

ROWING AT THE GAMES OF THE 2ND OLYMPIAD, PARIS 1900

BY TONY BIJKERK

The youngest Olympic competitor, medalist and gold medalist ever? This quotation comes from page 202 of the famous “Golden Book of the Olympic Games” by Erich Kamper and Bill Mallon. It was written about the young French boy who coxed the Dutch pair Francois Antoine Brandt and Roelof Klein during the final race of the pairs with coxswain at the Olympic rowing competition in Paris 1900. In the commentary, the authors state that this boy appeared to be between seven and 10 years of age at the time of the race. They concluded this from a photograph found in a Dutch memorial book, showing the two giant Dutch rowers and their “gamin”.

As the originator of this discovery almost 37 years ago, I think the estimation of this boy’s age is not correct. In my opinion the boy’s age has been rated much too low and that is maybe due to the bad quality of the photograph involved. Because I still feel responsible for the story as a whole, I thought that it would be necessary to add a post script to story. My commentary can only be corroborated by one of the principals himself! Let me, therefore, present the actual story about what happened in Paris 1900, which was written by Francois Antoine Brandt himself, and translated by me in his own words. He wrote it for a memorial book of his rowing club LAGA, which in 1926 celebrated its 50th anniversary.

My whole life long I will not forget how Klein and I, on the 26th of August 1900 won the world championship in the old two (with cox), on the Seine-river, between Courbevoie and Asnières. The day before, with calm weather and a nice temperature, we were beaten in our Deichmann-boat, the ‘A.P.Petrie’ by the SOCIÉTÉ NAUTIQUE DE LA MARNE by several lengths.

‘We had rowed the best we could, we were stronger than our opponents, we both had many years of rowing-experience, we were never beaten in Holland. -Therefore we should have the possibility to win, if only the circumstances were equal! But these were *not* equal; all those French teams rowed with children in the coxes-chair, who were replaced by lighter ones, as soon as they had reached the weight of 25 kilograms! And we had to pull 60 kilograms with us [the

weight of Dr. Brockmann, the coxswain from the series, Tony B.J. When we heard that we, as the fastest losers, were chosen to row in the final race, our coach Dr. Meurer decided, in consultance with the present members of the board from Minerva, that we also should search for such a boy. Between the already as too heavy discarded ‘gamins’ we soon found one, who formerly had coxed teams from the SOCIÉTÉ DE LA BASSE-SEINE. His weight was 33 kilograms, but when he took place in the ‘A.P.Petrie’ the rudder still came high above the water surface and therefor we had to use an extra lead-weight of 5 kilograms, that, attached to the rudder, brought at least its fin under the water surface. Thus we won 22 kilograms in weight!

“Before the start we had received information that **the** French teams, against whom we had to compete and who apparently were a bit scared about our performance, had decided that the R.C. Castillon would at the beginning give everything to try to come in front of us, then cut across our front and give us ‘foul’ water, while in the mean time the S.N. DE LA MARNE would keep up with us and then after half the distance would row past us. *Un homme averti en vaut deux!* [Forewarned is forearmed! Tony.]

“So we also decided to start with a sprint. Our plan succeeded beautiful and before we had rowed 100 meters we already were 3/4 length in front. This became 6/4 length and then Klein changed into a calmer pace, with our longest strokes. For me it has always been an enigma, why he did not change the pace upwards during the last 200 meters, because the MARNE was sprinting hard and gaining visibly on us; we were still fresh and it could have been done easily, but I could not stir him into this action, and even with the lower pace of the second half of the distance, we still passed the finish line as first, only 1/5th of a second before the MARNE.”

(The story continues with the tale how they experienced their stay in Paris and how they returned to the Netherlands with their price: “a heavy bronze statue of a lady,” with which they passed the Belgian/Dutch border!)

The conclusion of my findings!

I want to state that in my humble opinion this young boy might still be one of the youngest gold-medal winners in

the Olympic Games ever, but he is certainly not younger than 12 to 14 years old, as can be deducted from the enclosed photograph. It would be fantastic if his name and his personal data could still be found. But even the son of Brandt, whom I personally contacted several times between 1965 and 1984 (he died in 1985), could not tell me anything about this young "gamin", who played such an important role in the rowing career from his late father. It is a pity that even in the latest studies like the one from Karl Lennartz and Walter Teutenberg, nothing can be found about the ages from the coxes from the French rowing teams in Paris 1900. I am quite certain that when the age from these boys could be found, they must have been even younger than the one in the Dutch boat; who had already been discarded because of his weight!

In another article which I found 36 years ago in one of my country's earliest sports magazines, August 1900 and written by the same Dr. Meurer mentioned by Brandt, the story is corroborated. But not in such detail as the Brandt story.

Dr. Meurer was the trainer-coach of the Dutch rowing teams entered in the 1900 world-championships (Olympic Games), under the patronage of the club Minerva Amsterdam. This rowing club only existed to offer racing facilities abroad for Dutch student-rowers, who normally competed for their own student- clubs, like LAGA (from Delft), Nereus (from Amsterdam), Njord (from Leiden). A Dutch Leander Boat Club!

Klein and Brandt normally rowed for LAGA and the "four with coxswain" originally came from Nereus, while the eighth was a mixture of rowers from all three aforementioned clubs.

Dr Meurer himself played a key role in another strange episode at these 1900 Olympic rowing races. It concerned the dispute of the two different finals of the fours with coxswain, which were both rowed in Paris. Our former ISOH doyen, the late Erich Kamper, mentions this episode in his 1990 book "Olympische Heroen." Unfortunately Kamper did not give the complete history about what actually happened. Since the facts were written down by Dr. Meurer himself on the evening of, the first final, immediately after they really happened, I can now tell the story as it appeared in the magazine *Nederlandsche Sport* from Saturday, September 1st, 1900.

'The first number to be rowed that day [August 26th, 1900, Tony.] at 2 p.m., was the 'fours with coxswain'. In accordance with the official program it had been decided that only the winners from each heat, plus the fastest loser, would start in this final. You can understand our surprise when we received information that the jury had decided to add the teams Lyon (France) and Favorite-Hammonia (from Hamburg, Germany) to the final, because they had rowed a

faster time than heat winner Ludwigshafen (also from Germany). Ludwigshafen had a very easy heat against the team from Barcelona and therefore did not have to row all out to beat the Spanish team.

"Minerva, Germania and Ludwigshafen [the three heat winners, Tony.] protested; they came to the starting line, but did not actually start the race. The three other teams, which included Roubaix [from France and the fastest loser from the heats, as mentioned in the regulations, Tony.] rowed their race, which Roubaix won, Lyon being second and Favorite-Hammonia coming in as third.

"Dr. Meurer then went to the jury tent, together with Mr. Frikkers (a Dutch member of the international jury) to lodge a protest against this race. The result of the protest was that the jury decided to have the three original heat winners row against each other the next (mon)day morning at 10 a.m. to decide which team would be the strongest one.

"The funny side of this, in fact most regrettable, incident is that the three original prizes had already been handed over to the three mentioned losing teams and that for the race to be rowed tomorrow three new prizes will be supplied. The moral victory of this great 'battle' will be awarded to the three victorious teams of tomorrow! It is completely clear for me that the Netherlands should not any longer compete in rowing races in France; the conception of sport and the organization of races are more than 25 years outdated here!"

The second final on that Monday morning was won by Germania in 5 min. 59 sec., with Minerva second 6 min. 3 sec. and Ludwigshafen third in 6 min. 5 seconds. The team from Roubaix declined to participate in this second final of the strongest teams! Dr. Meurer ended his comments:

"It is a pity that in such important races, such acts can take place: the program showed the Committee exactly how to act and that from the losing teams only Roubaix should have been admitted to the final!"

I hope this information sheds new light on the second Olympic Games. Since it concerned some of our earliest Olympians, and was written in a Dutch contemporary sport magazines, I thought that it should belong to all of us!

Another peculiar note concerns silver medals presented to the Dutch rowers from Minerva Amsterdam (or better from Nereus Amsterdam, the Student Rowing Club from which these four rowers and their coxswain Dr. Brockmann were members). One of these rare medals has been exposed this year in the Olympic exhibition from the Netherlands Sport Museum. The medal concerned was won by the late Johannes Hester Lambertus Terwogt. After his study he became a children's doctor in Amsterdam and died in 1977 at the ripe age of 98 years old. According to his family, he never knew that he had participated in the Olympic Games!
