

THE FORGOTTEN WORLD CHAMPION

This is a story about the little known fact of a British roller speed skating team that competed in the 1947 RSROA World Championships and where one of our own came away as a 'World Champion'. Before we get to that, though, we need to explore a little bit of the background that led up to this event.

The story actually begins back in America in 1937. Between the 2nd and 4th April of that year the first ever 'official' U.S. national speed skating championships were held at the Arena Gardens rink in Detroit, Michigan. Witnessing the event were no fewer than 17 rink owners/managers who immediately afterwards met and formed the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA). The idea was to bring some structure to the professional and amateur skating competitions in the U.S., whereas prior it had been a bit of a free for all. Although the RSROA was predominantly biased towards roller dance, it did also cover speed.

Shortly after its inception the RSROA became affiliated to the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) which controlled most American amateur sports at the time, which in turn was affiliated to the FIPR (the fore-runner to FIRS). The result was that the RSROA became the recognised governing body of roller skating within America. However, due to the RSROA also having professional members (which included rink owners and managers) the AAU were never completely happy with having them on board. When a body known as the Amateur Skating Union (ASU) joined the AAU in 1939 it was insisted upon that the RSROA become affiliated to them. Although the ASU dealt mainly with ice skating it reluctantly accepted the affiliation of the RSROA. At the same time a second governing body, the United States Amateur Roller Skating Association (US-ARSA) that touted itself as being solely for the governance of amateur skaters, also became affiliated to the ASU. Very quickly, however, it became apparent that these two factions were never going to agree and a state of political turmoil ensued.

After much political wrangling and dispute, in 1942 the RSROA resigned their position from the AAU/ASU and went it alone. This effectively meant that America now had two governing bodies specifically for roller skating (RSROA and US-ARSA), both of whom would hold their own national championships. The rivalry between these two bodies would last for more than 30 years, but that's an entirely different story.

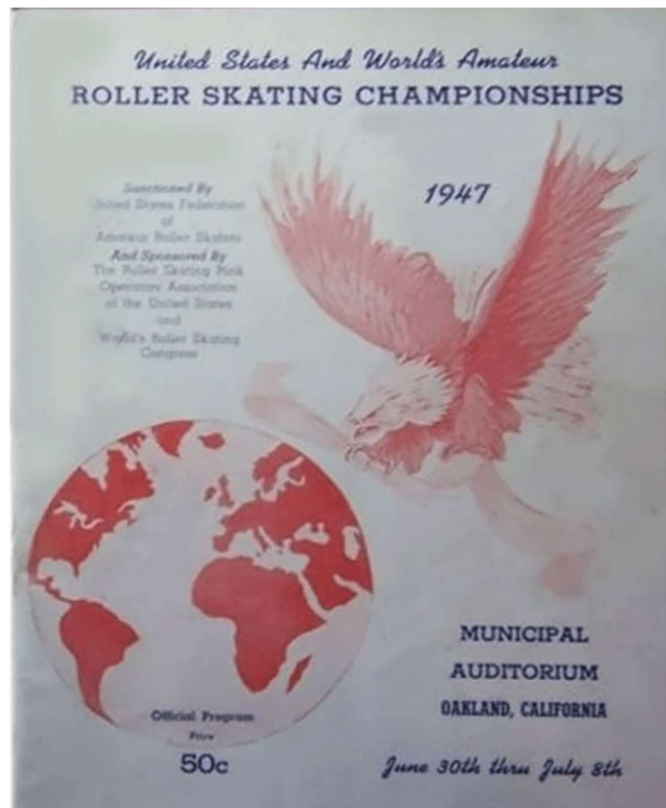
Despite having removed themselves from the AAU/ASU structure the RSROA were very much still seen as the body to be with. Not only were they more established but their work for charity events even saw them recognised by President Eisenhower.

By 1945 the RSROA had established itself as a body in other countries around the world, most notably Canada, New Zealand, Australia and India and set up what they deemed to be a World Roller Skating Congress. Although having been affiliated to the FIPR for some years the world governing body had always been uneasy about the inclusion of the RSROA due to its links to professionalism. This eventually came to a head in 1946 and the result was that the RSROA subsequently removed itself as a member body of the FIPR (or it was kicked out,

depending upon which report you read). Virtually the same day US-ARSA joined the FIPR to become officially known as the new and only American governing body for amateur roller skaters.

The RSROA was not blind to the perceived problem of its association with professional skaters/rink operators and so to overcome this it set up another body specifically for amateurs known as the United States Federation of Amateur Roller Skating (US-FARS). In September 1946 the RSROA crossed the Atlantic and met with a number of British rink operators and managers and explained exactly how they worked and what they could offer. As an established organisation they were greeted warmly with the aftermath being the setting up of the British Federation of Amateur Roller Skating (BFARS) which was itself affiliated to the RSROA. By Christmas of that year no fewer than 14 British rinks were affiliated to the RSROA. Unsurprisingly, the NSA swiftly made a comment that any move to “usurp” their governance of amateur roller skating within Great Britain would result in them taking “vigorous steps to resist such action”.

At the meeting with British rink operators the RSROA indicated that their World Roller Skating Congress would organise the first post-war World Championships for both speed and artistic. The first event was announced as being in July 1947 and would be held in Oakland, California.



Cover of official event programme

In January 1947 the RSROA and the NSA met to discuss matters at hand. For some time, NSA skaters had been unclear as to whether there would be sanctions if they joined the RSROA/BFARS and as such had been reluctant to do so. At the meeting it was agreed that sanctions would not be imposed and suggested that any NSA member could take a BFARS test but could NOT take part in any unauthorised competition. The NSA deemed a test (speed or dance) not to be a competition.

Teams from the RSROA member nations were soon invited to take part in the World Championships and in April of that year with NSA approval Britain announced that their own speed team would consist of Frank Lamb (Broadway), Geoff Sanders (Broadway) and Stan 'Jimmy' Hartigan (Alexandra Palace).

By the time the championships started there had been a few alterations to the British team. Stan Hartigan had been replaced by Joe Woodward (Broadway) and ladies speed skater, June Gillard (Broadway), had also joined the team. Arthur Smith (Broadway Honorary Secretary) also went along in the capacity of a speed judge.



The British team in Oakland, California – July 1947

Frank Lamb was the reigning British Mile Champion as well as reigning Southern Counties Champion and Relay Championship winner. He had also won the Mile Championship in 1939. In 1937, at just 17, he had finished 3rd in the Five Mile Championship behind skating legends Jimmy Reed and Jackie Robbins.

Geoff Sanders was the reigning Half Mile Champion in which Frank Lamb finished second. He had also won the Southern Counties the year previous and was also a current Relay Champion.

Joe Woodward was a twice bronze medallist in the Half Mile Championship and a silver medallist in the County of London Championships. He would be the travelling reserve skater.

June Gillard was the reigning ladies Half Mile Champion.

Despite all four skaters being from the Broadway club, these were indeed an elite bunch. It is not clear why Stan Hartigan did not travel, although one suspects it has to do with the fact that the Broadway club, through association with the Cricklewood rink, were closely aligned to the RSROA. As the reigning Five Mile Champion Hartigan would have certainly held his own during competition. And so, on June 25th the team set out aboard the Queen Elizabeth from Southampton to New York. From there they took the train to Oakland, California and competed in what was to be the first organised post-war World Championships.

The speed events were held over two days, 7th and 8th July, in the Oakland Civic Auditorium on a circuit that was twelve laps to the mile. The distances competed over were all imperial with the final results being as follows:

MENS QUARTER MILE

1. H.Wyant USA
2. G.Sanders GBR
3. F.Lamb GBR

MENS HALF MILE

1. H.Wyant USA
2. F.Lamb GBR
3. G.Sanders GBR

MENS ONE MILE

1. H.Wyant USA
2. G.Sanders GBR
3. Not awarded – C.Manahan (USA) and F.Lamb (GBR) disqualified

MENS TWO MILE

1. F.Lamb GBR
2. H.Wyant USA
3. C.Manahan USA

LADIES 220 YARDS

1. M.Lou-Dauer USA
2. B.Hosek USA
3. J.Gillard GBR

LADIES HALF MILE

1. M.Lou-Dauer USA
2. B.Hosek USA
3. V.Burgess NZL

With the exception of Joe Woodward all British skaters came home with a medal. With his gold medal in the Two Mile event Frank Lamb was the only non-American to win a world title, but outside of the Broadway club very little was made of Lamb's victory or indeed any detailed reports of the racing.



Frank Lamb's gold medal for the 2 Mile event

In early 1948 BFARS had firmly cemented themselves into the psyche of British roller skating. They had been holding figure and dance competitions for some time and there had been a distinct split between those held by the NSA and those held by BFARS. BFARS events were only held on rinks who were members of the RSROA but their membership had increased significantly. Despite some grumblings the NSA were focused on ice skating. In 1948 their membership was made up of 84% ice skaters and just 16% roller skaters and so effectively ignored these 'other' competitions.

It wasn't long before speed skating also came to the fore. Believing they now had a throng of skaters willing to take part, BFARS put on their own British Championship events at the Birmingham Embassy rink, a One Mile race and a Five Mile race. Only skaters who were members of clubs that were affiliated to BFARS (and by association, the RSROA) could take part – and this included both Broadway and Birmingham. Broadway's Don Brown would win the One Mile 'Championship' and his club mate, Denis Hill, would win the Five Mile 'Championship'.

BFARS and their membership had grossly underestimated the impact of their actions. Once it was known by the NSA that another event designated as an 'amateur British Championship' had been held without its authorisation it was quick to meter out penalties. All clubs that had taken part in these 'unofficial' British Championships were dealt an immediate 12 month ban. The result was that the 1948 NSA British Championships would only be contested by the Alexandra Palace club and a few lesser clubs. In addition, the British team for the 1948 World Championships in Monfalcone, Italy (the first post-war championships under the auspices of the FIPR), consisted entirely of Alexandra Palace skaters. The NSA had finally bared its teeth.

Over time the RSROA held a few more World "Congress" Championships – 1956 in Richmond, USA, 1959 in Christchurch, New Zealand and 1962 in Brisbane Australia. The sporadic nature of these events and the fact that the FIPR (now known as the Federation International de Roller Skating – FIRS) was recognised by the IOC as the world governing body for roller sports meant that these events would be short lived.



Don Brown receiving the BFARS One Mile Championship Trophy - 1948

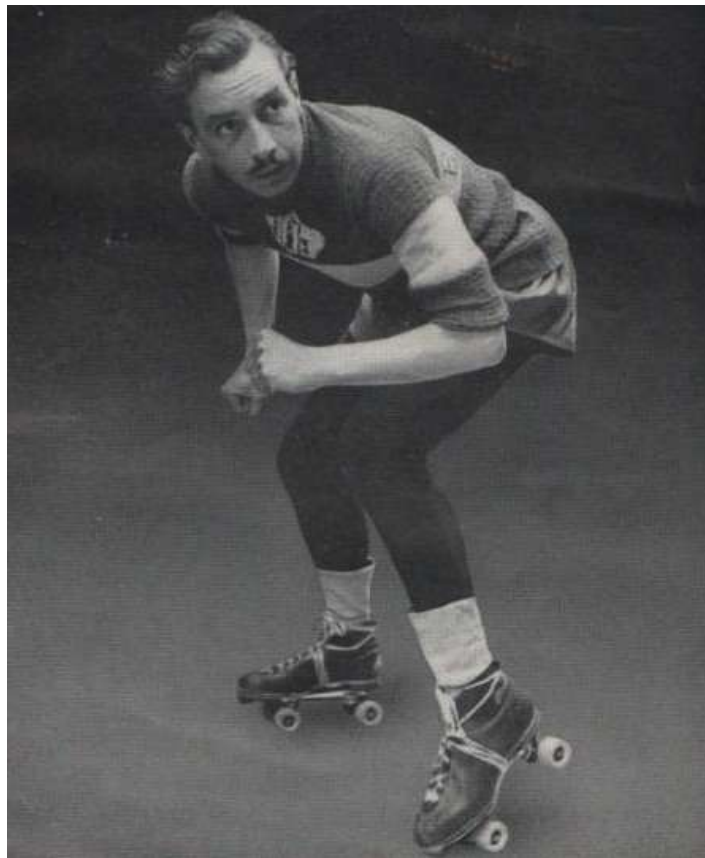
The ban given out by the NSA to the clubs who took part in the BFARS British Championships of 1948 effectively ended the competition before it had really begun. Skaters realised that if they wanted to take part in fully recognised world championships then the only way forward was to continue to embrace the NSA as the recognised governing body. By the time rinks started to close their doors for good in the 1960's, BFARS had all but vanished.

The RSROA and US-ARSA eventually put their differences aside in 1971 and joined together to make a single entity, the United States Amateur Confederation of Roller Skating (USAC), later rebranded as USA Roller Sports (USARS).

And so here we are. More than 75 years have passed since Great Britain sent a team to America and came home with our first post-war World Champion, albeit an unofficial one. Frank Lamb didn't win another British title and never made another British team, and over the years nor would he become a name synonymous with global success, unlike the names of Eason, Kelly and Folley.

It was heady times for the NSA and the commercial influence of rink operators were certainly their biggest threat over their 100 years existence. Since then, of course, the NSA has disbanded and roller (now inline) speed skating has gone its own way in the form of the Federation of Inline Speed Skating (FISS). The roller speed federation is still affiliated to FIRS (through the umbrella body of the British Roller Sports Federation – BRSF) and still attends World and European Championships, as it has done since 1936 (or even earlier if you count the international relay events of the early 1920's). Over time the memories of the events of 1947/48 have long started to fade. Those who were there are not here now and as with most stories, unless they are continued to be told they will be lost forever.

So, with that in mind, I think it's time to look back and recognise the exploits of our first post-war British team and our "forgotten" World Champion, Frank Lamb.



Frank Lamb – 1947 RSROA World Two Mile Champion

Pictured here in 1949

SUMMARY TIMELINE

- 1879** * The National Skating Association of Great Britain (NSA) formed
- 1893** * Roller speed skating formally becomes a skating discipline under the auspices of the NSA
- 1924** * The Federation International de Patinage a Roulettes (FIPR) is formed and recognised as the world governing body for roller skating disciplines
- 1930** * The FIPR organise the first European Championships (road) in Antwerp, Belgium
- 1936** * The FIPR organise the first European (track) Championships in Stuttgart, Germany - Great Britain are invited to compete for the first time and win 5 out of 7 events despite not yet being members of the FIPR
- 1937** *
- * The FIPR organise the first World Championships (road) in Monza, Italy - Britain do not take part
 - * The NSA become affiliated to the FIPR
 - * The Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) formed in the USA
- 1938** * London (Wembley) hosts the first World (track) Championships - Britain win 4 out of 6 events
- 1939** *
- * The RSROA join the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) - the governing body for most sports in the USA which in turn is affiliated to the FIPR
 - * Due to the RSROA also having professional members the AAU insist that the RSROA be affiliated to the Amateur Skating Union (ASU) despite it being predominatly geared towards ice skating
 - * A second governing body, the United States Amateur Roller Skating Association (US-ARSA) is formed specifically for amateur roller skaters and joins the AAU/ASU
- 1942** * Internal politics result in the RSROA resigning from the AAU/ASU although they are still recognised by FIPR as a governing body

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| 1946 | * | The RSROA resign from the FIPR |
| | * | US-ARSA is recognised by the FIPR as the new governing body for American roller skating |
| | * | The RSROA meet with British rink operators and communicate that a World Roller Skating Congress (WRSC) had been set up with Canada, New Zealand, Australia and India with the intention of holding their own World Championships |
| | * | 14 British rink operators join the RSROA |
| | * | Understanding the need for specific amateur recognition the RSROA set up a separate body known as the United States Federation of Amateur Roller Skating (US-FARS) |
| | * | The British rink operators set up a similar body called the British Federation of Amateur Roller Skating (BFARS) - believing the NSA to be biased towards ice skating |
| 1947 | * | A meeting between the NSA and RSROA takes place - the NSA agree that their members can take part in BFARS tests as well as NSA tests but cannot take part in unauthorised competitions - they do not see tests as competitions |
| | * | The first WRSC/RSROA World Championships take place in Oakland, California - Britain send a team with the approval of the NSA |
| 1948 | * | The BFARS hold their own British Championships at the Birmingham Embassy rink - skaters from Broadway and Birmingham take part - it is the first and last time the event is held - all races are won by Broadway skaters |
| | * | The NSA take a dim view of the competition and dish out a 12 month ban to all clubs who took part - this prevents Broadway and Birmingham skaters from being eligible for selection for the 1948 World Championships in Monfalcone, Italy and from competing in the 1948 British Championships |