

The Podium for Holland, The Plush Bench for Belgium

The Low Countries and the Olympic Games

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[HANS VANDEWEGHE]



Dutch Inge de Bruin wins gold. Freestyle, 50m. Athens, 2004.

The Netherlands is certain to win its hundredth gold medal at the London 2012 Olympics. Whether the Belgians will be able to celebrate winning gold medal number 43 remains to be seen, but that is not Belgium's core business: Belgium has the distinction of being the only country to have provided two presidents of the International Olympic Committee.

The Netherlands initially did better in the IOC membership competition, too. Baron Fritz van Tuijll van Serooskerken was the first IOC representative from the Low Countries, though he was not a member right from the start; this Dutch

nobleman joined the International Olympic Committee in 1898, two years after its formation, to become the first Dutch IOC member. Baron Van Tuijll is still a great name in Dutch sporting history; in 1912 he founded a Dutch branch of the Olympic Movement and became its first president. However, it was not long before Belgium caught up. There were no Belgians among the 13 men – even today, women members are still few and far between – who made up the first International Olympic Committee in 1894, but thanks to the efforts of Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, who joined the IOC in 1903, the Olympic Movement became the key international point of reference for sport in the Catholic south.

The Belgian Olympic Committee was formed three years later – a year after Belgium, thanks to the efforts of King Leopold II, had played host to the prestigious Olympic Congress. In Belgium sport was the prerogative of the well-to-do classes – the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie – and was organised from the centre, namely Brussels. The Netherlands had a much smaller aristocracy, and virtually no bourgeoisie comparable to that in Belgium. Moreover, Baron Van Tuijll was a socially committed nobleman who devoted part of his fortune to good causes. Yet it still took some time before sport became accepted as a pastime in the Netherlands. Even today, physical exercise is regarded as a sinful activity in some strict Reformed circles.

Amsterdam 1928 more important than Antwerp 1920

Initially, Belgium was noticeably stronger than the Netherlands in the Olympic arena, at least in the first seven Games. Up to 1924 Belgium had won 72 medals, half of them at its own Games, held in Antwerp in 1920. This was another first for Belgium, which had been awarded the first post-war Games in recognition of its heroic resistance during the First World War.

In the event, Antwerp 1920 proved to be a cesspool of corruption and nepotism, and badly organised to boot. And one way or another it ushered in the decline of Belgian sport, while by contrast it was in Antwerp that the Dutch discovered themselves and rapidly developed into a true sporting nation.

The Dutch had long campaigned for the Games to be brought to the Netherlands, but during the selection of the venue for the next Olympic Games Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the French founder of the International Olympic Committee, uttered the legendary words: 'I am going to die; give me one more Paris.' And so Paris became the venue for the 1924 Olympic Games; but with no trouble at all it was agreed that the other candidate, Amsterdam, would host the next Games four years later. And so it came to pass.

In contrast to Antwerp, where virtually nothing remains of the 1920 Games apart from a few walls in Beerschot AC's football stadium at Het Kiel, the site of the 1920 Games, the Olympic Stadium built by the Netherlands in the southern suburbs of Amsterdam was a monument which can still be visited today, albeit in much restored form.



Belgian Ulla Werbrouck wins gold. Judo (under 72 kg.). Atlanta, 1996.

A feature of the Amsterdam Games was the presence of Coca-Cola; the company had just become an Olympic sponsor and for the first – and last – time had drinks stalls in the stadium. These were also the first Games with no significant political riots, whereas at all previous Games some group or other had sought to take advantage of the Olympic stage to convey its message to the world.

Breakthrough for women's sport

There were many reasons why Amsterdam 1928 was symbolic, and more important than Antwerp 1920. Not only was the Olympic flame lit for the first time – by an employee of the gas company – but the parade of competing nations was also led for the first time by Greece, the country where the Games had begun. The host country brought up the rear of the parade, thereby establishing two traditions which persist to this day. The closing ceremony took place on a Sunday, to the frustration of the Dutch Reformed Political Party (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij). The best-known athlete was Johnny Weissmuller, who later achieved world cinematic fame as Tarzan. Weissmuller won two swimming gold medals. The Finn Paavo Nurmi won his ninth gold medal in the 10,000 metres.

Germany took part in the Games for the first time since the First World War, with a team of no fewer than 223 competitors who between them won 31 medals. A total of 46 countries took part, but the number of competitors was less than in Paris in 1924.

Despite protests, women's athletics and gymnastics were on the programme for the first time. The Pole Halina Konopacka became the first female Olympic athletics champion. After the women's 800 metres several of the participants collapsed from total exhaustion. This prompted a heated debate within the IOC about women's events in the Olympic Games. The new president of the IOC, the extremely conservative Belgian Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, argued that women should only be allowed to take part in gymnastics, swimming, tennis and skating events, but in fact only the 800 metres was scrapped. Not until the 1960 Games would women again be allowed to compete over distances longer than 200 metres.

In Amsterdam the Netherlands had discovered sport, and especially women's sport. Belgium was left standing. In six successive Olympic Games, Belgium won 33 medals and the Netherlands 47. Followed by a big fat zero for Melbourne 1956, because the Netherlands had had the courage to ban all its athletes from taking part in protest against the Russian seizing of Budapest earlier that year.

The tallest younger generation in the world

It is well-known today, but it was apparent as long ago as 1937 that the Netherlands was a nation of swimmers, thanks to its robust, strong women competitors. In 1937 half the 26 world records were held by Dutch swimmers. A year earlier, Dutch women won four of the five medals that were up for grabs at the Berlin Games.



Dutch women's hockey team wins gold with a 2-0 win over China. Beijing, 2008.

Ma Braun and her daughter Marie (known as Zus Braun) (from 1928) and Willy den Ouden and Rie Mastenbroek from the mid-1930s are household names in Dutch sport. The latter pair were part of the Dutch relay team who beat the - already rather detested and feared - Germans at the Berlin Olympics in 1936.

If the Netherlands is better at sport than Belgium – and Olympic medals are the ideal benchmark for measuring this – then as well as organisational and motivational factors, there is also a physical reason for it. The Dutch have always been tall, and after World War II they simply continued to grow. Today, the native Dutch younger generation are the tallest in the world.

Being tall has almost always been a decisive factor in sport, except in sports where centrifugal force plays a part, such as short-track skating or gymnastics. Oddly enough, though, the Dutch system has recently been producing some excellent performers in this latter sport, too.

Up to and including the recent Winter Games in Vancouver, the Netherlands has won a grand total of 98 gold medals. Belgium has stood on the central podium 42 times. We should not delude ourselves that this is all about the Winter Games, in which the Netherlands, as a well-known skating nation, naturally performs well. Leaving aside the Winter Games, the gold medal ranking is still 73-42 in favour of the Netherlands, and 254-154 for medals in total. It is also worth noting that half the Belgian medals were won in the period up to and including 1924.

Montreal 1976

There are two yardsticks for benchmarking modern and post-modern sport: the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976 and the Seoul Games in 1988. Belgium did reasonably well in Montreal, with six medals, partly due to its strong athletics team. Two comparable countries – the Netherlands has a population



Belgian Tia Hellebaut wins gold. High jump. Beijing, 2008.

one and a half times as big as Belgium's, while Australia's is roughly twice the size – did no better. Each secured a place on the podium five times and, like Belgium, failed to win a single gold.

Australia decided to do something about it and began developing the Australian Institute of Sports, and with it an unequalled sporting model. At first sight the Netherlands did not take any specific action, but in reality Dutch society changed visibly in the 1960s and 70s. In no time at all this flat, dull country with its conservative, dour population was transformed into a sort of guideland which sought to show the way to itself and the rest of Europe. Secularisation was just one aspect of this process, but it did lay the foundations for a leisure-time culture within which sport came to play an ever-increasing role.

And what of Belgium? Belgium was too busy splitting up its sporting apparatus which, since it was part of the cultural system, had become a regional matter as a result of the first major state reform. That conflicted with the central authority of the Belgian Olympic and Interfederal Committee, where a monolingual (Francophone) colonel ruled with an iron hand and a Francophone Brussels fixer carved a path for himself to the plush benches of the International Olympic Committee.



Jacques Rogge, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Belgium lost its way after Montreal 1976, despite a number of fantastic private projects initiated by passionately committed athletes such as the judoka Robert Vandewalle. It was striking that the Netherlands was able to profit from the Eastern Bloc's boycott of Los Angeles and win 13 medals there, whereas Belgium had to make do with four.

After 1976, the Netherlands won gold on no fewer than 29 occasions; Belgium managed five. The biggest difference was in Sydney in 2000, when the Netherlands won 12 golds out of a total haul of 25 medals. For half its medal tally to be gold was out of proportion in qualitative terms, but it did demonstrate how the Netherlands had evolved from a reserved sporting country to a sporting nation which regarded winning as normal. At that time, there was as yet no established Dutch sporting model. Pieter van den Hoogenband and Inge de Bruijn (swimming), Anky van Grunsven (dressage) and Leontien van Moorsel (cycling) all owed their victories to private projects sponsored by trainers, athletes and parents who saw the sky as the limit.

Four years earlier, when the Netherlands had produced its sporting performance of the century by winning gold in volleyball, Belgium had also scored, though not in the Olympic arena. In the mid-1990s Belgium had seven

members on the IOC; the Netherlands had just one, the former judo gold medalist Anton Geesink. In 1996 the Dutch Hein Verbruggen also became an IOC member, as did Crown Prince Willem-Alexander in 1998.

In the dying years of the 20th century Belgium lost much of its Olympic administrative status, as one IOC member after another either stepped down or died; but Count Jacques Rogge, an ex-sailor, powered on to the highest level, becoming president of the IOC in Moscow on 16 July 2001, thanks in part to the personal support of the Dutch Crown Prince.

With Rogge (2001-2013) and De Baillet-Latour (1925-1942), Belgium is the only country which can boast having produced two IOC presidents, and when Rogge steps down in 2013 a Belgian will have been at the pinnacle of the Olympic Movement for 30 of its 120 years. Partly because of this, the Netherlands looks at its southern neighbours with admiration – ‘you have to hand it to the Belgians; they’re good at lobbying’ – while the Belgians look at their northern neighbours just as admiringly – ‘you have to hand it to the Dutch; they’re good at sport’.

The current reality is more nuanced. Both nations have lost their places on the plush benches. For a time, the Netherlands had four IOC members in the persons of Geesink, Willem-Alexander, Verbruggen and International Hockey Federation president Els van Breda-Vriesman. The latter was not re-elected, Verbruggen resigned and Geesink died in 2010. That leaves the Crown Prince, who in reality is no more than a lame duck as regards his Olympic function.

Belgium, in particular, has lost much of its Olympic administrative status: Jacques Rogge will remain in post until 2013, but after London 2012 he will in reality be the outgoing president. Both the Netherlands and Belgium need new IOC members, but one thing must always be remembered: it is the IOC which co-opts new members, rather than them being selected by individual countries.



Prince Willem Alexander and Mark Tuitert (Skating gold medal, 1500m). Vancouver, 2010.

The power of numbers

Belgium is holding its own on the Olympian fields. What that means in reality is: hardly any medals since 1976. It is a precarious business, because in Beijing Belgium flirted for a long time with ‘nul points’. London 2012 again promises to be a difficult Olympic Games for Belgium, given the dismal results of individual Belgian athletes at the European and World Championships during the latest Olympiad. Belgium has never performed worse than in the period between 2009 and 2011, and that is an indicator of its medal prospects at the forthcoming Olympic Games.

The sporting achievements of the Netherlands have also declined compared with ten years ago. Following the 25 medals collected at Sydney, the Netherlands set up a sporting model based on innovation and aimed at securing a permanent position among the top ten countries in Europe. The resources ploughed into elite sport increased by 60 percent in the space of ten years; the medal haul fell by 36 percent over the same period.

Belgium is a structural underperformer when it comes to sport, but for the Netherlands the current results would appear to be a reflection of the intrinsic level of its elite sport. The Netherlands is experiencing the power of numbers.

The geopolitical trend is clear: sporting success is consolidating around a few major power blocs. This trend has continued since the collapse of the East-

ern Bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first relevant Olympic Games which are comparable with Beijing in this geo-sport perspective were the Atlanta games in 1996, when the three best-performing countries – the US, Russia and Germany – garnered 229 medals between them.

In Beijing, the top three countries – China, the US and Russia – ended the Games with an unprecedented 283 medals between them, 30 percent of the total number of medals awarded. The harvest of gold was almost hallucinatory: 110 out of a total of 302 gold medals. Number four in the medals table was Great Britain, the host country in 2012.

For a small country like the Netherlands (and an even smaller country like Belgium), the competition is becoming ever more fierce. The position of the Netherlands as the smallest major sporting nation is consequently under attack from all sides, and it is very debatable whether throwing even more money at it is the solution, not least because any such action would be socially irresponsible.

Belgium has expressed its ambition of one day winning ten medals at the Olympic Games. The Netherlands is not satisfied with such a target; the former guide-land would so much like to become the Australia of the northern hemisphere. Against that backdrop, great efforts are being invested in an attempt to bring the Olympic Games to the Netherlands in 2028. The last time Brussels had that ambition was when Tokyo was selected for the 1964 Games. Since then the Belgians have learned better, partly because they are much more familiar with the Olympian corridors of power. The Dutch have no such inhibitions: they dream of the Games, just as they dreamed of World Cup glory and of securing a place among the top ten sporting nations. Dreaming is not forbidden. Sometimes the journey towards an unattainable goal is just as rewarding as actually attaining it. ■

Translated by Julian Ross



Fanny Blankers-Koen (The Flying Dutchmam) wins gold on 100 m, 200 m, 80 m hurdles and 4 x 100 m relay. London, 1948. She was 30 at the time and mother of two children.