

## 1920 WOMEN'S WATER POLO - A DEMONSTRATION EVENT

from Anthony Bijkerk

The first female participant for The Netherlands in the Olympic Games was Miss Marie Martha Beisenherz, a swimmer who participated in the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerpen. She happened to be a niece from my mother and consequently was a full aunt of mine. I talked many times with her about her activities in that period of her life and in 1988 she was "rediscovered" by television and was invited to tell about her visit in Antwerp. She died last year, just over 90 years old.

But only a short time before her death, she told me a story which at the time sounded very strange to me and which I originally thought to be the "ramblings" of a certain kind. She told me then that in Antwerp a demonstration match was played between two Dutch female water polo teams. She could not remember where the teams came from and who were on the teams but she was sure that one of them came from her own hometown of Amsterdam. Being a member myself of the Dutch club of international swimmers and water polo players, this story intrigued me very much!

I first looked up Erich Kamper's *Encyclopædia of the Olympic Games* and many other well known works on Olympic history but nowhere could I find any reference to this mysterious demonstration match. Earlier this year I received about 20 volumes with bound yearly issues from the Dutch sports magazine *Revue der Sporten*, starting in 1907 up to 1924/25; and in the 1920 volume I found the first confirmation of the story which my aunt had told me. The article only mentioned the women's water polo match as an insignificant bygone, but for me it worked like a red flag to a bull!

I decided to contact an old friend, who happened to be the retired secretary-general of the Royal Netherlands Swimming Association (RNSA). He had been in charge of the Committee for the publication of a memorial book to celebrate the Centennial of the RNSA, and he remembered that he had also come across the story of the women's water polo match in Antwerp. He promised to look into the matter, but that unfortunately came to nothing. The archives of the RNSA had been reorganized just about at the same time as the Centennial and then had been given into the custody of the State-Archives in Utrecht. So, after all, the only way for me to get to the bottom of this story was to visit the State-Archives and see if they had anything there about this matter.

On 5 July 1993, I found the answer on the very first page of the Official Yearly Report from the (then) Netherlands Swimming Association for the period 1920-21, which states (Bijkerk translation): "With great pleasure we may refer in this report, which has to be short even on this particular point, to the water polo demonstration match, played in the swimming week of the Olympic Games and which was initiated by the 'Hollandsche Dames Zwemclub' ('Dutch Ladies' Swimming Club') and played by some 14-some ladies from Amsterdam and Rotterdam. We are quite certain, that this exhibition has shown a great propaganda for women water polo and we very much hope, that the International Olympic Committee will honor the request of the Netherlands Swimming Association to include women's water polo in the future program of the Olympic Games."

I found another clue in the State-Archives in the form of newspaper clippings from the newspaper *De Telegraaf*, which stated: "Antwerpen, 29 August (by telephone): The last day: . . . Next two ladies' teams from Holland (*sic* - Bijkerk) played a demonstration match of water polo, which was very much to the liking of the public in attendance. In Belgium, women's water polo is not played at all. The intention for this demonstration match was, to try to get women's water polo on the program for the next Olympic Games."

It only remains now to find the names from the two teams, but that will most likely be the hardest part of this discovery.

*Editor's Note:*

I've not seen this recorded previously, despite the extensive newspaper research I did in compiling *The Unofficial Report of the 1920 Olympic Games*. Through 1992, women's water polo has never again been on the Olympic program. Women have contested a United States' national championship in water polo since 1962 (indoors) and 1964 (outdoors). Still, I have not heard of any recent overtures from the IOC or FINA to include women's water polo on the Olympic program. Have any members?