



HOW AMSTERDAM OPENED THE GAMES IN 1928

THE DELICACY OF THE GAMES WILL BANISH ALL COARSENESS

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In the past decades the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games has developed into a cultural spectacle lasting for many hours. When Amsterdam was elected to host the Games almost eighty years ago, matters were quite different. The opening ceremony on 28 July 1928 was for the most part restrained. There was a 'dedication speech' of over twenty minutes. A choir of 1200 'chanteurs' sang the hymn *Wilt heden nu treden* and ten verses of *Hollands Vlag, je bent mijn glorie*. Angry with the Olympic mandarins, Queen WILHELMINA would not open the Games, so Prince HENDRIK opened them in her name.

The month of July had been advertising summer brilliantly in 1928. For weeks nobody had needed to bother about an umbrella. *"It had been too good, actually nothing like Holland, such weather, so steady and dependable. We had become unused to rain"*, according to a newspaper report. But in the night before and on the morning of the day the Games were to be opened in Amsterdam, the rain announced itself. With a vengeance. Leo LAUER, the flamboyant editor-in-chief of the weekly *Sport in Beeld*, put it into words in a colourful way: *"In bucketfuls, as if the clouds were torn asunder, the rain poured from an ashen sky, clattering and spattering down. The water poured through the gutters along the tarmac of the streets in waves. It seemed as if all Gods on Mount Olympus were enraged"*.

Amsterdam presented a cheerless prospect on the morning of 28 July, its countless flags stuck to their masts. Would the opening of the Games turn into a dreary Dutch affair? Desperation took hold of the organizers. But lo and behold, towards noon the weather suddenly cleared. And it was to remain dry during the entire ceremony. Every once in

a while a watery sun even shone through *"an angry Ruysdael sky"*.

According to calculations the brand-new Olympic Stadium could hold 40.000 spectators, but as it turned out, the counter stopped at 31,000; a considerable disappointment. Not a mouse could be fitted in at the opening. Ticket prices ranged from f. 7,50 guilders (€ 3.50) for the grandstand to 1,25 guilders (€ 0.60) for standing room. Since the photo rights had been leased, spectators were not allowed to take their own pictures. Even the smallest camera had to be handed in. A police inspector searched the stands with binoculars for offenders who were then set on by policemen.

Hans Meerum TERWOGT, the leading Dutch sportswriter of his time, was watching the many celebrities in the grandstand boxes before the start of the ceremony:

"Most of them were dressed in black official attire, crowned by the shine of their top hats, or in colourful uniforms, cocked hats and helmets, gold epaulettes and white braiding, luxuriant plumes and clinking sabres. In between all those solemn gentlemen fortunately also the more cheerful and fragile spectacle of the ladies, with all the flamboyance of their graceful and newly-fashionable costume, dominated by tightly-fitting hats and short skirts."

Just before two o'clock Prince HENDRIK, who was to open the Games officially, arrived in a state coach, pulled by four horses. The prince, clad in admiral's uniform, was led to his seat by members of the *Netherlands Olympic Committee (NOC)* and the *International Olympic Committee (IOC)*. The Royal



**The Czech Team at the Opening Ceremony
1928 (Private Archives R. Paauw)**

Military Band and the *Royal Navy Regimental Band*, conducted by Lieutenant Walther BOER, performed the *Wilhelmus*. It was sung by 1200 'chanteurs', belonging to choirs from Amsterdam, Breda, Den Bosch, The Hague, Haarlem and Maastricht, conducted by Fred ROESKE. It brought a lump to Meerum TERWOGT'S throat:

"Rarely has our beautiful old Wilhelmus sounded so strongly and so warmly, so intensely and so uplifting as this afternoon. The crowd stood as one, silently and devoutly, a shiver of emotion crossing their backs from time to time. The civilians bareheaded, the military rigidly at attention, the women moved to tears with lips quivering".

The gates of the Marathon Stand opened and to the strains of *Einzug der Gladiatoren* the parade of the countries began. For the first time in Olympic history Greece opened the parade, a tradition which is maintained until the present day. Forty-seven countries had entered the Games, forty-six paraded in front of Prince HENDRIK. The French team was absent, which caused considerable commotion. One day before the Games began, the French wished to visit the stadium. An attendant forbade this. An argument was followed by a fight in which the attendant had hit a high French official in the face. The French demanded (and received) an apology from the NOC and also requested disciplinary action against the man. But on the day of the opening they happened upon the attendant in question who was controlling the gate. This proved too much for the French and they turned on their heels. They very nearly returned to their own country. The Dutch ambassador in Paris and the French ambassador in Amsterdam had to intervene in order to hush up the argument. France did participate in the competitions.

Leo LAUER was not favourably impressed with what he was shown.

"Was this really the parade of human power and beauty? How disappointing those figures are on close inspection. Only rarely do we see proper marching. With most of them it is strolling, no more".

Some magazines covered the parade in a rather curious way, like Henrik SCHOLTE in *Revue der Sporten*, actually the leading sports periodical of the time:

"The Belgians wore carnival tights, huge Chileans passed by with monkey faces, bursting into three cheers very unexpectedly. Denmark showed up unkempt, looking like a travel club spending the kitty, and Austria also looked dreary and untidy. The Turks wore half-moon hats on their heads, possibly covering full-moon skulls. Spain, Portugal, Mexico, the Phillippines: various kinds of chocolate in colourful wrappings. The Egyptians were notable for their flat feet, the Germans for their waiters' outfits, Japan first sent in a complete funeral procession with top hats and umbrellas and next a coquettish little plague of locusts. Thus one country following another [...]".

But not everyone made a mess of it. Meerum TERWOGT, normally a rather critically inclined gentleman, loved everything he saw. He waxed lyrical over Lithuania, for they had a female flag bearer, *"a maiden of solid build, a magnificent specimen of her nation's type, leading the way in a green gown, tightly clinging to the gracefulness of her shapely lines"*.

The Netherlands, consisting of a very large group, concluded the parade. Dressed in navy jackets trimmed in white, white trousers/skirts, white shirts, straw hats with orange ribbons, white shoes and white socks. (The price for the entire outfit amounted to 25 guilders, € 11.50). The NOC



Harry Denis takes the Olympic oath
(Private Archives R. Paauw)

took care of the costs for the jacket and hat; the participants had to pay for the rest themselves). To LAUER'S satisfaction "*Holland kept up a brisk pace and cut a spirited figure*".

The theologian J.Th. de VISSER, the former Minister of Education, next spoke "words of dedication". He certainly showed courage, standing there. In 1925, still a minister, he had wanted to grant the NOC a subsidy of a million guilders for the organization of the Games. Protestants (among whom a large part of his own party, the CHU) and Catholics had stepped in: no support for heathen stuff. ("*In these Games not the Creator is worshipped but the creation. It is to be feared that God will not hold back at this evil*"). De VISSER had experienced enough trouble in his own circle and had not returned as a minister after the elections. With this dedication speech he once again did something his co-religionists were not thrilled with. De VISSER, who spoke for no less than twenty minutes, still firmly believed in the Olympic principles:

"The battle will be determined by incorruptible honesty and good faith. The delicacy of the game will banish all coarseness. And every combatant will be convinced that the victor will only be endowed with personal and national honour if the victory was gained with a blank weapon in a pure hand".

After this, something went wrong. High up in the Marathon Tower stood trumpet players who were supposed to come into action when Prince HENDRIK was performing the official opening. They were to receive a sign from sailors on the field using semaphore signals. Apparently something went haywire in the communication for the trumpet players blared right through the 1200-strong choir who were just then rendering the hymn "*Wilt heden nu*

treden" from VALERIUS' *Gedenckclancken*. It became an ear-splitting cacophony

After another speech, this time by the President of the NOC, Baron A. SCHIMMELPENNINCK van der OYE, it was Prince HENDRIK'S turn to officially open the Games (in the French language). Why did the prince do this in the first place? With a single exception heads of state had opened the Games since 1896. Queen WILHELMINA, however, had refused to do so. She had fallen out with the Olympic cardinals because they had failed to ask her in 1927 (!) if the opening date was convenient to her. Did she have anything else to do on this day? No, but that was not the issue.

In July the queen had gone on holiday to Norway incognito. Until the last minute attempts were made to change her mind. Telegrams went to and fro. Minister Beelaerts van BLOKLAND ate loads of humble pie to try and win her over. Well, all-right, WILHELMINA would open the Games, but not on the 28th; people would just have to wait until she got back...

The *Telegraaf* called it a disaster: "*It is a splendid tradition which always had the House of Orange share in the great moments in the life of their people. Alas - the people are living through the very moment of 1928 by themselves*". The communist paper the *Tribune* failed to understand what all the fuss was about: "*Good Lord, does all this really matter so very much? We have not missed the Queen at all in this. Moreover, we cannot imagine ever missing her at any occasion anywhere in the world, since we can do without her very well*".

High upon the Marathon Tower the trumpet players appeared to have lost their bearings, because after the Prince's speech they were now rather late in doing their bit. Gunshots sounded and the pigeons (wear-

ing the flags of all countries participating around their necks) were released to take to the air. For the first time in Olympic history there was an Olympic Fire (in the bowl of the Marathon Tower), not brought to Amsterdam by relay runners, but simply lit on the spot by a staff member of the municipal gas company. There was more smoke than fire, though.

When the Olympic flag was hoisted, the choir broke into the *Vlaggelied* by Johannes VERHULST. Much of this was lost in the droning of airplanes circling above the stadium. Surrounded by the flag bearers of the 46 participating countries Harry DÉNIS, the captain of the Dutch football eleven, took the Olympic oath on behalf of all participants, in the French language. According to the newspapers, he did not do it very well: "Someone could have told Dénis that he could simply have spoken at the microphone. Now he bit into it syllable by syllable, making it look very much as if he was reciting his lessons". Just as well the French were not there.

Finally the choir extensively sang the cantata *Hollands Glorie* by Richard HOL. The headmaster of the Academy of Physical Education, Mr NIEUWENHUIS, was rather sceptical about this: "Is it really considerate as a host to keep singing about your own flag? Should we leave forty nations standing out there in the cold, half-dressed, for ten verses?"

After this, the teams of the nations left the stadium. For the opening ceremony time was allotted from two to five o'clock, but the crowds were already out on the streets again at quarter to four.

The reviews on what was offered varied widely.

Leo LAUER in *Sport in Beeld*: "It was proper and quite orderly. But that just about sums it up. A pretty play of colours, but not a parade of beauty. What was lacking was a director".

Henrik SCHOLTE in *Revue der Sporten*: "From an aesthetic point of view this opening was calvinistic, with all the good and the bad of sober, lofty seriousness".



Words of Dedication by J.Th. de Visser
(Private Archives R. Paauw)

De Sport: "Undoubtedly it was a beautiful day, unique in our athletic lives. Yet we had expected 'the moment' to be more impressive".

However, there were other sounds as well.

De Maasbode: "A truly impressive celebration, a feast of enthusiasm, of flags, of colours and of sun".

Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant: "The opening ceremony was a success and has made a lasting impression on all those present. A wonderful page in the sports history of the Dutch people".

The Corinthian: "A stirring spectacle of sports fraternization, a rich and cheerful play of colours".



A Police Inspector confiscated all cameras, which were brought into the stadium (Private Archives R. Paauw)