

THE OLYMPIC TUG-OF-WAR ANTWERP 1920

By Anthony Th. Bijkerk

In the early sixties, I came in contact with Hendrikus Alexander Janssen from the "Achilles" tug-of-war team, which in 1920 represented the Netherlands at the Games of the VIIth Olympiad, in Antwerp.

For a long time, it had been uncertain, which team had really won the silver Olympic medal at this event during these Games, because both the Americans and the Dutch claimed to have won that silver medal.

The writing of the Official Report of the 1920 Olympic Games was much restricted owing to financial problems of the Organizing Committee after the Games were finished. It resulted in a simple typed report, of which not many copies still exist.

However, the report also was not very well written and contained many discrepancies, one of these being the results of the tug-of-war competition.

This may be illustrated by the fact that on page 62 of the Report, which gives the "Palmares General des Jeux Olympiques d'Anvers 1920" (the list with final results of the competitions at the Olympic Games in Antwerp in 1920) the final result of the competition in "Traction à la corde" (Tug-of-war) was:

1. Grande-Bretagne (Great-Britain)
2. Hollande (The Netherlands)
3. Belgique (Belgium).

On page 141 of the same Official Report is given a description of the tug-of-war competition, which was held on August 17 and 18, 1920.

The description on page 141 is rather detailed, but for the last sentences, which read:

"L'Italie décalara forfait devant les Etats-Unis.

Les Etats-Unis devaient tirer contre la Hollande pour la seconde place, mais, par suite d'une erreur, l'équipe hollandaise quitta Anvers et ne revint pas pour ce match.

Les Etats-Unis se trouvèrent de ce fait en seconde place."

According to this description, "the Dutch team should have pulled against the American team for second place, but because the Dutch team had already returned home, the second place was then awarded to the U.S.A."¹

In his book *THE UNOFFICIAL REPORT OF THE 1920 OLYMPICS*, which was published in 1992, author and Olympic historian Bill Mallon refutes these results.²

In the early sixties, when I started my Olympic hobby, I discovered that some of the participants-in the 1920 tug-of-war competitions were still alive and I was able to visit two of them in their homes.

Mr. Janssen was then one of the few still living members of the Dutch team and only because he could show me his silver medal and the accompanying Olympic diploma, I was able to find conclusive evidence the Netherlands indeed owned the only real claim to that silver medal!

I made a visit to Mr. Janssen in his home in the city of Arnhem, and during my visit made a couple of photographs from him, together with his Olympic silver medal and his Olympic diploma. The photographs are no real masterpieces of photographic competence, but they clearly show the things necessary to proof the sought for evidence.

The diploma shows not only his name as the winner of the silver medal (medaille d'argente), but also mentions the event for which the medal was won in french: Lutte à la Corde.³

In April 1968, I visited the premises of the I.O.C. in Lausanne and showed the photographs to Mrs. Monique Berlioux, at the time the Director of the IOC.

The photographic evidence conclusively proofed the Dutch team had really won that coveted silver Olympic medal, and consequently Mrs Berlioux wrote an article in *Olympic Review* and announced the

correction of the official results of the 1920 Olympic Games with regard to the tug-of-war- competition, officially giving the silver medal to the Netherlands, which was as it should have been.

Of course, I informed Mr. Janssen about the result of my visit to Lausanne, but it made not a very big impression on him, because he had always known they had won that silver medal!

However, a short time later, I received an envelope from him, containing a typed description of their participation in Antwerp and he wrote a note on the last page: "Sir, you may keep this copy."

This all happened over thirty years ago, and because of its historical value, I recently decided to translate that report into English. Not only because it probably is one of the very few existing descriptions of the last Olympic Tug-of-war competition, but also because the report, which was written by the team-leader of the Dutch, Mr. Teus van Deutekom, a well-known Physical education teacher in the City of Arnhem, where the "Achilles-team" came from, gives a historical and rare view on the 1920 Olympic Games.

Please excuse the rather lengthy and elaborate style of its writing.

I haven't left out anything, because I wanted to keep the report completely original, as far as the translation would permit.

Here it is:

"THE OLYMPIC GAMES 1920 IN ANTWERP

When, after having performed heavy and strenuous work during a couple of days, then after receiving a great and well-earned homage for the brave performance of the Achilles-team, then having had a couple of interviews and to top it answering a mountain of correspondence which had accumulated during our absence, it is difficult to sit down peacefully to write an article in which one wishes to incorporate everything that happened in athletics and strength sports, in Antwerp.

So much happened and there is so much to tell, that I can hardly find the words to make a good start.

The members (*of Achilles, Tony B.*) of course are curious to know the particulars, because the press usually only mentioned the results and didn't give any further contemplation about what really happened,

while in fact there was so much to tell.

The Nieuwe Arnhemsche Courant was the exception. Because many of us are not acquainted with this newspaper, I think it would be obvious to start with the descriptions from this newspaper.

The performances from the tug-of-war-team, although members of the Netherlands Athletic Union, and, on the other hand also well known within the Association For Strength Sports, will also be told in detail.

Therefore let me start with the Opening Ceremony.

Saturday morning, 15 August 1920 (this should have been August 14th, Tony B.), the Olympic Games have been consecrated with a solemn worship in the Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk, celebrated for the repose of the souls from the allied sportsmen who died in the war.

Cardinal Mercier celebrated the mass and then spoke to the many present sports-officials and participants in the Games, saying among other: "You, ladies and gentlemen, before the opening of the Olympic Games, have wished to commemorate those, who belonged to you and who did not return from this terrible war.. Before 1914, sport was one of the means to prepare for war, but today, it serves to prepare for peace. It serves us as a social school, it learns us self-control and discipline, chivalry and pride. We are no savages or barbarians and we must realize the social impact of sport, which not only strengthens our muscles and makes us strong, but which also helps us to better ourselves and learns us to obey the higher laws and enables us to obtain the necessary equilibrium.

The Cardinal finished his speech with the words: "Soon you will be crowned with laurels, which will wither, because you have fought and conquered, but fight above all the human beast within yourself and conquer it, to be crowned with the laurels of immortality."

Afterwards the "Te Deum" by Benoist was sung.

Shortly after eleven, the Cardinal departed from the church and was cheered by a large crowd outside the church.

At 2:30 p.m. King Albert would officially open the Olympic Games. Around 2:30 the king entered the Royal Box, accompanied by the Queen and his



The Dutch tug-of-war team in full 'swing'

Children. Cardinal Mercier also accompanied the Royal Family.

The Band of musiciens then played the Brabanconne (Belgium's national anthem). When the music ended, a Swedish choir took over and sang the same anthem. All those present listened to this anthem standing.

Then came the entrance of the participants, marching past in the alphabetical sequence, in accordance with the French language: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Egypt, Spain, Estonia, United States, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, The Netherlands (then called "Hollande"), Italy, Luxemburg, Japan, Norway, Monaco, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Tsjecho-Slovakia and Belgium, in the end.

The United States came with the largest team. Sweden also was represented by a great team of athletes. In front of each team somebody walked carrying a plate with the name of the country. For our country that was the master of the yacht owned by mr. Van Stirum. Behind him the flagbearer, mr. Van Dijk, the wellknown athlete with his fine, strong body, carrying the Dutch flag high and proud. Then followed our officials: Count Van Limburg Stirum, mr. Waller and Captain Scharroo, placid and dignified, correct and unpretending. Then came Peeters in his cycling-suit, with the Orange-coloured sash around his shoulders, flanked by mr. Hoogenkamp, official of the Cycling Union. Then came the athletes, among which the dashing Oscar van Rappard attracted attention, they

were accompanied by the officials messrs. De Herder and Meijer. In the rear the fencers, our dashing officers with their brave leader Captain A.F.W de Jong.

After the march past Count Henri de Baillet Latour climbed up the plain rostrum and in the French language opened the Games.

The King rose from his seat and spoke short and concise: "I declare open the Olympic Games in Antwerp, celebrating the VIIth Olympiad of the modern era".

The flag was raised on its pole. Pigeons were released to spread the happy news to all sides. The flagbearers from the various countries then took the oath on behalf of their countries, saying they would compete as honorary sportsmen.

Cardinal Mercier, standing up in his box, then gave his blessings, the brassbands blared and the sweet voices of the women sang French and Flemish songs. A brave pilot flew over the stadium, following the pigeons in their flight through the hazy sky, the troops marched past the King again and around half past three the ceremony was over.

Monday, 16 August. Accompanied by a couple of companions and sportfriends, we came to the railwaystation to depart for the City on the Schelde at 7.21 a.m. The train departed right on time and after a successful journey we arrived in Antwerp.

At the station, we were picked up by mr. Waller, secretary of the organizing committee, who brought us to the motorvehicle (a truck, which was freely put at our disposal by the Minister of War).

Up to the ship, our ship "Hollandia".

We were welcomed by mr. Van Dijk, sports instructor in the Royal Netherlands Navy, who was in charge of the housing of the Dutch participants and who really took good care of that job. Nothing fails.

After having refreshed ourselves and having sustained the inner parts, we went to have a look at the stadium.

The sight of such a place, filled with spectators from all over the world, decorated with flags in the colours of their respective countries, is in one word overwhelming.

And then the enthusiasm! We, Dutchmen, simply cannot understand something like this. An example. A group of Americans, under the leadership of one of their compatriots, spell the name of their favourite, as follows: "G-G-a-a-l-l-l-l-e-e-r-r-y-y-Gallery! He! He! He!".

This yell is often heard by entering the stadium, or leaving it, by one of the winners.

Then also add the applause, the whistling and the flourishing of the flags; I don't exaggerate when I say this all was an imposing spectacle.

We have made the acquaintance of the British and American tug-of-war teams. "What a guys", A. van Loon said. They truly are powerful men. Four of them are as heavy as eight of ours. But if they have trained as well as we did, is doubtful. Wait and see!

It is as yet unknown how the teams will be split up and in what way the competition will take place. Only in the mornings one can get the program for that particular day, and before that time one will not get any information.

Monday-afternoon. Tug-of-war, first series: Great Britain defeated the United States in the first pull in 13.2 seconds; in the second pull in 18 4/5 seconds.

The winning team, eight police-men from London, consisted of: Canning, Holmes, Mills, Sewell, Shepherd, Stiff, Humphries and Thorne.

"Up to the stadium", came the order from our chauffeur. And there we went with our tug-of-war-team!

We had to pull against Italy. Their team consisted of: Tanani Guiseppi, Garpi Romols, Forno Giovanni, Zotti Amedo, Schiaupapietra, Arnaldo Adriano, Rambozzi Rodolfo and Galzolari.

Our team consisted of: A. van Loon, W. van Loon, W. van Rekum, W. Bekkers, H. J. Hengeveld, S. Jansma, H. A. Janssen and M. van Rekum.

The Italian team was about 200 kilograms heavier. We won in the first pull in 1 minute 11 seconds; and in the second pull in 43.25 seconds.

We shouted: "H-H-O-O-L-L-A-A-N-N-D-D-, Holland! Hup Holland, He! He! He!"

The Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant wrote: First the British pulled against the Americans. Great Britain was represented here by a team of the London Police and looking at those strapping "Bobbies" one should be impressed by the London Police corps.

The United States had brought together all powers: white and black pulled at the same rope as one man for the honour of the Star and Stripes. However, against he-men like the London policemen not even the Americans were able to resist and in a short while, the decision fell in favour of Great Britain.

Then came the moment when eight robust built Dutchmen with the proud Dutch lion on the broad chest would compete against eight, fashionable clothed in blue, Italians. Outwardly, the Italian team looked a bit heavier then our representatives.

When the signal was given, and on both sides the muscles strained and all power was given, the rope trembled from the combined strength of the 16 athletes.

"Holland! Holland! Holland!", yelled the group Dutch enthusiasts and indeed it seemed the name of the Fatherland, and the knowledge that many Dutch



Feus van Deutkom

hearts were bursting with pride for the battling compatriots gave our men new powers, because after a terrific fight, our team winningly pulled the Italians over the line.

Then the teams exchanged place; for the second time and with anxious strain the Dutch spectators had to look at the tremendous efforts of the brave Dutchmen.

One moment it seemed the fierce Italians might win from the calm and with much deliberation pulling Dutch team. But a few fearful moments later the Arnhemers - it were eight citizens from Arnhem who represented our country here - stamped their feet on the ground and a few seconds later the Italians had really felt the power of the Dutch muscles.

The Italians flung themselves to the ground weeping. It lasted quite a while before they could leave the arena a bit appeased.

The tug-of-war-team is being massaged every day by mr. Brugman. Homage to this hard worker, who helped the boys where he could.

After massage the pullers rest. Then follow walk- and other bodily exercises, which take place on the deck (*of the vessel Hollandia Tony B.*)

Thursday-afternoon they have to pull against the British team, who also trains most seriously.

That team is 300 kilograms heavier than ours. They pull on a field of clay and ash. The earth is so hard that after training the shoes have to be repaired.

It also rained, which made it extra difficult to place the heels in the ground, which makes the weight of a team an even more important factor.

The British team won the first pull in 28.8 seconds; and the second in 13.4 seconds.

Great Britain also won from Belgium. Afterwards the teamleader of the British team told us that it was quite clear for him we would win the second prize. But we still had to pull against the Belgians, who had defeated the United States.

Italy in the mean time had abandoned, which gave the Americans the fourth place.

Friday-afternoon masseur Brugman was quite busy with the team, who were peacefully resting on the tables and benches in the dressingroom of the stadium. Such treatment can't be matched, said team-captain Van Loon.

Then came the message from the Belgian team that they were content with the third prize and therefore no longer wished to compete in the arena.

But we took no pleasure with this decision. We wanted to compete against them for second and third prizes. Our decision was broadcasted by microphone in the stadium, upon which followed a loud applause and whistling.



Detail of the 1920 diploma showing Henk Janssen's name and the colour of the medal (silver)

After many talks to and fro, we got it done that the Belgians would finally pull against us.

Their team gave us real strong resistance. The first pull was won by us in 1 minute 3.4 seconds; and the second in 2 minutes 3 seconds.

Waylaid by Count Van Limburg Stirum and Baron Van Tuijl van Serooskerken, messrs. Waller and Scharroo we went to the dressingroom in triumph.

When the teams would have had an equal overall weight, we would certainly have won the first prize.

A word of thanks should go to mayor and aldermen (of Arnhem, Tony B.); superintendent Schenberg of the Bath- and Swimmingpool and the other patrons, who freely gave their support and enabled the boys to take a couple of days off; and finally to those who supported us financially.

Return to Arnhem, Saturday afternoon.

Arnhem gave the tug-of-war team returning from Antwerp a worthy homage.

Long before the train arrived, it was unusually crowded at the Stationsplein and the interest of the

people was so great, platformtickets were already sold out at half past three.

When the train slowly entered the railway-station, the musiciens played the "Wilhelmus". (*The Dutch national Anthem, Tony B.*)

In the waitingroom second class the medalwinners wer addressed by the acting mayor mr. H. Goedhart Jr. and he congratulated the team with their success on behalf of the municipality.

"Winners, as the acting mayor, I think it my duty to thank you profusely for the way in which you have represented Arnhem. With attention we have followed the competition; after the first win and the honourary defeat against Great Britain, we looked with fear to the day of yesterday. Brave you have competed against the Belgians, creditable you have fought. You; when the Belgians through arriving too late, forfeited the right for winning the second place; decided not to accept this second prize without having to compete for it, as we have read in the newspapers.

You then beat the Belgians twice and that gives you double honours.

Your performance made me think of what our ancestors once did, when they, in the eighty-years war (*against the Spanish, Tony B.*) supplied a hostile fleet with warmaterials, to defeat them then afterwards.

However, since this example is not quite similar, you did something almost equal. You defeated the Belgians and kept the name of Holland high against them.

Then speaker ask for a threefold "hurray" for Achilles, that in such a brave way held up the name of Holland, and also of Arnhem, abroad.

When the "hurray's " had subsided, mr. A. Frank spoke on behalf of Achilles and thanked the team for the fine way in which they had represented the club. He handed the team-captain A. van Loon a wreath.

Mr. Dormits honoured the winners on behalf of the Boxing-club "Carpentier". Another sportsfriend then came and handed over a wreath with a short word of praise.

Mr. J. Hoogveld came on behalf of the Netherlands Athletic Union and congratulated Achilles with the



Henk Janssen in 1968 with his diploma and silver medal

way it had represented the Netherlands in the Olympic Games, because our country up to now had had little or no success at the Games. (*Hoogveld himself participated as an athlete in the 1908 Olympic Games in London, Tony B.*)

Speaker pointed at the long training the team had accomplished and he finished his speech with a "hurray" for team-captain A. van Loon, for the team itself, and for mr. T. van Deutekom, the soul of Achilles!

More wreaths were presented by messrs. J. Brons, on behalf of the Roman Catholic Sports Association, N. Kramer on behalf of the Municipal Commission for Physical Education, the Lower Veluwe Gymnastics Association and athletic club "U.D.I." from Arnhem. And by messrs. Dijkers on behalf of "Hertog Hendrik" and De Vries on behalf of "Neptunus".

Mr. T. van Deutekom thanked all for the honours the team had received, which exceeded all expectations.

Speaker requested all to continue supporting Achilles. He then spoke about wrestling, with which the Dutch contestants had had not much success owing to the use of the Bergvall-system; pointed at the examples set by Paulen (*Adje Paulen, Olympic participant in 1920, 1924 and 1928 in athletics, and much later President of the LAAU, Tony B.*) and the tug-of-war-team, which showed Dutch sportsmen that good and diligent training will succeed! He expressed the hope that the Netherlands would obtain many victories at the Olympic Games in 1924.

With this the official homage was finished.

After the team had been photographed in the railway-station by mr. D.J. Moonen, followed a drive by caleche through the city of Arnhem, music in front. Proof of the enthusiasm by the people from Arnhem was, that one hour after the arrival of the train, the police still had to open up a path through the lane with the interested multitude, who had waited so long, in spite of the rain.

In Musis Sacrum the reception-committee and the tug-of-war-team finally united for dinner.¹⁴

In Mallon's book, he gives full details and further comments on the names of the all members of the various tug-of-war-teams, including the Italians.

The Italian ones mentioned in this article were reproduced as given, and in the original version, they were apparently printed the other way around as they should have been.

In note 681 of his book, Mallon mentions the confusion still existing about these Italian names, and also Mallon gives the names of various Olympic historians, some of them current members of ISOH, who tried to shed light on these names.⁵

NOTES:

- 1 *RAPPORT OFFICIEL des JEUX de la VIIème OLYMPIADS, ANVERS 1920*. By Alfred Verdyck, Secrétaire général du Comité Exécutif des Jeux d'Anvers, pages 62 and 141.
- 2 *THE UNOFFICIAL REPORT OF THE 1920 OLYMPICS, ANTWERP BELGIUM* by Bill Mallon, pages 197, 198, 199.
- 3 See the photographs, from Mr. H.A. Janssen (*17 June 1890 † 28 August 1969) with his diploma and medal, and from the part of the diploma, where the event, the name of the winner and the colour of the medal is shown in detail.
- 4 Original article in possession of the author. The article is in the Dutch language and was typed out on very flimsy paper.
- 5 *THE UNOFFICIAL REPORT OF THE 1920 OLYMPICS, ANTWERP BELGIUM* by Bill Mallon, page 199.