

Strategy and Tactics – Part 1 – Overview

By Susan Ellis

Short Track is a complex sport where often times the best, most technical, or fastest skater does not win. Speed definitely helps, endurance helps, technique helps, but often times a race is won by outsmarting your competition.

I have seen so many races where an underdog has won the race simply by having a solid race plan, and using their own personal strengths to gain advantage over their opponents' weaknesses. By the same token I have seen many races where the favourite loses, simply by not reacting to what is happening in the race and making the same mistake over and over.

“A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it, is committing another mistake.” ~ Confucius

To win races you need to know your own strengths and weaknesses as well as your opponents. You will need to be able to execute a variety of different track patterns and know when to use those patterns, know when to lead races, when to follow, how to follow, when to pass, how to pass, when to block, how to block, when to go full speed, when to 'float'. Your strategy may also be dependent on the distance, whether it is a heat, a semi, or a final, and on how many qualify from each heat to the next round, whether there is a time qualification as well as a placement qualification.

Be the Boss – Control the race!

One of the traits of successful skaters is that they always put themselves in position to 'control' the race. This means they are always in advancement position or medal position when they need to be.

It has long been a misconception that leading a race is bad because your opponents can just draft off you and then pass you at the end. What is bad is not knowing what pace to go when you're in the lead while still conserving your energy for the end, and skating a track pattern that allows easy passing. This is where technique becomes so important in being able to comfortably handle any pace and conserve energy. In reality, the only place you are truly in control of what is happening in the race is in the lead position. You control pace, track pattern, and passing attempts, including who you do let by and who you don't let by. Leading a race puts you in advancement position should someone take you out in a heat, and puts you in medal position in a final. Leading forces others to expend more energy in trying to get around you, especially if you are skating a hard to pass track pattern, and may force others to make mistakes. Leading is an especially good strategy if you are not the fastest in the race, if you are not in the best condition, or if there are awkward people in the race you don't want to get caught up behind. Leading is also a good strategy if you are in great shape and can set a pace that burns off your competition. If you need to ensure your heat goes fast to enable you

to qualify for the next round on time when you are not sure you can do it on placement you may need to lead the race out fast to get the time.

Skating from second place also puts you in advancement and medal position, and also just one pass away from winning. But it is also just one person away from being out of the next round if you are passed. You need to be really aware of what is happening behind you so you can sense and hear when you are being set up to be passed and you must skate a track pattern that prevents the person behind from passing, and a pattern that sets you up to pass if needed.

Third place is what I call the 'jeopardy' position – not in qualifying position in the heats, and just one person away from being out of the medals in a final. Not so bad early in the race, but if you stay there too long you may not get by at the end of the race if the two ahead of you are doing a good job on pace and blocking. If you elect to skate from 3rd position you had better be prepared to go by before the pace really picks up to ensure an easier pass.

Skating from the back is only for skaters who are so far superior to the rest of the field that they can pass any time they darn well please. But all too often skaters who 'think' they are superior get caught back there, can't get by the pack, run afoul in passing, or simply wait too long. The Koreans often use this strategy in heats because of their superiority in speed and passing, but unless you are head and shoulders above the rest, not a good one to employ. When the Koreans use this come from behind strategy they normally make their pass from back to front in one fell swoop, going by the pack before the pack can do anything about it. Picking your way to the front one by one has a habit of biting back at you when you run up against a great blocker, or someone who simply will not give up their spot. That's when you run into DQ trouble, or get jammed up inside or stuck on the outside.

Often skaters will look at who is in their race and decide right away they can't win it. And, of course, based on the decision they have already made, they never put themselves in position to win. And guess what? They never do! They start at the back and finish at the back and never attempt to move, because, of course, they can't, right? To all you timid, non-confident, skaters – GET TO THE FRONT!!

Make things happen. Control the pace, change your pace, control the track, change your track, set up the blocking, make them work to get around you! If you just go to the front, set a steady pace with a steady track, you will be passed! A skater at a recent camp asked "What is the best track to skate?" There are many 'best' tracks'. It's a matter of choosing the right one at the right time with the right pace. But if you just do the same thing lap after lap you are too easy to figure out and you will be passed.

The Race Plan

Before your race you should have a general idea of what you are going to do in the race as well as back up plans and 'what if's'. Consider your strategy carefully, as what works against one skater may not work against another skater. Also consider that skaters can improve, so the person you could easily keep behind you 3 weeks ago may have just nailed their slingshot passing, and now you may need a different strategy against them. Confidence is one thing, but NEVER underestimate the competition.

Here is a list of some things to consider in developing your race plans, strategies and tactics that we'll be looking at over the next few articles in this series.

Short Track Strategy and Tactics Overview

Tracks

Types of tracks see Tracks – January 2005

- Normal
- High Speed – wide exit / wide entry
- Offensive defensive – wide exit / narrow entry
- Defensive-offensive – narrow exit / wide entry
- Defensive – narrow exit / narrow entry
- Passing tracks – wide, deep entry
- Trick tracks – fooling the opponent

When to use different tracks

- Situations
- Speeds
- Advantages / Disadvantages

Step patterns on different tracks

- Entry and exit points
- Adjusting step patterns
- Entry and exit
- Adjusting speed on patterns
- Leading step pattern
- Following step pattern
- Passing step pattern
- High speed simulations at low speeds

Strategy

- Physical race plan
- Mental race plan
- Considerations:
 - Realistic goals
 - Control vs react
 - Distance
 - Competition
 - Physical condition
 - Heat, semi, final
 - Time vs placing advancement
 - Points placing
 - Ice conditions
 - Skating height matches speed (high vs low)
- Back up plans

Tactics

- Position in pack
- Lead
- Follow
- Moving up
- Track pattern
- What pattern to use
- When to vary pattern
- Pace
- What pace
- When
- How to vary
- Setting pace
- Following pace
- Passing
- Safety
- Set up
- Inside coming out of corner
- Outside on corner
- Outside going in to corner
- Outside on straight
- Single passing
- Pack passing

- Blocking
- On exit
- On entry
- In lead
- In pack
- Breaking away

Start strategy see Start Strategy – November 2008

- Confidence
- Safety
- Aggressiveness
- Position on line – advantages, disadvantages
- Trajectory in to 1st block
- Transition point in to turn
- Trajectory through first corner
- 1st lap, if in lead, if not in lead.

Evaluation of the strategy and tactics

- Evaluating the competition plan
- Evaluating races, plans, strategy, tactics
- Revising plans

Time trialing

- Race plan
- Strategy for each lap
- Track pattern
- Mental plan

Warm ups see Warm Ups – June 2007

- Time trialing
- Pack racing