

A brief history of the indoor championships

The 2018 Indoor British Championships have arrived. With them are new distances and new age groups, but the Championships themselves go back a long, long way.

The very first British Championship took place as far back as 1894. Back then outdoor skating was unheard of in terms of racing. There was the odd exhibition event such as a London to Southend where skaters would use metal wheels (real bone shakers!) but all inter club competitions and especially British Championships were held on rinks using wooden wheels – and there were plenty of them. Holland Park, Forest Gate, Herne Bay, Rochester Casino, Birch Park Manchester, Batley, Alexandra Palace, Birmingham Embassy... the list goes on and on. In fact, right up until the mid 1950's even World and European Championships were contested on indoor rinks and Great Britain was a real force to be reckoned with.

Back then racing was very much a winter sport. The domestic racing season opened on October 1st and went all the way through to May. As the racing was held in between general skating sessions only one event was held on any one weekend. You could travel a hundred miles and if you didn't get through your heat your day was done. Back then, though, although racing was still as intense as it is today, the event was also seen as a social occasion to many. The summer months were kept free for international competitions. (Not until 2000 did the domestic season switch to 1st January to 31st December).

By the late 1950's the major international competitions had moved outdoors onto purpose built banked tracks but back in Britain, without a banked track we were still competing indoors. In fact, the technical ability and agility needed to negotiate indoor flat tracks helped Britain continue to be a dominant force on the world scene in those early days of banked tracks. Britain did not have its own purpose built track for another 30 years!

Towards the end of the 1960's and early 1970's, however, roller skating was on the decline. British rinks were closing down in their hundreds and being turned into bingo halls or car showrooms. The days of indoor competition appeared effectively over as racing moved outdoors. Without any proper facilities racing throughout the 1970's and 80's was held on car parks, school playgrounds, the odd road circuit and of course Tatem Park – an old 1930's junior cycle circuit that now had a layering of asphalt. All British Championships had now progressed to being outdoor.

In July 1988 the Roller Speed Committee decided to hold a one off Indoor British Championship to complement the 'normal' British Championships. This televised event was sponsored by the East Midlands Electricity Board under the banner 'SkateElectric' and was held at the Granby Halls, Leicester in conjunction with the British Artistic Roller Championships. With just two age groups (11 to 15 years and 16+ years) it brought championship skating back indoors for the first time in nearly 20 years. One of those competitors was teenager and recently turned senior skater, Michael McInerney.

Despite this, championships continued to be held outdoors and then in 1996 the Roller Speed Committee decided to hold a regular Indoor British Championship event. As with

what were now classed as 'outdoor' championships, indoor championships would bring a new (or old) dimension to the sport – going back to its roots as it were.

The Championships were once again held at the Granby Halls, Leicester with Michael McInerney winning the Senior Men's event and Sarra Dally the Senior Ladies event. With the exception of 2003, the Indoor Championships have continued to be held annually and have firmly established themselves as a key part of the domestic race season. Back in 1996 there were just 3 age groups (6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years and senior) each having just one individual distance and a senior relay race. Now, of course, the championships are far more reaching with no fewer than 7 age groups all having 3 races each and their very own relay.

The distances too have evolved. This year sees the inaugural championship event the timed individual flying lap, the 'Dobbin Sprint' – so named after New Zealand sprint legend and multi-World Champion, Kalon Dobbin.

Many trophies for these indoor events were donated by Leo and Pat Eason. Both had been world class skaters, indoor and outdoor. Leo was of course a World Champion back in 1963, but Pat was also a world medallist, winning medals in 3 out of 4 events on the indoor Barcelona rink in 1956. Sadly, Leo passed away last September as did Pat in January of this year. It is a fitting tribute to these masters of indoor racing that their trophies are still presented to this day.

So, take a breath and tune yourself into what will undoubtedly be a full day of thrills, spills, tears of both joy and frustration as skaters take to the track in an attempt write their names into the annals of history and be crowned 2018 Indoor British Champion.