

Warm winter melts Dutch skaters' hopes of legendary canal race

January 8 2016, by Jan Hennop And Nicolas Delaunay



A warming climate and a lack of freezing winters are forcing Dutch skaters to turn to artificial ice rinks, but many see natural ice skating as the ultimate form of the sport

Winter is nearing the halfway mark in the Netherlands with record high temperatures, melting fervent Dutch skaters' hopes of gliding over frozen canals or taking part in a near-mythical race last held 19 years ago.

December was the warmest-ever recorded in three centuries, leaving depressed Dutch skaters idly sharpening their blades and praying for temperatures to drop.

A short frozen spell in the country's north at the start of the New Year briefly raised spirits and saw some desperate skaters try out a thin layer of [ice](#) that glossed over pavements and streets.

Many others, however, have been left to seek solace at 24 major indoor ice skating centres and hundreds of smaller outdoor rinks to practise their gliding techniques on artificial ice, kept frozen by electrically-powered machines.

But what they dream of is skating on "real ice".

'Magic of skating outside'

Every winter, the Dutch carefully scrutinise weather reports. When a cold spell strikes the thickness of the ice is meticulously tested daily until it reaches more than six centimetres (2.3 inches), considered thick enough for recreational skating. Marathon skating requires ice to be at least twice as thick.

For some, the absence of a long, freezing cold winter is becoming a real cause for concern.



Record high temperatures in the Netherlands is melting fervent Dutch skaters' hopes of gliding over frozen canals or taking part in a near-mythical race last held 19 years ago

"Of course we're worried that the global climate is getting warmer," said Hans Zweedijk of the North Limburg Recreational Skating Society, based in the eastern Dutch city of Venlo.

"We've seen our membership drop over the last few years due to the lack of natural ice to skate on," he told AFP.

"Our members would much rather skate on natural ice than go round-and-round a 400 metre artificial ice rink," added Zweedijk, whose society counts some 500 members who skate at a rink in the nearby German town of Grefrath.

For many—including the country's top Olympic medallists who won a total of 24 skating medals including eight golds at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi—nothing compares to the feeling of skating outdoors.

"It's cold, there's ice, there's snow sometimes and that's the magic of skating outside," said Wiebe Wieling, president of the Society of Frisian Elf Steden (Eleven Cities) tour, one of the world's most mythical skating endurance races.

"When you skate from one place to the other you get a feeling you will never get from skating indoors," Wieling told AFP.

It is what skaters seem to crave.



The Dutch love affair with ice skating stretches as far back as the 13th century

"Skating on natural ice for many is the ultimate form of the sport," said Pieter Clausing of the Royal Dutch Skating Federation (KNSB).

Waiting for Elfstedentocht

The Dutch love affair with ice stretches as far back as the 13th century. Down the centuries skating became a main way of travelling between towns, according to the authoritative Dutch book "Alles over Ijs" (Everything about Ice).

Painters like 15th-century Dutch master Hieronymus Bosch featured strange creatures on skates in his works, while in the 1600s painters Hendrick Avercamp and Jan van Goyen immortalised the Dutch affinity for skating.

Nowhere is Dutch ice skating folklore more enshrined than in the legendary Elfstedentocht.

Each year around 30,000 registered skaters wait in nervous anticipation for the temperature to drop below zero long enough to freeze over 200 kilometres (120 miles) of Frisian canals, spanning the 11 cities on the arduous circular route of the race.

Having only been held just 15 times since it first began in 1909, the Elfstedentocht is considered the pinnacle of every Dutch skater's life and victory on such a tough course ensures near immortality.

"The whole country goes crazy!" said Wieling, who would be the one to pronounce the magic Frisian words "It giet oan" (It is happening) to inform the world the race is on, if and when the time comes.

But with the last race dating back to 1997, many are wondering when it will occur again.

It came close in 2012, but the Society of the Frisian Elf Steden finally decided the ice was not thick enough to support thousands of skaters and hundreds-of-thousands of spectators.

"It's been an exceptionally long time since we last had an Elfstedentocht," said Matthijs van der Linden, meteorologist at Meteovista.nl.

"The average global temperature is climbing. That however doesn't mean we'll never again have an Elfstedentocht," he told AFP.

"But it does mean that the wait between each race becomes longer and longer."

In an ironic twist of fate, this week's brief freeze led to the cancellation of an indoor skating competition as slippery road conditions made access to the track impossible.

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