

# A SECOND LIFE

By Ruud Paauw

FOR THE 1928 AMSTERDAM OLYMPIC STADIUM

**May 13, 2000 was a great day for sport in the Netherlands in general and for the Olympic movement in particular.**

The Amsterdam Olympic Stadium, a few years ago in such a horrible condition that the local authorities wanted to demolish it, opened fully renovated its gates for the public. Among the many thousands in the stands on this glorious, sunny day were IOC-president Juan Antonio Samaranch and the new IOC-member for the Netherlands, Willem Alexander, the prince of Orange who officially opened the stadium for its second life.

The Amsterdam Olympic Stadium was built in 1927/28 by architect Jan Wils (1891-1972). It consisted of a cycling track, an athletic course and a soccer ground. It had a capacity of 31.600. Wils' remarkable red-brick stadium with its proud Marathon Tower (42 meters high) won golden opinions and the first prize in the Olympic art competition for architecture in 1928. On top of the the Marathon Tower burned in 1928 for the first time in the modern Olympic history the Olympic flame. We are almost certain that the flame was Wils' personal invention because he was an architect who wanted to put his stamp upon everything in his work.

The Olympic Stadium lost a great deal of its beauty in 1937. Amsterdam's rival Rotterdam had built a stadium with a capacity of 60,000 and to keep the matches of the Dutch soccer team Wils had to extend his creation. The stadium got on top of the

red bricks a concrete superstructure which was far from flattering.

In the nineties it could no longer meet the modern requirements. Only the famous football club Ajax played a few Europa Cup matches in it, but when it got its own Arena the Olympic Stadium pauperized quickly. Especially the concrete structure was rotten to the core. When it rained the stadium gave a very sad, very weary impression.

It seemed to sense its fate.

The municipality of Amsterdam, not interested in the historical meaning of the building, wanted to tear down the place and build houses on it. No one any more gave a penny for the stadium. Only a few voices pointed out that only barbarians could destroy such a historical sports monument. But then a man of tremendous energy stood up: Piet Kranenberg, a retired manager of beergigant Heineken and a commissioner of the stadium. He was a man with a mission and he took every obstacle. He went to the government and to everyone's surprise succeeded in scheduling the stadium for preservation, at least a few



Images: (Below) The reopening of the Amsterdam Olympic Stadium earlier this year.

(Opposite page) The great Paavo Nurmi, centre, of Finland boxed between compatriot Vilho Ritola, front, and Swedens Edvin Wideduring the 10,000m in Amsterdam 1928.

*IOC Olympic Museum/Allsport*



years. This was very important because now the municipality could not start demolishing it. After that Kranenberg (80) began indefatigably collecting money. He needed 25 million guilders (about 13 million dollars) for the restauration of the original Wils' stadium, that is without the ugly concrete superstructure. And he got the amount: from the government, from trade and industry and from thousands of private persons who could buy a brick or a chair. Without Kranenberg the stadium would already have been a thing of the past.

The renovating showed how solid an architect Wils was: his red bricks appeared to be as strong as a rock, even after seventy years.

On May 13 we could see with our own eyes that the old stadium had been given its former glory: it is again as beautiful as in 1928. The only difference is that the cycling track has been removed. The many dressing rooms for the Olympic Games (only a few

were used after 1928) under the stands were made suitable as business units. The stadium itself will mainly serve as an athletic accommodation, but all kinds of events can be held in it.

On the occasion of the opening of the stadium a book was published about its history: 'Het Olympisch Stadion' by Tijs Tummers and Bert Sorgdrager, 141 pages, published by Bas Lubberhuizen, Amsterdam, price 49.50 guilders, ISBN 90 76314 446. The book is in Dutch but contains a great many photographs of the construction of the stadium in 1928, the many highlights (Olympic Games 1928, the Dutch Olympic-Days 1933-1958, the world championships cycling, the races of Fanny Blankers-Koen, the start of the Tour de France in 1954, the many soccer matches etc.), the years of terrible decline, the restauration and the new glory.