

THE MAN WHO ALMOST LOST HIS PANTS

By Tony Bijkerk

Last year, 2001, the Royal Netherlands Athletic Union [KNAU] celebrated its centennial anniversary, although the sport of athletics in fact has a much longer history in the Netherlands. As usual in these cases, a memorial book was published, rather prosaically titled: 1870-2000 – 130 jaar atletiek in Nederland.

Reading through the book, one specific story claimed my undivided attention. It told about the strange experience of one of our athletes during the Games of the VIIIth Olympiad, Paris 1924. The athlete was Jan Zeegers, a long distance runner, born 28 March 1902 in Amsterdam, who died 29 November 1978 in Amsterdam. Zeegers was told to have competed in the 3000 metres steeple chase in Paris, and it was his first steeplechase ever.

The story told in the memorial book was hilarious, because it seemed that Zeegers had to abandon the race for a very special reason. During the race, he came close to losing his pants as they became very wet after he fell backwards into the water after jumping over the hurdle for the first time. This happened a few times more before he became aware that the pool behind the hurdle had no horizontal surface underwater, but was rising to the surface at the end. His pants became heavy (they were from natural materials) and dragged down a couple of centimetres, but that was enough for the Dutch press representatives to turn it into an amusing story!

In his biography, titled: SPORT GREEP ME [Sport Grabbed Me], Zeegers described this event in detail, and he was critical about the reactions in the press, which gave him a hard time. Zeegers abandoned three laps before the end of the race, because the next day he had to run the 5000 metres, which was his major forte and he did not want to spend all his strength on this ridiculous affair.



Jan Zeegers, the man who almost lost his pants

Strangely enough, nothing about his participation in this event is mentioned in any report, or statistical book.

Neither the 1924 Paris Official Report, nor Ekkehard zur Megede's books on Olympic track & field (athletics), nor Volker Kluge's *Die Chronik I* mention his name in the list with the participants in the 3000 metres steeple chase; the Official Report only states: N. Part. [non participant]. As a consequence, I had also left him out of this event in my statistics in the *Gouden Bock van de Nederlandse Olympiërs*.

Well, sometimes one has to redress an earlier mistake and that is what I will do in a future issue of that book.

Anyway, the story is quite clear: Jan Zeegers ran in the heats of the 3000 metres steeple chase at the Games of the VIIIth Olympiad in Paris in 1924, and as a consequence all statistics should be corrected to include his name, adding that he abandoned the race three laps before the finish!