

THE GREAT INTERNATIONAL RACE OF 1909

The Great International Race of 1909 captured the imagination of many skaters up and down the country and across the Atlantic. The event was the brainchild of American businessman Chester Park Crawford and his Liverpoolian business partner, Frederick Wilkins.



Chester Park Crawford

In 1907 after a twenty year hiatus America was experiencing a resurgence in roller skating. All the major cities were opening rinks and the Samuel Winslow Skate Manufacturing Company who had been producing roller skates for almost three decades, recognised the upswing in popularity as the demand for roller skates increased. In an attempt to capitalise on this newfound popularity elsewhere across the globe they sensed an opportunity in Great Britain. The company sought out someone who would be prepared to travel and promote the activity across the Atlantic. That person was Chester Park Crawford of St. Louis.

Crawford came to England in the autumn of 1907 aged 37 having already owned a number of roller rinks in America. With the full backing of Winslow he initially became a General Manager of a rink in Brighton but within just two short months he had met the acquaintance of Liverpool businessman and merchant, Frederick Wilkins. Together they set up their own company, the American Roller Rink Company, and opened a roller rink in Liverpool's Tournament Hall on Edge Lane. The rink opened its doors on November 16th, 1907, and was to be the first of many. Crawford was already a very wealthy and canny businessman and his deal with Winslow (who made around ten thousand pairs of roller skates *per day*), meant that they would supply their all new ball bearing type skates for this new rink and any other rink that he and Wilkins intended to open. It is believed that Crawford also introduced Britain to Canadian maple wood flooring and floor polishing machines which set their rinks above those already in existence. In fact,

as part of his business venture he had the sole rights to loan out these floor polishing machines to other rinks, charging by the square footage. So popular was the Liverpool rink that within the space of six to eight weeks the business partners had recovered more than 40% of their investments and the newfound partnership set about looking for another establishment.



Floor polishing machine

On 7th March 1908 the Exhibition Hall in St. Mary's Place, Newcastle opened its doors. From then on, they started opening rinks up and down the country at the rate of about one per month. In December 1908 the pair signed a contract with London's Kensington Olympia which had last been used as a roller rink some eighteen years previous. The contract stated that they could open the venue as a roller rink for three months (end of December to beginning of March) for a period of three years. Laying more than 113 miles of maple wood and covering an area of 100,000 square feet they created the largest roller rink in the world.

By January 1909 they now had no fewer than seventeen rinks in their portfolio in places like Edinburgh, Belfast Birmingham, Dublin and Llandudno to name but a few. It was then that Crawford had his idea of a 'grand event' and publicised a race that would capture the attention of professional skaters from all quarters.

Crawford and Wilkins set out to find the fastest skater globally over a distance of one mile. With a prize pot of £400 (a little over £60,000 in today's money) the event was advertised in many periodicals as the "One Mile World Championship". This was advertised none more so than in The Sportsman newspaper. Benetfink & Co. who had donated a trophy to the NSA for the British (amateur) Championships, took umbrage with the use of the word 'championship' to describe the event and said so in an open letter to The Sportsman, however, little heed was paid to their objections and the

activities continued unabated. A set of specific rules were even set up and published, which became known as The Sportsman Rules, and had the full backing of the National Skating Association. The NSA also lent its support in terms of laying out tracks and supplying officials.



Sporting Life – 4th February 1909

The idea was to have qualifying heats from nine of the largest rinks owned by Crawford and Wilkins where the top two skaters (four in the case of the final qualifying round) would then qualify for the Grand Final to be held at Olympia. The rinks selected for these qualifying rounds were Liverpool, Glasgow, Leeds, Belfast, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Bradford, Manchester and London. Over a period of almost four weeks, skaters could enter any of the qualifying rounds at any of the venues they so desired. If they came up short at one venue nothing stopped them entering at another. Should they also complete the mile distance in under four minutes they would also get their entry fee back. Each winner of the qualifying rounds would get £10 prize money and the second placed skater £5. The prize for winning the Grand Final was £150 plus a trophy valued at £40, £50 for second place and £25 for third. Each venue held heats over a number of days with its own final to establish the skaters that would then secure a place in the Grand Final.

Liverpool – Tournament Hall

As one would expect, their first rink to open would be the venue for the first qualifying round. On 1st February 1909 the first skaters took to the track in their attempt to secure a place in the Grand Final.

On 4th February Harold Moulden (Manchester) and Arthur Lennie (Liverpool) became the first qualifiers for Olympia.



Liverpool – Tournament Hall

Glasgow

Over the course of three days skaters qualified for the Glasgow final which was held on 5th February in front of a crowd of some three thousand spectators. The final race was a pretty uneventful affair resulting in E. K. Rowe (Westcliff-on-Sea) and Harold Hall (Liverpool) qualifying for Olympia.

Leeds – Headingley



Leeds - Headingley

The first heat of this qualifying round should have taken place on 3rd February, however, gales in the afternoon blew out some of the glass panes in the roof and others were deemed unsafe. All skating activities were postponed until the following day.

When racing finally got underway further drama soon followed. In the second heat the skaters consisted of George Bloor (Newcastle), P. Swift (Bradford), P. McGuire, (Leeds) and W. D. McDonald (Leeds). McDonald looked to be winning easily when he was fouled by Swift and Bloor came through to cross the line first. McDonald objected to having been fouled but the judges still gave Bloor the victory.

As if that wasn't dramatic enough, the final, held on the same evening as the Glasgow final, would prove even more so. The qualifiers were Bloor, Charles Burdett (Leicester) and S. M. Johnson (Leeds). Johnson got away first but soon faded and was passed by Bloor and Burdett who crossed the line in that order, however, there were protestations that Bloor and Burdett had skated inside the track at one of the corners. The judges considered these protests and eventually awarded Johnson the victory. They then asked Bloor and Burdett to skate off to determine the second qualifier (plus the £5 prize). Both refused leaving Johnson as the only qualifier from the eventful Leeds qualifying round.

Belfast - Cliftonville

The final for Belfast was held on 10th February. R. J. Worrall (Cliftonville) had fallen in one of the heats but managed to pick himself up and still qualify, however, his wrist was so badly damaged from the fall that he did not turn out for the final.



Belfast - Cliftonville

The race went ahead with the remaining three skaters when J. H. Edwards (Llandudno) collided with the barrier on the second lap hurting his head and forced him to retire. This resulted in Daniel Peterson (Belfast) and R. Martin (Belfast) going through to the Grand Final with some ease.

Birmingham – Monument Road

This round provided some serious competition with many elite skaters of the day opting to use Birmingham as their opportunity to qualify for Olympia. In fact, out of all the qualifying rounds this probably proved the most problematic with such a quality class of



Birmingham – Monument Road

field. In amongst the starters were Alf Bear (London), Tertius Blakesley (Leicester), P.F.Powell (London), William de Borde (Leicester), George Cooper (Birmingham), Hal Berte (London) and Charles Burdett (Leicester), trying his hand again after his Leeds disappointment. Many of these skaters were professional champions or holders of records in their own right.

This qualifying round too was not without controversy, when in the second heat A. Ellis (London) was adjudged to have been fouled by Cooper and pushed off the track. Cooper had clumsily attempted a pass on the inside. Further, both Cooper and de Borde later kicked flags over which is also contrary to the rules and both were disqualified. The judges ordered a rerun but both Cooper and de Borde refused resulting in a walk-over for Ellis.

The final went without incident on 12th February and the two qualifying skaters for Olympia resulted in Powell and Berte crossing the line first and second.

Edinburgh – Murrayfield

George Bloor (Newcastle) put in another appearance after his debacle at Leeds. This time, without drama, he secured himself a place at Olympia by finishing second behind S. H. Hellman (Edinburgh) in the Edinburgh final on 17th February. The race was exciting and close throughout with Bloor just missing out on victory by one tenth of a second.



Edinburgh - Murrayfield

Bradford – Manningham Road

Having missed out on qualification in Birmingham, elite professional skater, Alf Bear (London), decided to use Bradford as his next attempt at qualification into the Grand Final.



Bradford – Manningham Road

On 19th February and skating against much lesser opposition, this time Bear easily made the grade, as did A. Ellis (London). Ellis had also taken part in Birmingham and had also failed in his initial attempt having courted much controversy in that particular round.

Manchester – St. James' Hall

Manchester provided a potential upset when both elite professionals, William Curtis Senior (London) and Charles Wilson (London), decided to use this rink to achieve their

qualification for the Grand Final. Luckily, Curtis and Wilson drew separate heats and would meet in the final on 19th February. Both drew away from their competition and kept in close contact with each other throughout, Wilson crossing the line ahead of Curtis by about a yard. Despite their obvious ease Wilson still set a new track record of 3 minutes 26.2 seconds.



Manchester – St. James' Hall

Wilson had never been beaten as an amateur in any race and was, in fact, the reigning amateur British Champion. He had actually won the very first title back in 1894 and again in 1906, 1907 and 1908. However, as soon as Crawford and Wilkins announced their desire to hold this international event, Wilson forfeited his amateur status and turned professional.

After Manchester there was just one final qualifying round left to run and that would be at Olympia itself.

London - Olympia

The London qualifying round attracted much attention, not least of all because it contained three great Americans, namely Allie Moore and the Davidson brothers, Harley and John. All were American champions and multiple record holders in their own country. Such was the size of the entry that the qualifying round also ran semi-finals as well as heats.



London (Kensington) - Olympia

A few days before the London qualifying round started one of the American competitors put in a complaint that the track layout of two straights and two bends would not produce fast times. Further, they noted that in America if a skater went wide then they were allowed to cut the next bend to make up for the extra distance skated and asked for these suggestions to be considered. Of course, these suggestions were refused by the NSA leading The Sportsman newspaper to comment "...in England we have our own way of doing things, and if they are not acceptable to the Americans they can adopt the obvious alternative". A re-publishing of the rules then followed along with the following statement:

COMPETITORS WILL BE DISQUALIFIED FOR:

- Fouling
- Hindering other competitors
- Cutting the corners or failing to keep the course
- Conspiring with others to cause a race to result otherwise than on its merit
- Ungentlemanly conduct
- Incorrect entry forms

On the 22nd February thousands of spectators turned out at Olympia to watch the first three qualifying heats won by William Curtis Junior (London), Allie Moore (USA) and John Davidson (USA). The following evening saw A. Terry (Knightsbridge), Harley Davidson (USA) and David Bennett (London - Olympia) all progress to the semi-final stage.

The two semi-finals and final were competed for on the night of the 24th February. It was already established that the four qualifiers for the final would compete in the Grand Final and this race was merely for pride and a £10 first place prize. The final was always going to be a two horse battle between Harley Davidson and Allie Moore with John Davidson and David Bennett making up the other two places. Catching everyone by surprise Davidson took the lead with three hundred yards to go and opened a gap of

several yards. He sprinted for home but coming out of the last bend Moore attacked the straight and pipped Davidson to the line by just a half yard. It was the first time Moore had beaten Davidson in a head to head and his result and obvious form now set him up as the firm favourite. Over the past few evenings, the racing had pretty much gone true to form. All that remained now was the Grand Final.



Alf Bear



Tertius Blakeley



Harley Davidson



Allie Moore



George Cooper



William Curtis



Charles Wilson



P. F. Powell

Some of the elite skaters who took part over the four weeks

The Grand Final - Olympia

Billed in The Sportsman as “THE GREATEST ROLLER SKATING MEETING EVER HELD FOR THE MILE CHAMPIONSHIP OF THE WORLD” the day had arrived. After almost four weeks of elimination rounds the final nineteen skaters (it should have been twenty but only one qualified from Leeds as described earlier) had now been established. Over one hundred skaters had taken part in the competition (some reports saying it was nearer one hundred and fifty) with skaters representing not only England but Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Northern Ireland, USA, South Africa and Brazil. It was truly an international affair.

The winner of each heat and the fastest second skater were to compete in the final. With Walter Hayes-Fisher MP (NSA President) along with Guy Campbell (Roller Committee Chairman) watching on the heats for the Grand Final had been drawn earlier and were as follows:

Heat 1

S. M. Johnson	Leeds
Daniel Peterson	Belfast
John Davidson	USA
Harley Davidson	USA
E. K. Rowe	Glasgow - Westcliff-on-Sea

The first was won by Harley Davidson in a time of 3 minutes 1.6 seconds. Behind him was his brother, John, who came home just two tenths of a second behind him. The time would see John Davidson progress to the final as the fastest second skater. Peterson retired whilst disappointingly Johnson and Rowe failed to appear.

Heat 2

Harold Moulden	Manchester
S. W. Hellman	Edinburgh
R. Martin	Belfast
Harold Hall	Liverpool
P. F. Powell	London

This time it was Powell who would romp home, albeit with nobody to push him. By half distance he was already a hundred yards up on his nearest rival and would eventually get a full lap up on the third placed skater. Powell's winning time was also just a little over three minutes. Hall was also a no show.

Heat 3

Charles Wilson	London - Fulham
Hal Berte	London
A. Ellis	London

David Bennett

London – Olympia

Wilson, Bennett and Berte ran pretty much Indian file until one lap to go when Wilson sprinted ahead and finished a full six yards ahead of Bennett. The veteran, Berte, completed the distance a further six yards back. Wilson's winning time was 3 minutes 2.8 seconds. Despite his efforts to qualify, for whatever reason Ellis was another no show.

Heat 4

Allie Moore

USA - Chicago

William Curtis (Senior)

London – Wood Green

Arthur Lennie

Liverpool

George Bloor

Newcastle

Alfred Bear

London

Moore got a bad start and Curtis took up the running with Bear sitting in a close third place. Curtis continued at a strong pace but with a lap to go Moore sprinted on the outside of a whole bend and by the time they hit the straight he was ten yards clear, a gap he maintained to the finish. Curtis and Bear battled it out for second place with Curtis just getting the nod, however, his time of 3 minutes and 3 seconds was not enough to see him through to the final.

And so, **the final** was made up as follows:

Harley Davidson

USA

P. F. Powell

London

Charles Wilson

London – Fulham

Allie Moore

USA

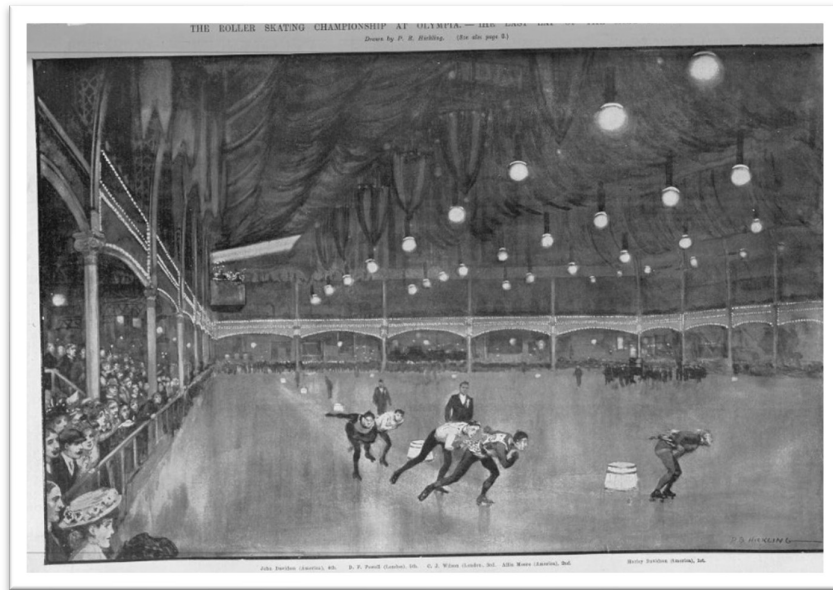
John Davidson

USA

With a prize of £150 (around £23,000 in today's money) going to the winner, £50 to second and £25 to third this was set to be a race for the ages.

From the gun Moore made the pace extremely fast. It was soon apparent that the fastest pace seen in the heats would be beaten. After a lap Powell took up the running and just six yards separated first from last. For the next two laps Powell continued to lead from Moore and Wilson. With two laps to go there was a slight change of position but a half

lap later Harley Davidson caught everyone napping and sprinted for home. By the time the others reacted it was too late. Moore, the favourite after his performance in the semi-final, had to go around Wilson in order to try and close the gap which despite his efforts he failed to do. Pulling Wilson along with him is how they crossed the line – Harley Davidson first in a time of 2 minutes 51.6 seconds and Moore just four tenths of a second behind him. Wilson, in his first ever professional competition, came home an excellent third, just one second behind the winner.



There was rapturous applause from the crowd for the skaters as the trophy (studded with no less than forty diamonds!), medals and cheques were presented. Lord Desborough, himself a former athlete and keen sportsman, was due to carry out the presentation of trophy and medals but as he was commanded to the first Court of the year that task went to Mr. Eugene Corri, the famous boxing referee.

Chester Park Crawford and Frederick Wilkins had given the skating world the first glimpse of what a proper global championship might look like. With Crawford and Wilkins 'American' rinks still popping up almost in every town and city, as well as abroad in places like Paris and Berlin, it finally felt that roller skating was set to be a mainstream activity and sport.

The night before the final the NSA were treated to an evening dinner in which Colonel Samuel Winslow, head of the mighty Samuel Winslow Skate Company, presided over. He had already made comment to a local newspaper that he was confident the current boom in roller skating was not a passing phase like had occurred some thirty years ago. He toasted the NSA and remarked that from a business perspective, unless a rink had a quality floor with quality skates that one shouldn't get financially involved as it was sure to fail. He also paid compliment to Crawford and Wilkins who as well as businessmen

and whose desire it was to see rinks all over the country, they also wished to be seen as sportsmen.

On behalf of the NSA, Colonel Cobbett, General Treasurer to the Association, gave thanks to The Sportsman newspaper and the work it had done to popularise roller skating. Guy Campbell, Chairman of the NSA's Roller Committee, also gave praise and recognition of the efforts to realise the event. Some three hundred workmen had laid the Olympia rink floor in just forty-eight hours. He also recognised the efforts of Crawford and Wilkins and how their rinks were doing a great deal of good. He finished by saying that the NSA would do all in its power to assist them in promoting the sport further.

Crawford, himself, then addressed those present and made it clear that he hoped "the Association and himself would later come together and promote amateur races throughout the kingdom".

The final word went to E. B. Barnes, Manager of Crawford and Wilkins' first rink in Liverpool. He remarked that "results proved that roller skating is not an amusement of the moment, it has come to stay".

For the next few years, it certainly felt that way, but just twelve months on from that famous Olympia race, Crawford and Wilkins were in financial trouble. It appears that whilst their financial model for erecting rinks or leasing buildings to convert into rinks in the UK had worked well and attracted big investors, the same model they used on the continent did not have the same effect. The result was that they ploughed profits from the UK rinks into setting up establishments in France and Germany with very little pay back. Coupled with a cooling off of roller skating back in England they very soon found that they had to close many of their rinks with very short notice. By February 1910 as many as ten rinks had closed their doors. On 14th March at a meeting in London, presided over by Colonel Winslow no less, Crawford and Wilkins resigned their positions and the American Roller Rink Company was placed into liquidation. Barely a year had passed since that Grand Final in Olympia.

One shouldn't underestimate the impact Crawford, and indeed Wilkins, had on British roller skating in just a few short years. They pretty much took the American revival and brought it across the Atlantic. Granted they were fully backed by Winslow, a multi-million dollar manufacturing company, but without their enthusiasm and, let's face it, determination to make themselves a lot of money, there may well not have been the boom period witnessed on these shores between 1908 and 1912, and we certainly wouldn't have the fastest skaters on the planet meeting up in a single competition. Despite their shortcomings and their short lived popularity, Crawford and Wilkins were pioneers and elevated the sport of roller speed skating to unheard of heights.

Many of the now defunct roller rinks opened under new management initially and for a period roller skating seemed to still be thriving. But by 1912 it had resigned itself to once more being a past time and a minority sport. The public interest petered out and they found their amusement elsewhere. When war broke out in 1914 many of the roller rinks had already been converted into picture theatres or dance halls. As the war progressed many of the remaining rinks became munitions depots and roller skating was one of the last things anybody thought about.

After the war there was a mini revival and some of the old rinks found new fortune, but as the sport waxed and waned in terms of popularity the 'Great International Race of 1909' became just another footnote. Its importance and impact it had on British roller speed skating and indeed British society was all but lost to history.