

# STUDIES OF SPORTS

## Speed Skating Through Life, 1879-1900: From the Little Ice Age to Artificial Ice

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Modern speed skating primarily evolved from an interplay of forces including the Little Ice Age (700-1900 AD), trans-Atlantic steamship travel, worldwide railroad development, rapid industrialization, urban growth, and western expansion, plus a little creative invention - all this occurred in conjunction with the first trans-continental expansion of artificial ice-rink technology in 1879. Artificial ice-rinks, in combination with a global warming trend and increased industrial river activity would eventually lead to the extinction of the "official" open river sport. Speed skating's abrupt appearance (in geological time) and sudden extinction from river and lake environments, was thereafter hastened by a desire for standardization and order, which caused officials to attempt to implement artificial control of the inconsistencies of nature.

In 1879, the British formed skating's first national governing body to control amateur and professional events; they also provoked a worldwide movement toward standardized control and verification of world records spearheaded by the skating editor of the *Spirit of the Times*, William B. Curtis, who was a dedicated open river skater. Curtis, known as the "Father of Amateur Athletics in America," also founded the Fresh Air Club which was instrumental in locating good ice conditions in the New York City area. From 1879 onwards, Curtis' obsession with speed "records" would eventually require the consistent dependability of artificial ice, since records were difficult to equate under varying conditions of ice quality, wind speed, size and shape of track, etc. This need for standardized consistency led to the need for artificial ice, subsequently creating the ice-stadium as a market force for the development of short lived professional speed skating, and the future growth of hockey and figure skating. The invention of the artificial ice rink and the roller skate was to coincide with a global warming trend that began around 1700 when the coldest part of the Little Ice Age (1300-1700) ended. Although the maximum extent of the Little Ice Age went to the year 1900, a further warming of the earth began around 1850. British skaters were

frustrated with inconsistent and slushy ice, leading them to develop the first in-line roller skate around 1760 which hoped to satisfy the British passion for skating.

Since 1965 in Holland, the 124 mile eleven city canal skating race Elfsteden has been held only a few times because of poor ice caused by continued warming over the last 30 years. It was cancelled most recently in February of 1996. The recent facts on global warming come from an October 1995 report by the U.N. sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climatic Change (IPCC) which in cooperation with the World Meteorological Association has clearly stated that - human activity is definitely responsible for the increase in global temperatures! Today, with global warming being a reality, the Dutch are more concerned about the possibility of rising sea levels breaching their dikes than they are with the failure to hold their traditional ice-race.

After the first artificial ice-rink was developed in London in 1876, the first building with artificial ice to hold speed races on a short track oval in New York City was at Gilmore's Garden in 1879, later that year to be named Madison Square Garden #1. This began a movement that would eventually lead to Olympic speed skating events like Lillehammer '94 being held indoors on a stadium rink next to a snow covered lake of "natural ice" used for races only 100 years earlier.

In the late 19th century, the U.S. did not have a strong racing tradition like Holland which conducted races for women as early as the 1600s, but in 1888, William Curtis helped motivate the first amateur "world" champion whose early years of stern parental training on the frozen uppers of the Hudson River allowed him to sweep the European circuit. His name was Joseph F. Donoghue of Newburgh, N.Y. His presence on the world scene was to lead to the creation of the International Skating Union (ISU) in 1892. Later, this open river specialist would fail to master the tight turns of artificial stadium ice in professional races while using long racing blades designed for "straight" river work.

Today, the northern hemisphere rivers in Ottawa, Canada and Pyongyang, North Korea still have river-skaters transporting themselves from place to place, but the Hudson, Hackensack and Shrewsbury Rivers have not experienced anything like it since the Golden Age of open river speed skating.