

IS THE AMSTERDAM OLYMPIC STADIUM TO BE TORN DOWN?

by Tony Bijkerk

The Games of the IXth Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928 were quite a success! Not only because Germany and its allies from World War I returned to the Olympic Family, but there was another first in the form of the Olympic Flame, which burned on the top of the Marathon tower during the period of the Games. It remains the greatest international sporting event in the history of Netherlands' sports. The Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam is the only tangible memory to commemorate these Games and the events that took place during those glorious days in 1928. But will the Olympic Stadium survive this century?

During the 19th IOC Session, which was organized in Lausanne from 2-6 June 1921, the decision was taken that Amsterdam would be the host city for the Games of the IXth Olympiad. It should have been the culmination of a lifetime dream for the originator of the idea, Baron Frits van Tuijll van Serooskerken, IOC Member in the Netherlands. Yet the Baron could not himself enjoy these Games, as he died on 13 February 1924, long before the Games were organized. His memory lives on in the form of a monument, put up on the stadium grounds, with an athlete forming the Olympic salute. The people of Amsterdam, with their particular sense of humor, call this monument "Jan met de hanjes," which is impossible to translate!

The Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam was designed by the famous architect Jan Wils of Amsterdam, who won an Olympic gold medal in the Art Competitions at the 1928 Olympic Games for this design. Jan Wils already participated as a member of the international jury for architecture in these art competitions in 1924, and was again asked to serve on that jury in 1928, 1936 and 1948.

The Stadium was designed in 1924-1925 and the actual preparations started in March 1926 with the sand supply for the leveling of the ground floor. Like all other buildings in Amsterdam, the stadium is founded upon long piles. In total, 4,425 piles with a length between 14 to 18 meters each were used and the last pile was driven into the ground on 27 January 1927.

His Royal Highness Prince Hendrik of the Netherlands laid the first stone of the stadium on 18 May 1927. The Official Opening Ceremony of the Games of the XIth Olympiad took place on 28 July 1928 and since that date a multitude of events have taken place in this stadium. Some of the memorable ones were the international football games between the Netherlands and Belgium. Among the many events were not only football, but also hockey, equestrian sport, cycling races, motor-speedway and track and field. The culmination before World War II were the "Olympic Day" events, which were organized to raise money for participation in the Olympic Games.

The Royal Family also has strong ties with the Stadium. In 1929 a special festival was organized to honor the Queen Mother Emma. In September 1933, Queen Wilhelmina celebrated the 35th Anniversary of her reign, and she was welcomed into the Olympic Stadium for an immense folk festival. The engagement between Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhard was announced here and when Queen Juliana took over her mother's crown, the outdoor play *Juliana Regina* was organized in the stadium, too.

During World War II the stadium was used for many sports events, as the theory that sports and politics have nothing in common was used indiscriminately. The world of sport did not much bother with the occupation by the Germans! This attitude changed only after September 1944 and the period of inactivity lasted until mid-1945, before normal peace was resumed.

After the war the “Olympic Days” were re-started, but lasted only a short time. Prince Bernhard, himself a fair equestrian and president of the FEI, also participated in this “Olympic Day” event. Many events of all kinds were held in the Stadium: including the famous flower festival from Aalsmeer, and the Gymnastrada.

In 1962 the first Europa Cup Final between Benfica from Portugal and Real Madrid from Spain took place in Amsterdam’s Olympic Stadium and many other important football matches followed, including the Europa Cup, which Amsterdam’s own professional football-club, Ajax, won on 13 May 1992!

About twelve years ago, Amsterdam started its “compact-city” policy. Within its infrastructure the use of space was to be optimized. All structures with functions which did not fit within the current concept of the city were again reviewed. And because space in a large city like Amsterdam is scarce, the question arose whether some of the “institutions,” with functions that were not of immediate value within that concept, would be better employed for housing purposes. In 1984 the residents of the Stadionbuurt (the neighborhood of the stadium) polled 71 percent for tearing down the Stadium and for the building of new houses! This was the result of a poll of 2,700 inhabitants (from 10,000 inhabitants older than 18 years)!

Yet today there is an absolute majority among the same inhabitants for keeping the Stadium unimpaired! In May/June 1992 the Committee for Preservation of the Stadium collected support declarations from the same inhabitants and now 52 percent were for preserving the Stadium. The actual count of positive votes was no less than 4,752, out of the 9,135 inhabitants older than 18 years!

In addition, the city council decided, together with the professional football club Ajax, that a completely new stadium was necessary and should be built in the southeastern part of the city. Although financing this new stadium took some years - we are talking about far more than the \$100 million dollars - the actual building started in 1993. Ajax will be the main user of this new stadium and that means that the Olympic Stadium shall lose its current main (and only) user!

The “Committee for Keeping the Olympic Stadium” protested the decision of the city council, but to no avail. They, then, contacted the Minister for Welfare, Health, and Culture and asked her to place the Stadium on the National Monuments List. The minister, Hedy d’Ancona, indeed placed the Olympic Stadium on the list, but with a provision that the old Stadium would have to be manageable, especially financially. And there is the problem!

Although the Olympic Stadium Committee is still trying to stop all proceedings concerning the removal of the stadium, their efforts seem to be in vain. Recently, in January 1995, the city council for Amsterdam-Suid (-South) decided to give out “official permission” to demolish the old stadium, in spite of the ministerial monuments decision. It is no longer five minutes before twelve for the old Olympic Stadium. No, it is less than “one” minute before twelve for the Stadium, in which the Olympic Family celebrated the 1928 Olympic Games!!

In the current plans, only the marathon-tower, where the Olympic Flame once burned, will remain to remind us of the famous past! It will be the first Olympic Stadium in the world to be tom down and that is another, albeit negative, “first” for the old Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam.