

## ***THE AMSTERDAM OLYMPIC STADIUM THE FINAL COUNTDOWN***

*by Ruud Paauw*

It is almost certain now: the Amsterdam Olympic stadium, built for the Games of the IXth Olympiad in 1928, will be demolished in 1996. Recently a special branch of the municipal council of Amsterdam has taken this decision. Houses are planned on the grounds where the stadium now sits. Only the remarkable Marathon tower (46 metres high), from which the marathon runners were welcomed back to the stadium by trumpeters, will be saved.

A very small barrier to tear down the stadium still remains: the building is on the list of the Ancient Monument Department of the Ministry of Works. But the protection is only to a certain degree. If the management of the stadium cannot find another useful destination for the building in a short time, the municipal council will be allowed to demolish it. And it will be hard to find such a destination. The stadium is old and old-fashioned and no longer suitable to hold big events. For years the stadium did not have its regular football club anymore, the Dutch football team stopped playing their international matches there in the sixties. Only the famous Ajax team still plays six or seven important matches a year in the old stadium. That's all.

No doubt the management of the stadium would have modernized it, but to do so they asked the municipality in the seventies to extend the long lease for the grounds on which the stadium is built. The municipality did not say yes or no (politicians hate these simple words) and it let things take their own course for years. The city fathers were worried by the protests of the neighbors around the stadium who had a lot of trouble with the football hooligans before and after the matches. The management of the stadium could not take the risk to modernize the buildings in such an uncertain situation. And so the stadium was neglected more and more.

Generally speaking the Dutch "attitude" towards the demolishing of the stadium has been rather indifferent. They have no eye for the impressive history of the stadium, they only see the neglect which they have harshly termed the "concrete hod." But architects have protested and said that "we are worse than barbarians if we demolish such a remarkable creation."

In 1996 the new stadium for Ajax (\$150 million) in another part of Amsterdam will be ready and the Olympic stadium will then be regarded as superfluous. The last thing the builders of the new Ajax stadium want is a competitor which a renovated Olympic stadium could become.

Architect Jan Wils (1891-1972) built the stadium in 1927-28 and received an Olympic gold medal for it in the 1928 Art Competitions. The raising of the grounds started in 1926; 750,000 cubic metres of sand had to be poured on the rather swampy land before work could begin. On 18 May 1927 Prince Hendrik, the husband of Queen Wilhelmina, laid the first of two million red bricks which were needed. The grounds contained a football-ground (76 x 114 metres), a running track (400 metres in length, 8 metres wide), and cycle track (500 metres, 8 metres wide). On top of the aforementioned Marathon tower Wils made a special tray for the first Olympic Flame in the history of the modern Olympic Games. This was not lit in a ceremony at Olympia but just by a civil servant of the local gas-works on the opening day of the Games. In a popular speech it was called "the ashtray of the flyers."

The stadium cost about \$800,000 (US) and it was Wils' life work. The man was far ahead of his time; he not only built a beautiful stadium but, in fact, one of the first Olympic Parks. In a radius of less than 500 metres he also built a boxing and wrestling hall, a fencing

pavilion, tennis courts, and a swimming pool - since all demolished. He also designed a complete Olympic Village but could not build it because of lack of money.

The original capacity of the stadium was a disappointing 31,600, which was far from enough for the many international football matches that would be held there. Therefore Wils put a second concrete ring on it in 1937. The stadium then held 60,000 spectators but lost its beauty.

The world cycling championships have been held there several times. It saw all the great track & field stars, from Janusz Kusocinski to Emil Zátopek, from Jack Lovelock to Fanny Blankers-Koen. From 1933 to 1958 (with the exception of the war years) the Dutch Olympic Committee held its popular Olympic Days in it, the receipts of which were used to finance the Dutch Olympic teams.

The days of the 1928 Olympic Stadium appear to be numbered. Are they? It proved itself to be resilient in 1989 when the authorities first announced its last match, and it still survives. But I am afraid the final countdown has now started.