

# THE PROFESSIONAL AMATEUR

By Anthony Th. Bijkerk

**D**uring my long research into the history of Dutch participation in the Olympic Games, I looked through a multitude of sports-literature.

Many years ago, in a memorial book dedicated to the history of the athletic club PRO PATRIA from Rotterdam, I came across a sentence, which immediately caught my attention and then captured my imagination.

The sentence was part of an article dedicated to the long-distance runner (marathon and longer distances) George Johannes Marcel Buff, born 23 November 1874 in Rotterdam, who died 3 March 1955, also in Rotterdam.

The sentence stated, to my surprise, that: "George Buff ran in the 1900 Olympic marathon in Paris and came in in fifth place."

I knew that this could not be true, because the results of the 1900 Olympic marathon had already been researched and fully reported by many eminent Olympic historians, including Erich Kamper, Bill Mallon, David Wallechinsky, Volker Kluge, Karl Lennartz and Ekkhard zur Megede.

Nowhere in their publications was mentioned anything at all about a Dutchman participating in this marathon, the only long-distance run in the 1900 Olympic Games!

Still, the photocopy I made of the article kept coming back to me regularly.

Especially so, because of my unflagging interest in the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris. After all, almost four decades ago, I happened to be the one who found the conclusive evidence that the Netherlands actually did take part in those Games and even won several Olympic medals, including a gold (in rowing).

In 1998, I was researching some facts for Karl Lennartz about the early century Olympic football-tournaments, when all of a sudden, in an extremely rare sports-magazine, published in the year 1900, I

found the solution of the problem, that had been eluding me for such a long time. It opened up most interesting insights in the historical aspects of sports in those days!

As stated, George Buff was a well-known long-distance runner around the turn of the last century. The longer the distance, the better he ran, according to the contemporary papers.

In June 1900, the first indications of Buff's plans to participate in Paris in 1900 are published in an article, published in *Het Sportblad*. This sports-magazine was then the official mouthpiece of the "Nederlandsche Athletiek Bond (NAB)". (see the end of this article).

The article concerned was published under the title: "George Buff as a professional runner to Paris."

In the article, the second secretary of the NAB, Mr. H. van der Wielen, explains the decision of the Board of the NAB to support Buff's participation in a professional race in Paris.

The secretary stated, that the Board only acceded, because there happened to be no event for amateurs, suitable for Buff's capacities as a runner. (*the underlining is mine, Tony B.*)

However, the Board admits this decision is in fact contrary to its own rules and regulations, because these are to support amateur-sport!

In a commentary on the same page, the editor of *Het Sportblad*, Mr. J.C. Schröder from Amsterdam, questions both Buff's decision to run as a professional and for money, and the NAB-Board's decision to support Buff.

Mr. Schröder even states that Buff, "as a professional, should no longer be a representative of the Nederlandsche Athletiek Bond, and that any amateur running against him should be disqualified."

IN PARIS:

In *Het Sportblad* No. 32, from 9 August 1900, the story is continued and unfolds itself.

This time, the reporting has been done by Mr. A.J.

Jansen, 1st Secretary of the NAB. He apparently accompanied George Buff to Paris.

He writes:

“Mister Buff participated in the world championship for professionals over 6 hours, in Paris on Sunday.

He was not among the first ten arriving and his name is not mentioned once in the report written about the race in the *Journal des Sports*. Thus he unfortunately had not much success, and that is now wonder, if one knows that the race was going too fast even for the British champion Len Hurst.

Bagré became first and Charbonnel second.

According to the International rules Mr. Buff now is a professional, and everyone running against him might be disqualified.” (again underlining by me. TB)

The same reporter, Mr. A.J. Jansen, then gives his report on the race itself. which is interesting enough to be published here.

#### “GEORGE BUFF IN PARIS

At eleven thirty Sunday-morning be, with his 51 colleagues, appeared at the start.

Bagré, the winner, with Buff, Charbonnel, Victor, Remy and Hurst were in the lead for about 1 ½ hours, leaving all the others far behind, when Buff, suffering from severe headaches and fever, quit; although heat was not bothering the runners at all, he complained about it, most likely caused by his fever.

Among the friends, who accompanied and supported him, were the gentlemen De Jong, Kruit, Brussaard, some French and Belgians, and also the former long-distance runner Boogaardt from Amsterdam.

For about 3 ½ hours, he continued shambling along, then he gave up and was treated by three doctors, who established that he had a high fever. He was kept along with wet pieces of cloth, injections near the temples, etc.

In this way, he was kept until half past three.

When he felt better, he started anew and to show how willing he was to perform well and to bring home a prize, which he knew his friends wanted for him, he ran another 15 kilometres per hour, in the last two hours, bringing his total over six hours up to 52 kilometres, which made a difference of twenty kilometres with the first one, Bagré.

Pity, that he, who was so good in condition during his training-period, as shown by his run between Rotterdam and Leiden and back, 78 kilometres in 5 hours and 52 minutes, during which run the undersigned was one of his companions, now had to endure such bad luck.

The bad luck became even greater, when the Jury placed him in sixth place, while some members of the Jury and many from the public had seen him to be fifth.

His ‘belle allure’ was generally praised. Even while returning home without prize, I thank him in the name of the N.A.B. for his efforts, and for his goodwill to hold up the Athletic Sports as a Dutchman abroad.

May he continue for many years on the road he has chosen for himself, as an example for all other sportsmen, is the wish from the undersigned.

A.J. Jansen”

The Editor of *Het Sportsblad*, Mr. Schröder, apparently completely disagrees with this article and immediately responds with:

“We cannot place this article without commenting on it. We simply think it a shame, that someone, who has to be treated with cold water cloths, injections, etc., in order to not fall down unconscious, still runs another 30 kilometres in two hours - something like a record run.

That Mr. Buff didn’t know better himself, can be ascribed to his fever, but were his friends also affected?

We have to believe it, because it cannot be accepted that good sportsmen wouldn’t have kept him from continuing in this lunatic action, which might have impaired him for life.

The Editor.”

But now comes the 'crux of the matter':

In 1908, the replacement of the Nederlandsche Athletiek Bond, the Nederlandsche Athletiek Unie (NAU) accepted George Johannes Marcel Buff as a participant in the Olympic marathon, which was run July 24th, 1908 from Windsor Castle to the Olympic Stadium in London.

Buff did not finish his marathon-race. He was truly the ultimate professional amateur!

Karl Lennartz and Walter Teutenberg in their book: *II. Olympische Spiele 1900 in Paris*, only mention on page 180: under "Wettbewerbe der Profis: the "6 Stunden-Lauf, with its winner 1. Bagré Victor, with 72,545 km, and 2. Charbonnel, Albert, with 71,490km.

Bill Mallon in his book *The 1900 Olympic Games Results for All Competitors in All Events, with Commentary*, gives the full results and participants of/in the event, as far as he could completely find them, on page 56 of his book.

In his list, the name George Johannes Marcel BUFF is not mentioned at all, and Mallon mentions the amount of competitors to be 44.

According to the report from Mr. A.J. Jansen, who himself was an official of the N.A.B., there were 52 competitors, including BUFF!

Both Mallon and Lennartz/Teutenberg do not accept the 6 Hours Event for Professionals to be an Olympic event, and rightly so. But the established fact is, that George Buff competed in this event as a professional, and eight years later as an amateur in the Olympic marathon in London 1908!

Fortunately, both for him and for the N.A.B., the Netherlands Olympic Committee, as the future 'guardian' of the Olympic Rules and Regulations, was not established until September 1912!

It should be noted that in the Netherlands, athletics (track and field) became organized on 17 November 1889, when the Nederlandsche Voetbal en Athletiek Bond was founded. It was this organization which received the invitation to attend the 1894 Olympic Congress in the Sorbonne in Paris!

However, the combination with the football-sport was not very successful because football apparently was too dominant, and thus on 29th September 1895



George Buff

the Nederlandsche Voetbal Bond split itself off and founded an organization of its own, representing only football.

The athletes now also needed an organization of their own, and thus the Nederlandsche Athletiek Bond came into existence, but only for a period of five years! It was replaced by the Nederlandsche Athletiek Unie, which was founded in early 1901 (and still exists to this day).

These changes might be responsible for the reason why Buff's participation as a professional never came up when the team for the Games of the IVth Olympiad, in London 1908, was selected.

On the other hand, Pro Patria in Rotterdam, existed as an athletic club long before both the 1900 and 1908 Olympic Games, weathering all the changes in the national coordinating bodies. They should have known better, if they so wished?!