switzerland], did not at that time recognize indoor speed skating. These two countries have the honor of maintaining the longest running International Indoor championships in indoor speed skating which they organized in [1906]; [and in 1921] they also introduced into the program competitions for Ladies.

In 1946 at Johannesburg, South Africa there was a club practising indoor speed skating and in 1948, Frank Stack and Gordon Audley of Canada competed in London, England against top skaters from the Aldwych club prior to their participation in the 1948 Winter Olympics. (it should be pointed out that Stack was 48 years old at the time and has enjoyed a long successful career in indoor speed skating competitions in North America). As early as the late 40's, the London (Aldwych) and the Birmingham Mohawks [early 50's] clubs of Great Britain had already entertained teams from Belgium and France and return matches had been staged on the Continent of Europe.

[In 1948] the National Skating Association of Great Britain (N.S.A.) had organized the England vs Scotland International match, which remains to this day, one of the oldest International competitions. In 1949, John Hurdis who was active in British indoor speed skating was in correspondence with Dr. Joseph L. Zaremba, who was President of the Mid-Atlantic Skating Association of New York, U.S.A. about the possibility of competitions between American and British speed skaters on indoor ice.

Recognition of short track speed skating had ultimately to be introduced at the International level of competition and under the control of the I.S.U. In 1965 at the Congress of the I.S.U. in Vienna, Austria; Great Britain through E.J.G. (Ernie) Matthews their delegate [and Jean Heckly of France] introduced to the delegates, proposals for Regulations to govern short track speed skating and in 1967 these Regulations appeared in the printed manuals of the Union. Short Track speed skating was now part of the Union, but nothing really developed in the way of organised I.S.U. competitions on a world-wide basis for some time although Great Britain, Belgium, France as well as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S.A. competed amongst themselves.

In 1971, Rene Marleau, the President of the Canadian Amateur Speed Skating Association (CASSA) wrote to the General-Secretary of the I.S.U. for approval to stage a "World" Indoor Championship. This was obviously rejected as the discipline had not been promoted among the members of the Union or properly tested at full international levels.

At the [1973] I.S.U. Congress, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, John Hurdis, then President of CASSA together with [Dr.] Jean Grenier, Vice-President of the same organization vigorously promoted the discipline to the delegates present by using films, literature and discussions. This approach was successful and the Council of the Union named a special committee to study this. Ernie Matthews (GB) was to be the Chairman with Jean Grenier (Canada); George Howie (U.S.A.); Kiell Trystad (Norway) and Lars-Olof Eklund (Sweden) as the other members of the committee. Phil Krumm (U.S.A.) who was heavily involved in the U.S. Olympic movement and a former Secretary of the Amateur Skating Union of the U.S.A. (A.S.U.) played a large part in these deliberations.

In Quebec City, Canada in 1974; CASSA, strongly supported by the Quebec provincial association, and their many dedicated volunteers, staged the North American Indoor Championships. It not only attracted competitors from Canada and the U.S.A. but from as far afield as Australia, Belgium and France.

A year later in 1975 at the Lake Placid, N.Y. staging of the North American Indoor and during the Awards Ceremonies when Jim Lynch of Australia had received his accolades as the Senior Men's Champion, a comment from a parent of a U.S. competitor was overheard and what she said was "why do we (the U.S.A.) let the foreigners into these championships?". William Markland (U.S.A.) and John Hurdis who were there, talked amongst themselves about this comment and the possibility of a truly international "World" competition. Later that day during the festivities, Jean Grenier and Harry Henriksen (U.S.A.) joined in these in-depth discussions ... plans for an International Short Track competition were well underway.

Part Two: The 1976-86 Period

As mentioned in the previous issue Wm. Markland, John Hurdis and Jean Grenier during the 1975 North American Indoor in Lake Placid had planned the organization of a "world" competition [and an organizing committee was established consisting of both Americans and Canadians]. The end result was the first International Short Track "competition" staged at Champaign, Illinois [with 7 countries] in 1976.

The following year the French federation staged the second competition in Grenoble, France. Some national associations who had previously held no native championships in short track introduced them and the Dutch association, long masters of the outdoor scene organized the "Dutch Open" Short Track championships; to date this championship has attracted competitors from Australia, G.B., Republic of Germany, China, Canada, U.S.A., France, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Japan, New Zealand and Holland.

At the 1975 Congress in Munich, West Germany the members present elected their "first" Short Track Committee with Ernie Matthews as Chairman and Lars-Olof Eklund (Sweden); Ottavio

Cinquanta (Italy) and Jean Grenier as members.

In 1977, the Congress of the I.S.U. in Paris, France the supporters of Short Track speed skating, who were present expressed great delight when the President, Jacques Favart of France, said in his opening address to the members "that he thought Short Track should have it's own championship within the framework of the union". Correspondence had been heavy up 'til this Congress, many views and suggestions had been presented to format a championship and improve the Regulations by practising nations and much of the ground work to achieve this was executed by Hurdis and Markland. Proposals submitted to the Congress were accepted with very few changes.

A new committee was elected with Lars-Olof Eklund as Chairman and Ryohei Ishikawa (Japan); Ottavio Cinquanta and John Hurdis as members.

During the next 3 years (1978-1980) the I.S.U. staged three Championships [for Ladies & Men], in Solihull (England); Quebec City (Canada) and Milan (Italy). They were not called "World Championships" but "I.S.U. Championships", these championships paved the way to full recognition for a "World" title event.

The approval for a "World" title event as well as recognition for "World Short Track Records" came during the 1980 I.S.U. Congress in Davos, Switzerland. At this Congress, John Hurdis was elected Chairman along with Ryohei Ishikawa; Ottavio Cinquanta and William Markland as members. [it must be added that Benjamin T. Wright, a former President of the U.S. Figure Skating Assoc. who was present at this Congress strongly supported the move for the ISU to recognize Short Track as one of their disciplines..]

In the following 4 years (1981-1984) four World championships for Ladies and Men were staged at Meudon-la-Forêt,(France); Moncton,(Canada); Toyko, (Japan) and Peterborough,(England) with definite signs of improvement in technique and speed. The Peoples Republic of China and South Korea entered competitors for the first time at the Toyko championships and the Austrians did the same at the Peterborough championships.

At the 1984 I.S.U. Congress held in Colorado Springs, U.S.A. we saw the Short Track Committee enlarged to a Chairman and four members;the name of the discipline changed to "Indoor Short Track Speed Skating"; the four member team in Relay races for Ladies and Men becoming a championship event within the structure of the World event and the mandatory use of a hard shell protective helmet. The "seeding" system used since [the] Meudon-la-Forêt championship and known in short track circles as the "Markland System" was also written into the Regulations. A new committee was elected which saw a long time member of the committee as Chairman in Ottavio Cinquanta. John Hall (G.B.); William Markland, Jean Grenier and Reinier Oostheim (Holland) were elected as the members.

Many people over the past eighty years have played a large part in the development of indoor short track speed skating. For the modern day indoor short track speed [skating] these people could possibly be divided into three categories -- "Dreamers"; "Architects" and "Builders".

In my opinion we would have to place their names as follows:- "Dreamers" - E.J.G. (Ernie) Matthews (G.B.) and James "Bunny" Sheffield (U.S.A.). "Architects" - John Hurdis and Jean Grenier (Canada) and William L. (Bill) Markland (U.S.A.). In the "Builders" category we should find the names of Ryohei Ishikawa (Japan);

Otto Livi Cinquanta (Italy); Roy Helmski (U.S.A.); John Hall and Glen Henderson (G.B.); Lars-Olof Eklund (Sweden); Reinier Oostheim and Jaap Manshaden (Holland); David Morgan and Robert Roberts (Australia); Serge Bocquet and Jean Heckly (France); and Michel van Eesbeeck (Belgium) Of course there are many other names that could be listed but these are the names that come to the forefront as far as the development of the discipline as a truly International sport.

Twenty years have passed since Indoor Short Track Speed Skating was introduced on the floor of the I.S.U. Congress, there have been many people who have been pessimistic about the discipline ever making it in the Union, but now we see it firmly entrenched in the Regulations. The discipline has been accepted by the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) as a "demonstration" sport at the 1988 Winter Olympics to be held in Calgary, Canada and who knows... we may see it as a full sport event in the 1992 Winter Olympics.

Revised January 1998