

MARIA VIERDAG

✦ 22 SEPTEMBER 1905 ✦ 17 JULY 2005

Maria VIERDAG was born 22 September 1905 in Amersfoort as the eldest child in a family with two more girls and three brothers. She spent her youth in the city of her birth.

She started competitive swimming in 1921 with the local swimming club A.Z. & P.C. First only long distance swimming and later in 1922 also shorter distances. She had no coach and did her training without a real effort.

Already in 1922, she for the first time bettered the national record for the 200 metres free style and in later years repeated that for the 100, the 200 and even the 400 metres free style.

Paris 1924

To her own surprise, she was selected for the Dutch swimming team in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, where she took part in the fourth heat for the 100 metres free style, finishing third in 1:22.0 and with that time promoted to the semi-finals. In the first semi-final she was fourth in 1:21.4, with which she did not qualify for the final. Because the final consisted of only five competitors, Rie VIERDAG was finally placed overall sixth in the 100 metres free style, because of her time in the semi-finals.

She was also entered in the 400 metres free style, but because she was not yet fully trained for that distance, she swam the first 200 metres in the so-called 'trudgeon-style' and then changed over in free style for the next 200 metres. She swam in the fourth heat and finished fourth in 7:02.40.

Her memory of the 1924 Paris Olympic Games was not very positive. She told me:

"We travelled by train; we had an obscure and bad hotel in Paris; the food was bad; we did not participate in the Opening and Closing Ceremonies; and generally speaking, it was all badly organised."

In those early days, she worked in an administrative job.

In 1925 she moved to Amsterdam, became a member of the famous swimming club "'t IJ" in that city, and started with teaching swimming to primary schools in Amsterdam. That same year, without any diploma yet, she also started swimming lessons for the students in the Academy for Physical Education in Amsterdam, and with success, because only a few years later she was invited to study at that same Academy to get a degree in Physical Education, which she obtained in 1929.

In the mean time, her own competitive swimming had improved considerably and she was selected to represent The Netherlands in the Euro-



pean Swimming championships in Bologna, Italy in 1927. She won the title in the 100 metres free style; a fact that would bring her fame exactly fifty years later, when she was invited as an honorary guest of the Portuguese Organizing Committee for the European Swimming Championships in Lisbon. Although, she had already lost most of her eye-sight by then, she was invited to present the medals to the three medal winners in the 100 metres free style; the event she herself had won fifty years earlier.

Amsterdam 1928

A year later, she was selected in the Dutch swimming team for the Games of the IXth Olympiad in her home town Amsterdam. This time she only competed individually in the 100 metres free style and started in the third heat, where she finished in third place in 1:14.4. In the second semi-final, she finished in fifth place [no time available].

Also Marie VIERDAG was a member of the 4x100 metres free style relay with Zus BRAUN, Eva SMITS and Truus BAUMEISTER. This team became second in the first heat in 5:08.8, but was disqualified in the final because Truus BAUMEISTER started too early

when taking over. The team was in second place when this happened, and in this way this disaster 'drowned' an almost certain Olympic medal.

When she told me about her participation in the Amsterdam Olympics, she said:

"I used to cycle to the Olympic Stadium and left my bicycle standing against a tree without locking it. After completing swimming, I picked up the bicycle and went home. The highlight of these Games was the Opening Ceremony, which had a special feeling because it was organised in my hometown, and I marched in the first row of the Dutch women with the Dutch Olympic team into the Stadium."

She continued her career as a teacher in Physical Education and also studied for, and received a diploma for Physiotherapy, which she also practiced.

One year after the Amsterdam Olympics, she won the national title in the 100 metres free style in the time of 1:12.8.

Los Angeles 1932

At the (in those days) late age of 26, she was selected to represent The Netherlands in the Games of the Xth Olympiad in Los Angeles. She told me herself that this was probably due to the fact that she spoke good English. Actually, she was no longer at the top of Dutch swimming, but good enough for the 4x100 metres free style relay team.

The trip to Los Angeles, first with the liner "Statendam" to New York, and then by train across the whole width of the United States to Los Angeles has always been one of the highlights in her life as a swimmer. All women were housed in the luxury Chapman Park Hotel in the beautiful Wilshire District.

The team for the 4x100 metres free style relay consisted of Marie VIERDAG, Corrie LADDE, Willy den OUDEN and Puck OVERSLOOT. Because only five teams had entered this event, the organizers decided not to have heats, but only the one final. In that final the Dutch team finished in second place in 4:47.5 and received an Olympic silver medal for their efforts.

Marie VIERDAG also competed in the individual 100 metres free style, but only became fourth in the second heat in 1:13.3 and did not qualify for the semi-finals.

The majority of the Dutch team made the homeward bound trip again with the train to New

York, but this time by a different route, and again boarded the liner the "Statendam", which finally arrived in Rotterdam.

End of Swimming Career

Marie VIERDAG upon her return home from Los Angeles decided to end her career as a competitive swimmer. Other things in life were becoming more important.

On December 18, 1935, she married Evert Frederik Johannes "Frits" SMIT, a waterpolo-player from her club "'t IJ".

Her daughter Marjorie arrived ten years later in April 1945, just after the terrible period in the then still occupied Western part of the Netherlands; which was later called the 'honger-winter'.

In 1950, the Municipal Inspection for Physical Education [GILO] requested her to take charge of all swimming lessons for the pupils of the basic schools in the City of Amsterdam. She accepted that responsibility and succeeded to continue with this work until she was pensioned in 1970.

Her life took a dramatic turn, when in 1951 her husband Frits suddenly passed away, leaving her alone with the responsibility for her daughter, then only six years old.

Rie once told me that the years after her husband's death were among the most difficult in her life, but she was a courageous woman, who never gave up!

Many years later, another very difficult period arrived in her life, when her eye-sight slowly went away. However, she remained very keen to the very end; she had a good memory and with her daughter Marjorie, husband Dick, and her granddaughters Liesbeth and Saskia, she always tried to attend meetings from various clubs, attended concerts in the famous "Concertgebouw in Amsterdam", and in 1997, as mentioned above was able to attend the European Swimming Championships in Lisbon.

At the age of 99 years and almost ten months, she passed away on Sunday-morning, July 17, 2005, in her own bed in the "Emmahof" in Amsterdam, with her family around her.

She was cremated on July 21, 2005, also in Amsterdam. The ceremony was attended by many of her friends, including the President of the Netherlands Olympic Committee Mrs. Erica TERPSTRA.

by Anthony Th. Bijkerk