

THE EMPRESS OF BERLIN FORGOTTEN, UNDERVALUED AND STILL GOING BUT NOT VERY STRONG

BY TONY BIJKERK

Berlin 1936. The athlete J.C. “Jesse” Owens wins his four Olympic gold medals and with them, the never dying praise and eternal glory of the whole Olympic World.

In 1986 during the festivities for the fiftieth anniversary of the Berlin Olympic Games, a celebration was organized in which three former participants of those Games, all three gold-medal-winners, were invited. Together with the two other gold-medal-winners, Sohn Kee-Chung (Kitei Son) the Korean marathon-winner and the American athlete John Woodruff (800 meter), the swimmer Rie Mastenbroek from the Netherlands was received by IOC member and president of the German Olympic Committee Willy Daume, who, during his speech at that meeting, said the following words: “Ladies and gentlemen, as you know Jesse Owens was the Emperor of the Berlin Olympics in 1936. But there was also a young girl, she became the Empress of Berlin”..... and he then pointed to Rie Mastenbroek.

During the Games of the XIth Olympiad, Berlin 1936, the then only seventeen year old swimmer Hendrika Wilhelmina “Rie” Mastenbroek won three Olympic Gold-, and one Olympic Silver medal and thus remained only a few points behind the Emperor, as Jesse Owens has been called by Mr. Willy Daume.

Rie Mastenbroek never really received the acclaim that she so richly deserved. Even in the Centennial Olympic year 1996, she was only interviewed by very few representatives from the Dutch media; and the international media, including the Atlanta Olympic Organizing Committee, completely forgot her existence. She had deserved to be invited to the spectacle of the opening ceremony, together with the other ten Olympic gold-medal winners.

She recently told me that she certainly would have declined the 1996 invitation, just as she had done in 1988, when the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee invited her to attend the Olympic Games, but the gesture as such should have been made by the ACOG. Also many books published in this centennial year, including the ones from

ISOH members, like Kluge (‘Olympische Highlights’) and Greenspan (‘100 Greatest Moments in Olympic History’), did not even mention her name and that certainly hurt my national pride.

Not only because she deserved better, but most of all, because she was a phenomenon in her time, as she was the first woman to win four Olympic medals during one Olympic Games, albeit only three of them gold, and that feat (three Olympic gold medals in one Olympic Games) had already been performed by two other female swimmers earlier (Bleibtrey in 1920 and Helene Madison in 1932). But Rie Mastenbroek won a fourth, a silver medal, too, and that feat had never before been accomplished.

Rie Mastenbroek herself personally never had the idea of being a “forgotten, or undervalued” champion; but contrary to many others of equal fame, she was never very fond of the limelight and thus did not pursue being celebrated. She told me this in January 1997.

Rie Mastenbroek fortunately is still very much alive. She lives quietly in a small town in the south-west of the Netherlands. She can move around, but her wheelchair is always close by, because she still suffers from the after effects of an automobile accident in 1968 and from diabetes. Her husband, suffering from dementia, has been taken away into a nursing home close by where she visits him every other day.

Rie Mastenbroek did not have an easy life. She was born in Rotterdam on 26 February 1919, actually born out of wedlock, as she herself told a Dutch reporter in 1996. Her parents were never married, although they formed a couple for 46 years!

Rie learned to swim at a very young age and one day, when she was eleven years old, she was invited by two observers to join a swimming club. One of the two observers, a woman, later appeared to be the famous trainer ‘Ma’ Braun, who had already brought her own daughter ‘Zus’ Braun, and Marie Baron another famous swimmer from

Rotterdam, to Olympic medals in swimming in previous Olympic Games.

The contacts with 'Ma' Braun changed Rie's life forever and everything had to make way for her swimming career. Her life was from then on completely dominated by 'Ma' Braun and even today she can still get quite mad about the treatment she sometimes received from 'Ma' Braun during those years of her youth. 'Ma' Braun was a stern taskmaster, who asked her pupils to give everything they had, including a 'way of life' that was frugal in the extreme. Rie mentions the many times that she had to eat red kidney-beans with bacon, a typical dish that she still abhors today.

But with these stern methods Ma Braun brought Rie Mastebroek's condition and techniques to such a point, that already in 1934 she won three gold medals and one silver medal at the European Championships in Magdenburg, Germany.

In the period running up to the Games of the XIth Olympiad, Berlin 1936, Rie often trained at lunch-time in a swimming pool in Rotterdam, which belonged to the exclusive Rowing and Yachting Club "De Maas", which had a 50 meter basin. Swimming between the industrial 'upper ten' from Rotterdam, the young girl met for the first time a young man by the name of Kees Kerdel, the later IOC-member for the Netherlands.

Together with "Ma" Braun, swimmer Piet Stam and diver Hannes Haasmann, which both came over for the Berlin Olympics from the isle of Java in the Netherlands East Indies, Rie departed to Berlin one week before the rest of the Dutch swimming team. According to "Ma" Braun, Rie had to get acquainted with the circumstances in Berlin and "Ma" wanted her to acclimatize before the real Games started. During this first week, she again met Kees Kerdel, who visited Berlin (and the Olympics) as a tourist, and "Ma" Braun asked him to keep an eye on Rie, because she had no one else to talk to. Kees Kerdel received the necessary 'special pass' and took charge of Rie during the whole period until the swimming competitions started. He and Rie Mastebroek remained friends and kept in touch all their lives, until Kees' death in 1986.

Rie's program in Berlin was strenuous. She started on Saturday August 8 with the series 100-meter freestyle and from that day onwards until the very end of the swimming competitions, she had to swim at least one race each day; either the 100 meter freestyle, the 100 meter backstroke, the 400 meter freestyle and the 4x100-meter freestyle relay.

Her first gold medal was gained on August 10th in the 100 meter freestyle, which she won in an Olympic record of 1.05,9 sec. against strong competitors like Jeannette Campbell from Argentine and Gisela Arendt from Germany.

The next day, she competed in the series 100 meter backstroke. As holder of the world record on this distance in one minute, 15.8 seconds, she finished "only" in second place in the final, behind her teammate Dina Senff, who almost lost the race and her changes for a gold medal, owing to a completely "missed" turning-point at 50 metres. Senff realized her "mistake" in time, turned back to the turning-point and resumed her race with such a pace that she overhauled all other competitors and finished in first place, with Rie as the silver medal winner.

But Rie had a valid excuse for coming in second, because that same morning (August 13th), she already swam the series 400 meter freestyle.

August 14th brought her the second gold medal, because with the Dutch team, consisting of "Jopie" Selbach, "Tiny" Wagner and 'Willy' den Ouden, she won the 4x100-meter freestyle relay, again in a new Olympic record of 4.36 seconds and before the German and American teams. Rie was the last swimmer from the Dutch relay team and she competed once again against Gisela Arendt, who was the last swimmer of the German relay team. Although the Dutch team was in the lead, Rie Mastebroek got into trouble because she 'inhaled' water in the last couple of metres and almost choked; she finished as first, but her team-members had to pull her out of the water, because she had no breath left. That same morning she had already competed in the semi-final for the 400-meter freestyle. Both Ragnild Hveger from Denmark and Mastebroek won their semifinals easily.

Her last final and the most difficult one, came on August 15th with the 400 meter freestyle-event. Although Willy den Ouden held the world record on this distance, Rie had a very strong opponent in Ragnild Hveger.

Rie later remembered that "Hveger had received a large box with chocolates from her supporters, but when Rie thought/hoped that Hveger would offer her a piece of chocolate, Hveger passed Rie by, deliberately. Rie was sorely disappointed about this act and thought of revenge."

That revenge came in the final. Rie swam the first 350 metres of the race next to Hveger. Then she started her final sprint, in which she was invincible, and left Hveger behind, thinking: "this is much better than a piece of chocolate".

She defeated Hveger with a margin of 1.1 seconds; both beating the previous Olympic record. Rie's time was 5.26.4 seconds.

Rie's return home from her successes in Berlin was a triumph. She arrived home by train and was received in Rotterdam by a crowd of well-wishers.

Shortly afterwards her life changed very much for the worse. The reason for that was, as Rie tells us in her own words: "that 'Ma' Braun tried to get my mother out of official parenthood over me. This was meant to bring me completely under her (Ma's) influence. She had already done

the same thing before to Rie Baron, who also lived for several years in 'Ma' Braun's home." According to Rie, 'Ma' Braun even brought the case before a court of justice in Rotterdam. Fortunately the judge was wise enough not to give in to the claims brought in by 'Ma' Braun. But this act meant a total rupture between Ma Braun and Rie Mastenbroek and in fact also meant the factual end of Rie's swimming career.

Rie tried to continue her swimming-career for a short while, but felt in fact so betrayed by her ex-trainer, that she decided to quit with swimming. She got a job as a swimming-instructor, first in Hilversum and later in Groningen, although she did not have any experience in teaching.

The result of her job in the swimming pool was that on 16 August 1937, she was declared to be a professional by the Dutch Swimming Association and could no longer compete. That was a spiteful decision, because Rie Mastenbroek did not even have a diploma for teaching. It meant the definite end of her active swimming career and caused a permanent rift between her and the Association. But her first jobs didn't last long. She then went to Belgium, first working for the Belgian family Blitz, famous from water polo, and finally in a Dutch family, where she again "taught" the youngsters to swim, again in spite of never having received any experience in teaching.

In 1939 she returned to Rotterdam, married, and got two children. The marriage did not hold out and in 1945 ended with a divorce. She moved to Amsterdam and worked hard to keep up her family, as she had received the custody for both children (a boy and a girl). She worked as an interpreter, as an accountant for a doctors-clinic and acted as a building-inspector. She later remarried to Mr. De Wit, whose name she carries up to today and finally ended up in Rozenburg, where she still lives. Her third child, a son, is from her second marriage.

What happened to her Olympic medals? One of her gold medals she gave away in a TV-program, in which the whole Dutch nation was united in getting funds together for building a special village for the handicapped near Arnhem. This medal is now in the Netherlands Sportmuseum in Lelystad. One other gold medal went to her eldest son who still owns it, and the third gold medal is back with her, as her youngest son, who lives in a boat, gave it back to her for security reasons. The silver medal belongs to her daughter.

In 1972 she received an invitation to attend the Olympic Games in Munich, but she does not remember those Games with pleasure, because of the massacre of 11 Jewish Olympic participants by Palestinian terrorists.

Let's return to the meeting in 1986 in Berlin. After the fine words that Willy Daume spoke to her, during that meeting to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Berlin 1936

Olympic Games, everybody attending that meeting, stood up and applauded her.

It was a true and fitting tribute for this woman and she still remembers Mr. Daume's speech with pleasure and gratitude.

Her whole life has been influenced by illness.

Already in 1935 she suffered from asphyxiation during a race in Bilthoven. The doctors ascribed that to be owing to problems with her thyroid gland. For many years she swallowed pills to remedy those problems. Others said that she had a mysterious blood disease. But her own doctor much later told her that she suffered from a too low percentage of hemoglobin in her blood, with a much too low blood pressure as a result. This was never treated well.

Doctors later said to her: "We certainly would like to know, what your achievements in sport would have been, if you could have performed in a healthy and normal situation, with the correct treatment for these deficiencies."

Today she lives alone in Rozenburg, suffering from arthritis, articular rheumatism, sometimes using a wheelchair, but not only because of her diabetes. As told earlier, she had an automobile-accident in 1968 together with her youngest. Later she broke both her hips within a period of six years. Last year she had a double pneumonia with complications. Her husband suffers from Alzheimer disease and hardly ever recognizes her, when she visits him. Fortunately she can still use her adapted car, which gives her the possibility to move around. She continues to be a member of the Dutch association of former international swimmers and water-polo-players and whenever possible attends the yearly meeting.

Forgotten, undervalued. Maybe so. But as stated before, she does not regard herself as such. She still has a lot of spirit and endurance and whenever I call her, I am surprised at the unpretentious way she looks at her own performances!

A woman for which one should always take off his hat!

References:

Several articles about her life, including:

1. "De Vergeten Keizerin Van Berlijn" in the special edition of the NRC/Handelsblad newspaper, by Guido de Vries.
2. "Rie Mastenbroek: "Daar sta je dan, met je zeventien jaar, in een vol stadion", in the "Kroniek Olympische Spelen" from 1987, by Ruud Paauw.
3. "Olympische herinneringen van Rie Mastenbroek", in the sport-magazine "SPORTIEF", from July 1948, by Cor Braasem.
4. De Zwemkroniek", from 19 August 1937.
5. Personal contacts with Mrs. H.W. 'Rie' de Wit-Mastenbroek and Mr. C.L. 'Kees' Kerdel.
