

The Mysterious Case of Zus Braun

Ruud Paauw

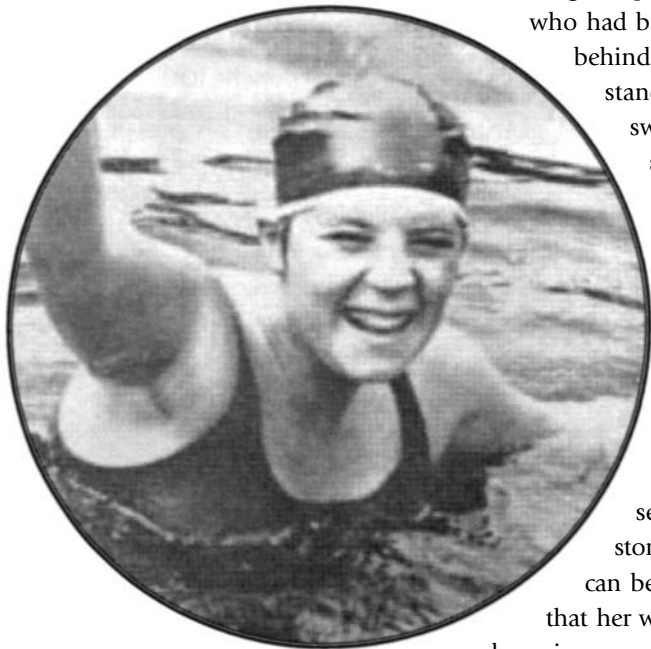
What happened exactly to Maria 'Zus' Philipsen-Braun, the 1928 Olympic backstroke champion, during the 1932 Games in Los Angeles? It's still a mystery. We know she got terribly ill (the doctors at a LA hospital even feared a few days for her life) and could only return to the Netherlands six weeks after the closing of the Games.

On October 13, 1932, she arrived by boat in Rotterdam, together with her mother and coach, well-known in her day as 'Ma' Braun, and gave an amazing press conference. Until then the general impression was that Zus Braun had been the victim of a bite of an insect with a horrible infection as a result, but the Dutch champion had quite a different story to tell. She claimed that she had been stabbed in her leg with

something sharp by Americans who had been sitting behind her in the stands of the swimming stadium. All the important Dutch

newspapers published substantially the same sensational story, so there can be no doubt that her words had been in any way 'twisted'.

Zus Braun at the top of her career



This is what Zus Braun told the press on October 13, 1932:

"On Tuesday August 9, I won easily my heat in the 100 metres backstroke and a place in the final which would take place a few days later. Wednesday was a day off and we went to the swimming stadium to see the men's 400 meters freestyle final. It must have happened then.

"I was there with other girls in the stands, which were reserved for foreign participants. In the row in front of us were two young Americans, which was rather strange because this part of the stands was not for spectators. I did not pay much attention to them, though they looked repeatedly in our direction. The 400 metres freestyle was a very exciting race. We all stood on our seats to see the finish. Suddenly I felt a stab in my left leg.

"There was so much enthusiasm about the race that I did not worry about it at that particular moment. I only noticed that the two American men had left. That same evening, the leg began to hurt. The trainer of our athletic team thought that it was a stiff muscle and gave me a massage - we know now that it was the worst thing he could have done. The next morning I swam the 400 metres free style but could hardly use my left leg. Then the situation got worse and worse. There were moments that I yelled with pain.

"It was impossible to swim on the afternoon of the final of the 100 metres backstroke. They gave me very hot and very cold baths, but that did not help. I got a heavy fever, 42 degrees. A Dutch doctor came to see me and said that I had to go to the hospital immediately. There, four doctors examined my leg. I heard one of them say: 'But this is not an infection'. Then they

realized that I could understand English and walked away to discuss the case somewhere else. Suddenly, I remembered the stab in the swimming stadium and the two American men. It must have happened there.

"Later I heard that one of the doctors had said that my condition was so bad that he was afraid that I would die. But I recovered slowly. After three weeks, I was allowed to leave the hospital, but still too weak to travel. We stayed in L.A. for another three weeks. Mother noticed that there was a young man who often stood about our apartment, but when she tried to speak to him he ran away. At last the doctors gave us permission to return to Rotterdam".

Zus Braun was asked by the press, what the reason could have been to do such a horrible thing to her. She then suggested, that there was a lot of betting on the



Zus Braun after winning her gold medal in the 100 metres backstroke, Amsterdam 1928



Zus Braun and her mother, the famous "Ma" Braun

Olympic races and the two favorites for the backstroke title were the American Eleanor Holm and herself. Why had not she gone to the police? She answered: "We could not prove anything".

The Dutch press and sport officials were very skeptical about her story. The Netherlands Olympic Committee distanced itself from her statement. It was generally thought that the bitterness after all the misery made her look for a criminal act. But Zus Braun never changed her opinion. In later years she began to hate her swimming days in spite of all the successes. She did not want to talk about swimming any more, and refused interviews. When her own daughter started a swimming career, she never attended the races.

"Zus" Philipsen-Braun died almost forgotten in 1982.

Note: American sources have never made any mention of the allegation of foul play. In 1996 Doris H. Pieroth's book *Their Day in the Sun - Women of the 1932 Olympics* says of her withdrawal: "Just after placing second in the 400-metre freestyle trial ... (Braun Phillipsen) suffered a serious insect bite that escalated into a case of blood poisoning and forced the defending champion to withdraw from the remaining competition." The same book later refers to her having suffered "a poisonous insect bite".