

THE FIRST INTERNATIONALS

In 1922 the Roller Committee (precursor to the Roller Speed Committee and eventually Federation of Inline Speed Skating) was almost 30 years old. That said, it was still very insular and did not consider competitions outside of the British Isles. Certainly not as far as roller speed skating was concerned.

Up until this time there had been no reported international events that pitted one country against another, certainly not on an amateur level. There had been plenty of professional races, some dating back to the 1880's, where skaters from across the world took part in competitions, however, these were for personal gain and not sanctioned by the governing body of competing nations. The likes of Jesse Carey, Allie Moore and Harley Davidson from the USA, pitted themselves against the likes of Frank Delmont (Australia), Nicod and Merpillat (France), Borda (Italy), Smit (Holland) and of course British skaters such as Bill Curtis, Hal Berte, Tertius Balkesley and Charles Wilson. Then in the winter of 1922 it all changed when the French federation extended an invite to a number of other national federations to take part in an amateur international relay event that would be held at the Velodrome d'Hiver, Paris.

The velodrome was no stranger to roller skating events and had held the 24 hours professional contest back in 1910 and 1911, but this was to be the first international competition for amateur roller speed skaters. Skaters would be representing their country and not themselves for the very first time ever in the history of the sport.



1911 - British, French, Italian, Dutch and American skaters line up at the Velodrome d'Hiver, Paris, to take part in the professional 24 hour skating contest

This is how the invitation was recorded in the minutes of the Roller Committee meeting held at the Craven Hotel, London, on 18th October 1922:

The Roller Committee unanimously officially accepted the invitation of the French skating assocn. to send a team to represent Great Britain in a 25 kilo team race in Paris on Nov. 3. 1922 between teams representing Great Britain, France, Belgium and Roumania [sic], also the French assocn. offer to defray the expenses (3rd class rail & boat & hotel expenses) of the English team.

The Roller Committee unanimously endorsed the recommendation of a grant of £10, proposed by Mr. Prescott (Hon. Sec. & Treasurer) to the speed secretary. Hon. Sec. to defray the expenses of a representative of the Roller Committee to travel with the English team. Mr. V. C. Thomson, the Speed Hon. Secretary was unanimously elected representative to the N.S.A. to travel with the team.

The Roller Committee unanimously elected Mr. T. J. Wilson captain of the English team subject to his acceptance.

Messrs. V. C. Thomson, C. Meggs and T. J. Wilson were unanimously elected a sub-committee to select the team with full powers to carry out any matter in connection with this event.

It was unanimously decided by the Roller Committee that it was desirable that the team should wear a badge and cap, the selection of which was left to the sub-committee.

It being considered necessary by the Roller Committee that a trainer should be sent with the team, and failing a grant by the Council for a trainer's expenses, the Roller Committee accepted with hearty thanks the offer of Mr. V. C. Thomson to start a subscription list with that object.

And so, everything was set for Great Britain to send a team to France to take part in what is believed to be the world's first ever amateur international competition.

The date of the event was eventually moved by one week to 10th November. The N.S.A. Council agreed to fund a representative and trainer to the sum of £15 and the sub-committee selected Tom Wilson (Team Captain), Otto Lerwill, William Bowley and Alfred Symondson as reserve.

Wilson was a triple British Champion and double Southern Counties Champion, Lerwill a British Champion, Bowley a pre-war British Champion and Symondson a British Championship bronze medallist.

International #1 – 10th November 1922 – Velodrome d’Hiver, Paris

The day of the race came and the four teams took to the track. It was a pretty uneventful affair until at 21 km one of the Belgium skaters went to overtake a French skater and they collided. Both fell and in so doing upset Wilson who was on the track for Great Britain. The Romanian team (consisting of three brothers – C., R. and J. Samuel) pulled away and were soon a half lap up on the rest of the field, which is where they stayed for the remainder of the race, winning by some sixty yards. Therefore, Romania became the first ever winners of an amateur international event between a number of competing nations. (Now that’s a pub quiz question if ever I heard one!)

France crossed the line second a yard ahead of Great Britain, but France and Belgium were eventually disqualified, France for not touching on the final relay and Belgium for obstruction. The result was that Great Britain were awarded second place.



Uniform badge worn by British team members

In addition to the team event the French scheduled a 1000 metre race between their One Kilo Champion, Rene Beaujard and Britain’s reserve, Alf Symondson. Beaujard won by a foot from Symondson in a time of 2 minutes and 4 seconds.

On the teams return a special committee meeting was called on 20th November to investigate an alleged case of misconduct by one of the British skaters at the event. The N.S.A. representative, Thomson, reported that Otto Lerwill had used “abusive language” towards William Bowley in the dressing room after the event. The skaters were actually

teammates with the Aldwych club when not competing for Great Britain. The British team captain, Tom Wilson, was called to give witness and confirmed that Lerwill had indeed used abusive language but in his opinion “Mr. Lerwill was not in a fit state to control his actions having just finished a very hard race”.

Lerwill was also called before the committee and acknowledged he had used abusive language towards Bowley, which he now regretted and apologised to the Roller Committee for. The committee reprimanded Lerwill for his “regrettable breach of good conduct” but elected to take no further action, recognising his apology and provided he sent a written apology to his club.

How times have changed eh?

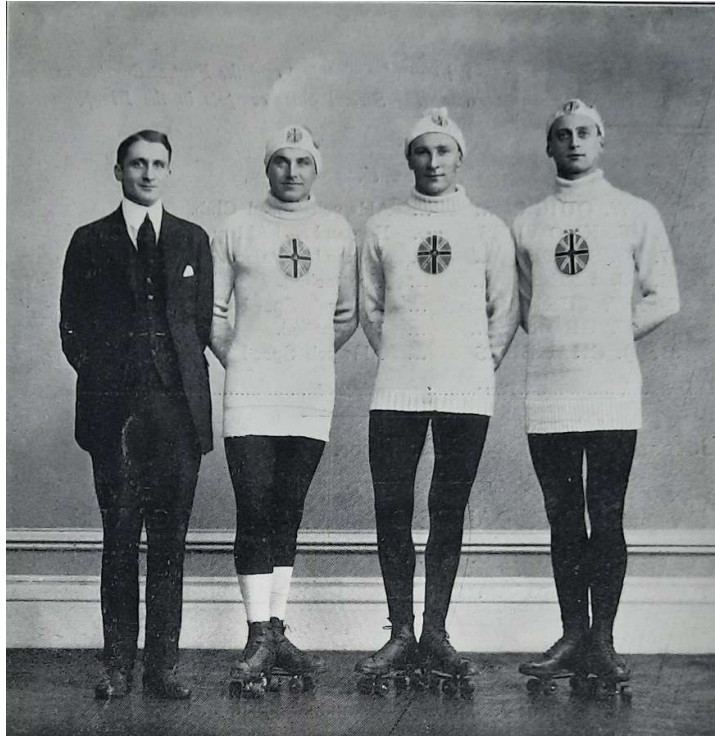
International #2 – 5th January 1923 – Holland Park Rink, London

The race was seen as a huge success and the Roller Committee swiftly set about setting up a return match at the Holland Park Rink to be held in January 1923. It was estimated that £75 would cover rail and hotel expenses for the visitors over three days and invitations were sent and duly accepted. It was agreed with the rink that the £75 expenses would be split equally and taken from the box office receipts and that the remainder split equally between the rink and the Roller Committee.

In the build up to the event the Romanian team sent a letter explaining that they were unable to obtain passports and requested the N.S.A.’s assistance in the matter to pay for the passports totalling £20. Initially, the N.S.A. tried to obtain passports through the Romanian Embassy but this eventually proved fruitless. However, the Romanian team set out and had every intention of defending their title, but once in France the team got held up further due to their passport issues resulting in them being unable to cross the channel. It was an unfortunate circumstance and the event had to be held between just the British, French and Belgian teams.

The return leg was a 15 miles relay as opposed to the 25 km event in Paris. That equated to 135 laps of the Holland Park rink (about 180 metres per lap). An estimated crowd of four thousand spectators were in attendance with the national anthems being played out for each team.

The British team, now being trained by professional skater Arthur Eglington, consisted once again of Tom Wilson (team captain), Otto Lerwill and this time Frank Knowles in place of William Bowley. Alfred Symondson was once again reserve. France was made up of Rene Beaujard (French champion), Rene Moyatt (later President of the Federation Internationale de Patinage a Roulettes – precursor to FIRS) and Charles Morel. The Belgian team consisted of brothers Albert and Rene Neels and E. de Ridder (who would later become the first “official” European Champion).



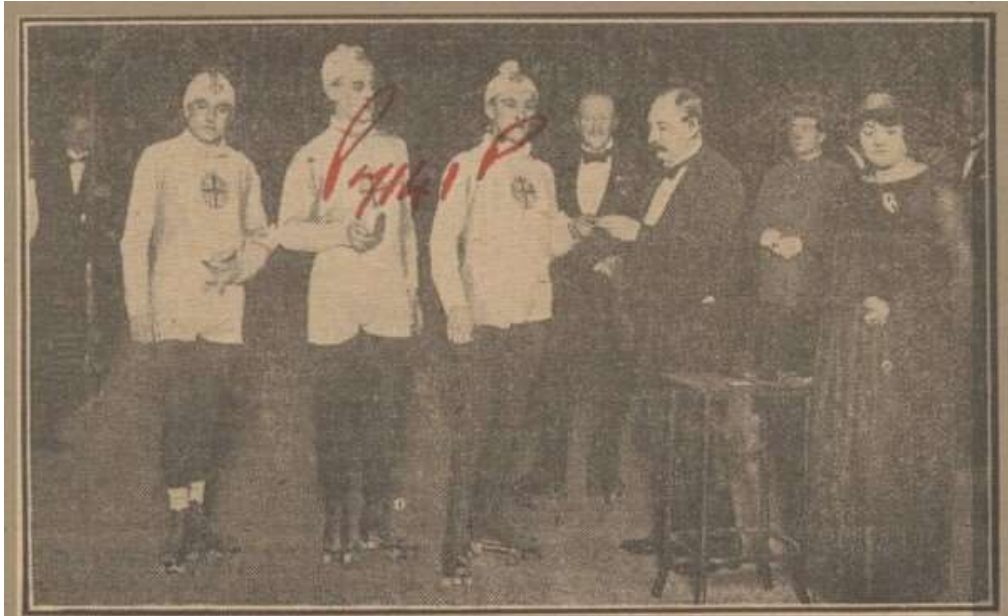
L to R: Arthur Eglington (Trainer), Otto Lerwill, Tom Wilson and Frank Knowles

The rules were pretty standard in that teams could relay at will throughout the race. France was leading after the first mile but at the half way stage Great Britain had drawn to the front and established a quarter lap lead with France in second and Belgium a close third. With four miles to go Britain upped the pace and extended their lead further. With a mile to go they lapped the other two nations and came home in a time of 46 minutes and $48 \frac{2}{5}$ seconds. Belgium moved up to second and France third. In celebration Tom Wilson (team captain) was carried shoulder high around the rink by many of those present.

Once the race had concluded Viscount Doneraile, President of the N.S.A., handed out the medals. Shortly afterwards Madame Beaujard, wife of French skater Rene Beaujard, made her way onto the rink and kissed the British and French skaters much to the amusement of those present.

The following evening a race for what was billed as the Half Mile Championship of Europe was held on the Holland Park Rink. It was not a formally recognised championship with the FIPR not yet formed as an international governing body. Britain fielded ten skaters whilst Belgium and France fielded three each. There were two heats of eight skaters with the first three of each heat going through to the final. Alf Symondson won the first heat in a new British record time of 1 minute $30 \frac{2}{5}$ seconds. Rene Neels (Belgium) equalled the record when he won the second heat. The final

consisted of Alf Symondson, Rene Beaujard, Tom Wilson, Otto Lerwill, Rene Neels and Charles Morel.



[Daily Mirror] Viscount Doneraile (N.S.A. President) hands out medals to the winning British team

L to R: Otto Lerwill, Frank Knowles and Tom Wilson

Symondson took the lead from the gun and was never passed, taking the victory ahead of Beaujard and Neels who dead heated for second.

In October the N.S.A. received a letter from the Federation Francaise de Patinage (French federation) once again inviting a British team to take part in the next 25 km international team event, provisionally scheduled for December and again at the Velodrome d'Hiver. The French suggested that the event be changed slightly so that each nation would field two teams of two skaters. The letter was given to the Roller Committee to respond, which they did so.

In the committee's response they stated that before Great Britain accepted the invitation, they wanted the proposed expenses paid in advance. The committee also stipulated that British team members would compete in one meeting only; they requested a copy of the rules and regulations of the event; and suggested that as the event had been run successfully in the previous format that this format remained – i.e. one team of three skaters per nation.

Once again, a sub-committee was formed to deal with the matter consisting of V. C. Thomson, H. J. Barclay and Tom Wilson. The Roller Committee were already thinking

about a return leg in February and hoped that the Duke of York (failing him, the Prince of Wales) might be in attendance to witness the race, but for now, the Paris event needed to be sorted.

International #3 – 16th January 1924 – Velodrome d’Hiver, Paris

It soon became apparent that the original December date would need to be moved and 16th January 1924 was eventually settled upon. In December the committee agreed that V. C. Thomson, C. Meggs and Tom Wilson would be the selection committee for Paris. It was also suggested that Thomson would again be the N.S.A. representative to travel with the team. If, for any reason, Thomson could not go then Tom Wilson would take his place. In the end, however, neither men were available and the position was eventually taken up by former international, Frank Knowles.

The committee also proposed and unanimously agreed that professional skater and world record holder, Arthur Eglington, be approached once more to be the trainer and coach of the British team and also travel to Paris with them. Eglington agreed.

It was later reported that the French federation had indeed changed the conditions of contest for the event. This time the teams would consist of four skaters and it would not be a relay. Each skater would skate the full distance and points would be awarded at each mile (1500 metres) stage as the skaters crossed the line. The team with the lowest points tally would then be declared the winner.

The new team selected to travel consisted of Joe Weatherburn (European Half Mile record holder), Benny Lee (British Half Mile Champion), Harold Lee, John Spry and Joe Chambers and preparations for the event saw Eglington put the team through their paces at Holland Park. Although Harold Lee was nominated as team captain, the final selection of the team for the race would be at the discretion of Knowles and Eglington once they arrived in Paris.

A week before the team travelled Joe Weatherburn had his skates stolen. It was a race against time to get a new custom pair manufactured in readiness for the event. With the help of the Holland Park Rink and Henley’s Mr. Mills, who made the Dexter skates, a new pair was manufactured and Weatherburn, who had celebrated his 19th birthday just a few weeks before, made the trip.

The team travelled out on 13th January in order that they could spend some additional time training on the circuit. The track surface left a lot to be desired having holes and giving cause for some considerable vibration when racing. The additional time proved invaluable to Weatherburn as initially he had trouble adjusting to his new skates and fell in training, cutting his knee. However, as the training and preparations progressed, he had impressed Knowles and Eglington enough that he was to be part of the team to

race. Alongside him would be Chambers, Spry and Benny Lee. Despite being named captain, Harold Lee was made reserve.

(As an aside, a story that circulated during their time in Paris was that they took frequent taxi rides to places of interest. On one such journey it was reported that one team member (who remains a mystery) squirted 'freezing solution' onto the driver's seat of the taxi. When the driver tried to get up, he found himself stuck until he ripped the seat of his trousers trying to get out of the cab. Needless to say, they left a substantial tip and beat as hasty retreat!)

In the build up to the event it was reported that once again Romania was unable to attend, but more surprisingly was the absence of the Belgian team. This meant that the race would be a head to head between the home nation, France, and Great Britain.

On the day of the race there were some fifteen thousand spectators in attendance. It was a huge affair and many had come to watch in the hope that France would win the event for the first time. It was not to be.



L to R: Arthur Eglington (Trainer), Joe Weatherburn, Joe Chambers, John Spry, Benny Lee and Harold Lee

All eight skaters completed the distance with Britain's Benny Lee crossing the line first in a time of 49 minutes and 7 seconds. The order behind him was Peroche (FRA), Morel (FRA), Weatherburn (GBR), Chambers (GBR), Beaujard (FRA), Spry (GBR) and Mathis (FRA). With points awarded at various stages throughout the race they were tallied and the result being that Great Britain retained their title by a two point difference to the French.



French skaters Rene Beaujard and Raymond Mathis

Benny Lee received a medal for being the first skater across the line and the British team was awarded a trophy as the winning nation. The trophy was in the form of a wreath (a bronze emblem of oak leaves draped in the French colours) in honour of the British athletes that fell in the Great War. These prizes were presented by Lady Cartwright, the British Ambassador in Vienna.

The Roller Committee later agreed to have a glass case made to house the trophy/wreath and stated that it should be kept on show at the Holland Park Rink until such time as the committee wished to remove it. (The rink closed in 1928 and what happened to the trophy remains a mystery). The Roller Committee also agreed to issue N.S.A. die medals to the winning British team.

International #4 – 8th February 1924 – Holland Park Rink, London

At a Roller Committee meeting on 30th January, it was reported that the French and Belgian Ambassadors had been invited to attend the return event at Holland Park. It was also reported that both the Duke of York and the Prince of Wales had declined the invitation.

It would only be a matter of weeks before the return event at Holland Park was held and the British team once again consisted of Weatherburn, Spry, Chambers and Benny Lee with his brother, Harold, again named as reserve.



8th February 1924 - Start of the Holland Park Rink return leg

This time Belgium was in attendance. The French team was identical to that which had competed in Paris in January, i.e. Beaujard, Morel, Peroche and Mathis, whilst the Belgium team consisted of the Neels brothers, Albert and Rene, E. de Ridder and for his first outing J. Houssa.

Both Belgium and France had been training on the rink since 5th February, so by the evening of the 8th February they were both as prepared as they could be. In front of a packed rink and a crowd of five thousand the race started at 9pm prompt.

In the early stages Weatherburn set the early pace and narrowly missed out on setting a new Three Mile record by just 1/5 second. A Belgian skater (which one is not known) was ahead at the four mile mark and did indeed set a new Four Mile record. During the race Albert Neels fell and badly bruised his body but he did get back up and finished second in his team.

By the end of the race the first across the line was Belgium's Rene Neels in a time of 49 minutes and 27 seconds. He was closely followed home by Benny Lee, Joe Weatherburn, Joe Chambers and John Spry. Despite Neels being the first skater, Great Britain would once again retain the title with 15 points. Belgium was second with 27 points and France third with 36 points. De Ridder (Belgium) would be the last skater across the line some seven laps down on the winner.

With the Belgian Ambassador also present, the prizes were awarded by the Rt. Hon. Lord Tweedmouth and the skaters from all three teams enjoyed a celebratory dinner the following evening at the National Sports Club. Rene Neels was presented with a medal on behalf of the N.S.A. for his victory. Neels commented that had Weatherburn skated for himself instead of unselfishly setting the pace, he believed Weatherburn would have undoubtedly won.

It would be a full year before the event was held again. As time wore on throughout 1924 there was no return invite forthcoming from France, or indeed any other nation. Towards the end of October, the Holland Park Rink wrote to the N.S.A. and asked their intentions about holding another event. In the absence of a return invite the Roller Committee agreed to write to France and Belgium to take part in another international event, again at Holland Park. By January only France had accepted the invitation with no word from Belgium. It was proposed by Guy Campbell at a meeting by the Roller Committee that should only one other team enter then the event be "dropped for a year". Tom Wilson opposed this and a vote was taken. The result was that should only one other team enter then the event would go ahead and provisional dates of 12th or 19th February were proposed. It would eventually take place on 13th February by which time Belgium had responded and accepted the invite.

International #5 – 13th February 1925 – Holland Park Rink, London

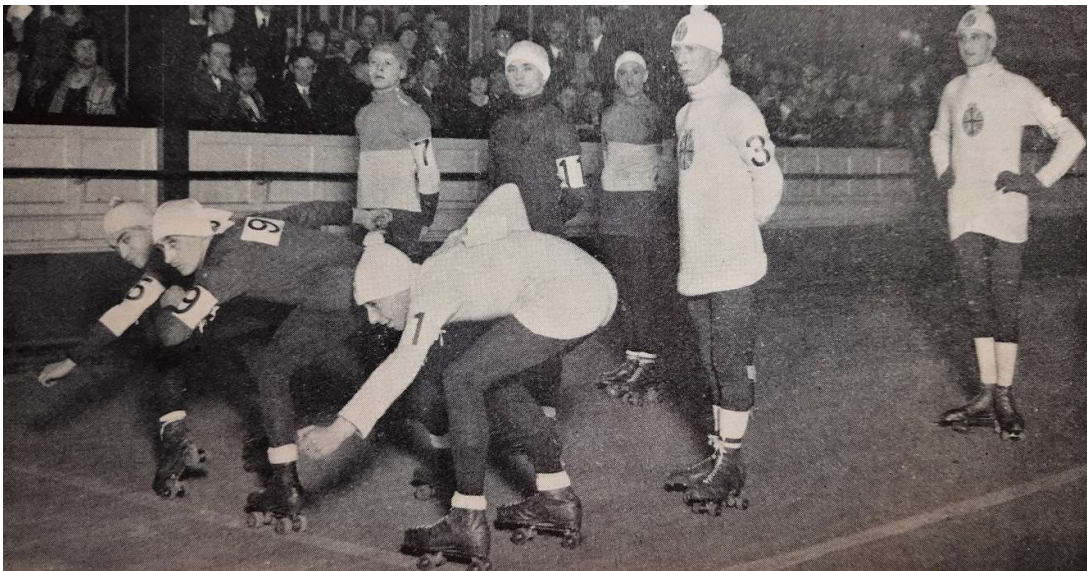
The format of the event reverted to a relay. Each team would consist of three skaters who would relay at will over the course of 15 miles and Arthur Eglington once again was appointed as trainer and coach of the British team. The team consisted of Benny Lee

(captain), Harold Lee and John Spry, with Joe Weatherburn in attendance as reserve. The French team was made up of Raymond Mathis, Charles Morel and newcomer, Jean Fouchy, plus reserve skater Labille. Belgium selected two Liege skaters, J. Houssa (captain) and Marvet plus Verhaere from Antwerp. Debeur from Liege was named as their reserve.

As a prelude to the main event a Half Mile scratch race was run between the three reserves. Weatherburn won from Labille by ten yards with Debeur coming home in third place.

Not many details of the main event were published but again Great Britain came home winners. It was a close and exciting race, much closer than anyone anticipated, with Benny Lee doing the anchor leg for Britain and beating the French by just three yards. The winning time of 45 minutes 45 $\frac{3}{5}$ seconds was a new European record and it was noted just how much the French team had advanced since the teams last met. Disappointingly, Belgium was pretty much out of the running after just a mile and a half.

After the event a further race was held, a Half Mile scratch race between the international relay competitors. Again, Benny Lee would win ahead of his brother, Harold, and France's Raymond Mathis. All the Belgian skaters were knocked out in the heats.



13th February 1925 – The start of the last team international

This was to be the last time these European nations met in an international competition before the advent of formal European championships, with one exception.

In April 1925 the N.S.A. received an invite from the Belgian club Modern, based in Antwerp. They intended to hold a series of three events for the national champions of Belgium, France and Great Britain. Britain accepted the invite and a date of 17th May was set. With only one skater from each nation to be selected the Roller Committee selected Benny Lee as their athlete, with the Hon. Sec. of the Speed Section of the Roller Committee, F. Campbell, to accompany Lee as a representative of the N.S.A. France selected Raymond Mathis and Belgium selected E. de Ridder.

International #6 – 17th May 1925 – Anvers (Antwerp), Belgium

The results of the three events are as follows:

200 metres

1. Benny Lee
2. E. de Ridder
3. Raymond Mathis

7.5km

1. Benny Lee
2. E. de Ridder
3. Raymond Mathis

3km Pursuit

1. E.de Ridder
2. Benny Lee
3. Raymond Mathis

FINAL CLASSIFICATION

- | | |
|-------------------|-------|
| 1. Benny Lee | 4 pts |
| 2. E. de Ridder | 5 pts |
| 3. Raymond Mathis | 9 pts |

Benny Lee's performance was deemed "extremely creditable" especially in view of the prevailing conditions. The three races were skated on an asphalt surface and a section of a roped off public boulevard. In Campbell's report of the event he stated "There was practically no organisation of the discipline and of training facilities there were none".

And there we have it. Between November 1922 and May 1925 there were a series of international events that could be considered the forerunners of later World and European Championships as we know them today.

There was a further road event in Antwerp in 1930 that has since been declared in some quarters as the first ever European Championships and was organised by the Federation Internationale de Patinage a Roulettes (FIPR). All three races were won by E. de Ridder (Belgium), but Great Britain did not send a delegation. Why that was is not entirely clear, but there could be a clue in the minutes of a Roller Committee meeting in April 1925 that stated the following:

It was reported that a letter had been received from the N.R.H.A. advising us that it was proposed to form an International Federation of Roller Skating at Montreux, Switzerland, and giving Secretary's address.

A further letter was read from a body styling themselves "Federation Internationale de Patinage a Roulettes" of Montreux, inviting the N.S.A. to affiliate and to send representative to the A.G.M. to be held at Montreux on April 13th. Proposed by Mr. Buller and seconded by Mr. Knowles that the correspondence be forwarded to Council with the recommendation that no affiliation take place.

It is this second paragraph that is most telling. In true British fashion for the period, the suggestion that another authority was now in town was met with the usual dismissiveness and pomposity of an institution who felt themselves to be above all others. It might also explain the reluctance of both France and Belgium to take part in further international events not sanctioned by the FIPR to which they were now affiliated.

Great Britain would eventually send a team to take part in the European Championships of 1936 in Stuttgart, in Nazi Germany, after being invited to do so by the FIPR. Despite this, Great Britain would not affiliate themselves with the FIPR (later to become FIRS and today known as World Skate) until 1938. But that is an entirely different story altogether.