

WILLEMIJNTJE "WILLY" DEN OUDEN A BIOGRAPHY

by Anthony Th. Bijkerk

Willemijntje DEN OUDEN was born on the 1st of January 1918 in Rotterdam. Her father Antonius Victor Josephus DEN OUDEN married Johanna Francisca Wilhelmina WESSELS in 1907, but divorced her in 1914. In February 1916 he remarried Willemijntje KUIPERS.

At that time, he owned the *Cafe Modern*, a licensed victualler's shop, at the Coolsingel in the centre of the city of Rotterdam.

Willy was the second daughter in the family; she had three sisters and one stepbrother (from her mother's earlier marriage).

Like any girl her age, she went to primary school, followed by a domestic science school in its most simple form. Willy DEN OUDEN grew up into a very pretty girl. She was not very tall; she just reached 1:55 metres. Compared to other swimmers of her time, she was always the smallest, as can be seen on many photographs, but she certainly was one of the prettiest.

First results

In 1930, she took part in swimming races organised on the occasion of the Queen's birthday. During those races, a Dutch Olympic swimmer and diver by the name of Truus KLAPWIJK¹ could not help noticing Willy's natural ability in swimming. A few months later, still only twelve years of age, she took part in junior swimming races in the swimming pool at the Tuinderstreet in Rotterdam. To the amazement of the officials attending, she won the free style event, and they all noted the flexibility and natural grace with which she swam.

She was invited to join the *Rotterdamsche Dames Zwemclub* (R.D.Z.), and came under tutorship of Mrs. Pieterella van WUYCKHUISE-GROEN, who remained her trainer and chaperon throughout the entire period of her swimming career. Because of her youth,

she was then only 13 years old, the R.D.Z. asked Dr. KOLFF [a physician] to keep Willy under his supervision, in order that she would not overexert herself.

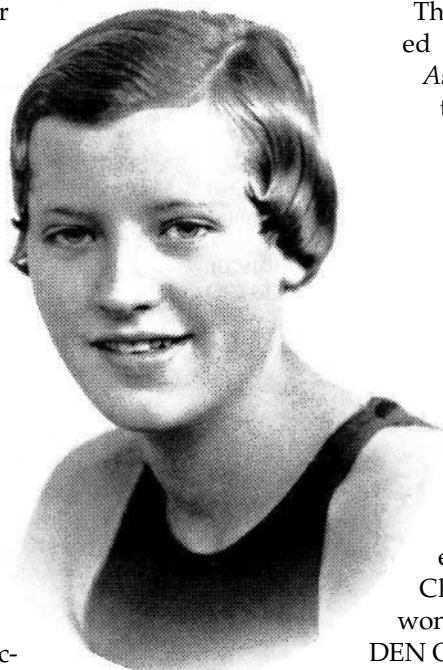
In the early days of August 1931, in the new swimming pool in Tilburg, she was entered by the R.D.Z. in the 100 metres free style race at the National Dutch Swimming Championships, and she won in a time of 1:11,4, equalling the Marie BRAUN'S national record!²

That same month, she was selected by the *Netherlands Swimming Association* to represent her country at the European Swimming Championships in the Stade des Tourelles in Paris.

On the first day of these Championships, August 23, 1931, Willy DEN OUDEN took part in the 100 metres free style for women; she was placed in the second heat. Her opponents were Jean MACDOWELL of Great Britain, the Hungarian Magdolna LENKEL, who held the European record for this event, and the Frenchwoman Claire HORRENT. Miss LENKEL won the heat in 1:11,6, with Willy DEN OUDEN in second place in 1:12,2 ahead of MACDOWELL in 1:16,8 and HORRENT in 1:17,6. She qualified for the final, which took place two days later and to everyone's surprise DEN OUDEN took the silver medal in her first international event behind the Frenchwoman Yvonne GODARD from France, who won in 1:10,0. Willy's time was 1:11,8.

The 4x100 metres free style squad Truus BAUMEISTER³, Marie VIERDAG⁴, Willy DEN OUDEN and Maria BRAUN, won the gold medal in 4:55,0, ahead of Great Britain in 5:00,8, Hungary and France.

And so at the age of thirteen years, and almost nine months, Willy DEN OUDEN became a new swimming star with one gold and one silver medal in the European Swimming Championships!



* This biography was constructed with the assistance of Mr. Nico van Horn, who supplied genealogical information; and further by researching many contemporary documents and newspaper cuttings which had been collected by herself or by her trainer Mrs. Pieterella van Wuyckhuise-Groen. The newspaper cuttings were available from the former collection of the Netherlands Sports Museum Olympion, which unfortunately ceased to exist on May 1, 2004.

Olympic Games Los Angeles 1932

In 1932, she was selected for the Netherlands Olympic team which travelled to the Games of the Xth Olympiad in Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.

Only Twenty-four Dutchmen and women [plus a few reserves] travelled to the Olympic City; a small team indeed. That a Dutch team went at all was only possible because of the generosity of the *Netherlands Football Association*, who subsidized the NOC with 10,000 guilders. A considerable sum of money in those days! The swimmers travelled with the other members of the Dutch Olympic team on the *SS Statendam* to New York City and from there by train to Los Angeles.

Only the equestrian team travelled, with their horses, by a separate boat via the Panama Canal to Long Beach, the harbour of Los Angeles.

Willy DEN OUDEN was entered in the 100 metres free style. On August 6, 1932 she started in the fourth heat and finished in second place behind Eleanor GARATTI-SAVILLE [USA]⁵ who won the heat in 1:08,5 [a new Olympic record]; Willy finished in 1:09,2 and qualified for the semi-finals. The semi-finals were the following day. This time DEN OUDEN not only beat GARATTI-SAVILLE, but also the one day old Olympic record, setting a new mark of 1:07,6.

The day of the final was August 8, 1932. Six swimmers qualified for the event: Helen MADISON⁶ [USA], Eleanor GARATTI-SAVILLE [USA], Josephine MCKIM [USA]⁷, Neville Frances BULT [AUS], Jenny MAAKAL [RSA] and Willy DEN OUDEN [NED]. Immediately after the start Helen MADISON took the lead, and was never headed, finishing in a new Olympic record of 1:06,8, just 0,2 seconds slower than her own world record of 1:06,6 from 1931. Willy DEN OUDEN finished in second place in 1:07,8 taking the silver medal, beating Eleanor GARATTI-SAVILLE, who finished in 1:08,2.

Four days later, August 12, 1932, the final of the women 4x100 metres free style relay took place. Only five countries had entered teams for this event, therefore the FINA decided not to organise heats, but only run a straight final.

The Dutch team were seriously depleted. One of their top swimmers Zus PHILIPSEN-BRAUN, had an infection thought to have been caused by an insect bite.⁸ The American team, the clear favourite, easily won in the new Olympic and world record of 4:38,0 and took the gold medal. The Dutch team still came in second place in 4:47,5; Maria "Rie" VIERDAG was the first swimmer; Puck OVERSLOOT⁹ second, Cornelia LADDE¹⁰ third and Willy DEN OUDEN last. The British were third. So Willy DEN OUDEN came home with two Olympic silver medals at the age of only fourteen years and eight months!

More records

Less than one year after taking part in the Los Angeles Olympics, on May 3, 1933, Willy broke her first world record, for the 200 metres free style in 2:28,6, taking six full seconds of Helen MADISON'S previous world record of 2:34,6. It was Willy's first breaking of a world record, but certainly not her last. Two months later, July 9th, 1933, she broke Helen MADISON'S world record on the 100 metres free style [1:06,6] taking it down to 1:06,0.

Then on October 8, 1933, she took the world record for the 300 metres free style away from, again, Helen MADISON and brought it down with 1,5 seconds from 3:59,5 to 3:58,0. Because of these successes, she was invited to swim all over Europe and accepted invitations from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, England and Scotland.

On February 4, 1934, she swam a new world record for the 100 yards freestyle in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 59,8. She was the first female swimmer to break the one minute barrier, MADISON had only equalled it. On 9 February 1934, she swam a world record for the 150 yards free style in 1:39,5 again improving on MADISON'S time of 1:40,4.

On February 24, 1934, she lowered her own world record in the 100 metres free style to 1:05,4. She did that again on April 15, 1934, and now even reduced it to 1:04,8. On May 5th, 1934, she took the world record for 220 yards free style from Helen MADISON and reduced it from 2:34,8 to 2:27,6; this being her





eighth world record within a single year! During the same race, she also broke the world record for the 200 yards free style, but this ninth world record was not recognised by FINA because they had earlier decided to delete that particular distance from their record lists.¹¹ However, she continued to attack all world records in the women's free style. On July 12, 1934, she swam the 400 metres free style in the new world record of 5:16,0, breaking Helen MADISON'S record of 5:28,5 with 12,5 seconds.

Magdeburg, Germany 1934

The European Championships in Magdeburg, Germany, took place between 12 and 19 August 1934, now loomed on the horizon.

On the first day of the European Championships in Magdeburg, August 12, 1934, Willy den Ouden swam in the first heat of the 100 metres free style and won the heat in 1:08,9. The second heat was won by another Dutch swimming star, Rie MASTENBROEK¹², also from Rotterdam, but a member from another club: the *Onderlinge Dames Zwemclub* (ODZ), which was trained by Zus PHILIPSEN-BRAUN'S mother "Ma" BRAUN. MASTENBROEK won her heat in 1:07,9. Both Dutch swimmers qualified for the final which took place on August 14th, 1934; DEN OUDEN won that final in 1:07,1 with MASTENBROEK in second place in 1:08,1, and Gisela AHRENDT¹³ from Germany in third place in 1:10,3.

Four days later, 18 August 1934; Willy won the first heat of the 400 metres free style in 5:37,0, and MASTENBROEK won the second heat in 5:37,8. That same day, both Willy and Rie also competed in the heats of the women's 4x100 metres free style relay, together with Jopie SELBACH¹⁴ and Ans TIMMERMANS¹⁵. The Dutch relay-team easily won the race against Germany, Great Britain, Denmark and France in 4:41,5; the split-times of the individual Dutch swimmers were: Jopie SELBACH 1:13,8; Ans TIMMERMANS 1:10,2; Rie MASTENBROEK 1:10,4 and Willy DEN OUDEN 1:07,1; they were almost nine seconds ahead of the second placed German team. On 19th August 1934 the final of the 400 metres free style took place with two Dutch competitors, who were competing more against each other than against the other participants in this final.

It was indeed a final to stir the blood with both swimmers going equally fast, lap after lap, right to the finish, where both were clocked with exactly the same time: 5:27,8. Instead of handing out a gold medal to both swimmers; the FINA-rules at the time dictated that both had to swim the same distance again to decide which of them would win the one and only gold medal. However, Willy DEN OUDEN decided she had had enough and refused to swim that long distance again.

As a consequence, she received the silver medal, where Rie MASTENBROEK went home with the gold medal. During the victory-ceremony for the 400 me-

tres free style, Rie MASTENBROEK pulled Willy onto the highest platform next to herself, to show that Willy also should have received a gold medal. It showed that the girls themselves were good friends.

DEN OUDEN returned home from the European Championships with two gold medals and a silver but still stood one step behind her team mate Rie MASTENBROEK, who had won her third gold medal in the 400 metres. Rie also won the 100 metres backstroke and also a gold medal as a member of the relay-team; she won a silver medal in the 100 metres free style.

World records

Willy continued to receive invitations to swim exhibition-meets all over Europe and pictures of her and her coach Mrs. VAN WUYCKHUISE show that they often used a plane for transport; quite unusual in those days! Willy DEN OUDEN'S world record days were not yet over. On 27 March 1935, she broke the world record in the 500 metres free style in 6:48,4; breaking Leonore KNIGHT'S (USA) original world record of 6:59,8. On September 8, 1935, she pulverized her own world record in the 200 metres free style in 2:25,3, setting it 3,3 seconds faster. Two days later, she attacked her own record in the 300 metres free style and deleted that from the books with a new world record of 3:50,4; her thirteenth; 7,6 seconds lower than the old one had been.

The culmination of her life as a swimmer came on February 27th, 1936, in Amsterdam, where she swam the 100 metres free style in 1:04,6; breaking her own world record of 1:04,8. Her fourteenth world record stood for little short of twenty years! It was to be one of the longest standing world records in swimming of all times. It was also the last world record Willy achieved.

(Incidentally on the night of February 21, 1956, during the Australian swimming Championships in Sydney, Dawn FRASER broke that world record with 0,1 of a second. However, it must be stated that Dawn FRASER swam that time over a distance of 110 yards; thus 1 foot, 11 inches (58 cm) longer than the standard 100 metres¹⁶. Dawn FRASER'S world record was acknowledged by the FINA Board during its spring session of 1956. Dawn FRASER'S own record was eclipsed within two weeks by another Dutch swimmer: Cocki van ENGELSDORP GASTELAARS, who, on March 3, 1956, swam 1:04,2 and two weeks later brought it further down to 1:04,0.)

Olympic Games Berlin 1936

To return to DEN OUDEN, she was of course was, of course, selected on the Dutch team for the Games of the XIth Olympiad in Berlin, in 1936. She was only entered in the 100 metres free style and in the team for the women's 4x100 metres free style relay.

On August 8, 1936, Willy swam in the second heat of the 100 metres free style and won easily in 1:08,1, and qualified for the semi-final. A day later, she swam in the second semi-final and became second, after the Argentine swimmer Jeanette CAMPBELL¹⁷, who finished in 1:06,6; with Willy in 1:06,7.

The final of the 100 metres free style took place on August 10, 1936. There were three Dutch swimmers joining Willy DEN OUDEN and Rie MASTENBROEK (who had breezed through all her races with ease), there was also Tini WAGNER¹⁸, a swimmer of the same age as Rie and Willy; the line up was completed by CAMPBELL (ARG); Gisela Ahrendt (GER); and two American swimmers Olive MCKEAN and Katherine RAWLS.

From the start it was AHRENDT who set the pace with CAMPBELL in second place and the three Dutch girls further back. At the turn AHRENDT was still ahead followed by CAMPBELL. At three quarters of the race, Rie MASTENBROEK suddenly spurted forward; she always had a good final sprint. She first overhauled AHRENDT and then CAMPBELL. Her swim for gold also broke the Olympic record the time 1:05,9; with CAMPBELL in second place in 1:06,4; AHRENDT third in 1:06,6; Willy DEN OUDEN in fourth place in 1:07,6. Tini WAGNER finished in fifth place, the two American girls brought up the rear.





On 12 August 1936, the Dutch team for the 4x100 metres free style started in the second heat; after the American team had won the first heat in 4:47,1. The Dutch team consisted of Jopie SELBACH, Tini WAGNER, Willy DEN OUDEN and Rie MASTENBROEK. They were up against Germany, Denmark and Japan. The Dutch won in 4:38,1, ahead of Germany in 4:40,5 and Denmark in 4:46,2. All three qualified for the final.

The final took place on August 14th, 1936. The Dutch team was in lane 4 and Germany, their strongest opponents, in lane 7.

The Berlin Olympic Pool was in the open air and it rained hard during this race! As predicted, the Dutch and German teams fought for first place and the gold medal. Thanks to the now famous final sprint of Rie MASTENBROEK, the Dutch team won the gold medal in a new Olympic record of 4:36,0, with Germany a close second in 4:36,8. The Dutch team, with the same swimmers, including Willy, had earlier that year already set a new world record in this relay with a time of 4:32,8. The bad weather had prevented a new world record in Berlin.

These races were in fact the end of Willy DEN OUDEN'S brilliant career as a swimmer. She no longer reached her earlier level of excellence. Certainly she continued to compete for two more years, but there were no more records. For instance, she took part in the women's 4x100 metres relay during the European Championships from 1938 in London, with Alie STIJL, Rie van VEEN and Trude MALCORPS and won silver. It was to be the last time her name was mentioned in the international swimming results.

Her life after swimming

Her fame, however, was still great and in 1939 she received an invitation from a Belgian firm *Paerl*, to participate in a film *Van het een komt het ander*, an offer she accepted. However as the film was being shot at the *Sonar-Studio* in Brussels in Belgium, the Germans invaded Belgium and on 26 June 1940, she escaped from Belgium to Falmouth a coastal town in South west England. In London, she got a job as a secretary with a Dutch firm.

During the war years spent in London, she met Swedish shipping manager Gustaf Staffan BROMS, whom she married on October 28, 1943. Later, they moved to his beautiful house in Saltsjobaden, a suburb of Stockholm. Unfortunately, the marriage did not last very long; the couple separated on June 24, 1946, in Stockholm.

She returned to Rotterdam and rejoined her family, who had already informed her that almost all her trophies, including most of her Olympic and European Championships medals, had been lost during the infamous German bombing raids on Rotterdam on May 14, 1940. The only medal that had been recovered was the commemorative medal from the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936. In 1946, she was still a very beautiful girl; as demonstrated by photographs in a sporting magazine *De Sportwereld*. This magazine interviewed her both in Stockholm and in Rotterdam, when she visited her parents. These interviews were probably the last normal contacts she had with the media. Since that time she avoided interviews and any contact with the press.

In 1972, one journalist tried to interview her again, but he got no further than her front door. DEN OUDEN opened it slightly to tell the reporter she was ill and did not wish to be interviewed. No other reason was ever given.

In the meantime she had twice remarried. In Amsterdam on November 27, 1953, she wed Mr. Wicher HOOITE JAGER, but that marriage also broke up, almost four years later, on August 15, 1957.

There was a third marriage with Mr. Jan Edwin SCHUPPER, which took place in Rotterdam on October 3, 1958. This marriage did not even last one year, as they divorced on the May 5, 1959. She had no children from her three marriages.

During the latter part of her life she worked in a fur shop in Rotterdam but continued to shun all contacts with the media. Only a few old friends, like Rie MASTENBROEK, were able to contact her now and then. She passed away in Rotterdam on December 6, 1997.

Conclusion

It is difficult to describe Willy DEN OUDEN as a person. In files, made up by the Dutch Department of Justice in London during the Second World War she was described as vain, feeling herself very much "God's gift to mankind", not particularly clever and in fact a bit plain.

It is no wonder that she became the person she was; especially when, at such an early age, she was already being hailed as "the greatest miracle in swimming". She had to endure constant scrutiny; was "paparazzi'ed" by photographers and received great honours wherever she came to swim. She was lodged in the best hotels, travelled extensively. She

was pretty and she knew that all too well herself. Her later life shows that she could not find much contentment, not in her personal life anyway. She most likely died as a very lonely woman.

May she rest in peace, as she brought many glorious moments to the world of sports. She will always be remembered for that fantastic record in the 100 metres free style of 1:04,6, which stood tall for twenty years!

Notes

- 1 Geertruida "Truus" KLAPWIJK; * 2 January 1904 in Rotterdam; † 3 May 1991 in Rotterdam; member of the *Rotterdamsche Dames Zwemclub* [Rotterdam Ladies Swimming Club] in Rotterdam; teacher at a technical school; she took part in the Games of the VIIIth Olympiad in Paris in 1924, and in the Games of the IXth Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928.
- 2 Maria Johanna "Zus" BRAUN; * 22 June 1911 in Rotterdam; † 23 June 1982 in Gouda; member of the *Onderlinge Dames Zwemclub* (O.D.Z.) in Rotterdam, won an Olympic gold medal for the 100 metres backstroke during the Games of the IXth Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928; she also took part in the Games of the Xth Olympiad in Los Angeles in 1932, but then under her married name: Mrs. Maria Johanna "Zus" PHILIPSEN-BRAUN.
- 3 Gertrude [Geertruida Christina] "Truus" BAUMEISTER; * 21 October 1907 in Rotterdam; † not known; in 1971 emigrated to the United States of America; member of the *Onderlinge Dames Zwemclub* (O.D.Z.) in Rotterdam.
- 4 Maria "Rie" VIERDAG; * 22 September 1905 in Amersfoort; † 17 July 2005 in Amsterdam; member of the Amsterdam Swimming Club 't IJ; in 1929 one of the first women to complete the study for physical education in Amsterdam; followed by physiotherapy; from 1950 to 1970 she was responsible for the swimming of the basic schools in Amsterdam; she was the first Dutch woman to participate in three consecutive Olympic Games, 1924, 1928 and 1932.
- 5 Eleanor A. GARATTI-SAVILLE; * 12 June 1909; † 9 September 1998.
- 6 Helen MADISON; * 19 June 1913; † 27 November 1970.
- 7 Josephine E. MCKIM; * 4 January 1910; † not known
- 8 Rumours flew around in the Dutch press afterwards; that she had been injected with some kind of venom by two men sitting behind her on the stands in the day before the final of the 100 metres backstroke, in which she was a serious contender of the famous American swimmer Eleanor HOLM, who was opting for a career in Hollywood. The rumours could never be proved, but Zus PHILIPSEN-BRAUN firmly believed that this had happened and she told the same story many times, when she returned to Rotterdam in October 1932, after having been released from the hospital in Los Angeles.
- 9 Maria Petronella "Puck" OVERSLOOT; * 22 May 1914 in Rotterdam; member of the *Onderlinge Dames Zwemclub* (O.D.Z.) in Rotterdam.
- 10 Cornelia "Corrie" LADDE; * 27 October 1915 in Batavia, Dutch East Indies; † 18 September 1996 in Bad Ischl, Austria.
- 11 In the early thirties, world records in many more distances, both in metres and in yards, were still being acknowledged by the FINA. This is no longer the case. Only for the distances used in international meets, like world championships and Olympic Games; national, European and world records are accepted. Former used distances, like the 300 and 500 metres have been deleted, but other distances like the 50 metres have been added to this list.
- 12 Hendrika Wilhelmina "Rie" MASTENBROEK; * 26 February 1919 in Rotterdam; † 6 November 2003 in Rotterdam; member of the *Onderlinge Dames Zwemclub* (O.D.Z.) in Rotterdam; during the Games of the XIth Olympiad in Berlin Rie MASTENBROEK won three gold (100 and 400 metres free style and the 4x100 metres free style relay) and one silver medal (100 metres backstroke).
- 13 Gisela AHRENDT; * 1918; † 1969.
- 14 Johanna Katarina "Jopie" SELBACH; * 27 July 1918 in Haarlem; † 30 April 1998 in Zoetermeer; member of the *Amsterdamsche Dames Zwemclub* (ADZ) in Amsterdam.
- 15 Anna Petronella "Ans" TIMMERMANS; * 10 April 1919 in Rotterdam; † 21 August 1958 in Parkdale, Australia; who emigrated from the Netherlands to Australia after the Second World War.
- 16 Information received from the Australian Olympic historian Harry GORDON, completing the description of this world-record-breaking in the book *Below the Surface*, by Dawn FRASER and Harry GORDON, page 66.
- 17 Jeanette CAMPBELL, * 8 March 1916; † 15 January 2003 [information received from Stephanie DANIELS (GBR).
- 18 Catharina Wilhelmina "Tini" WAGNER; * 17 December 1919 in Amsterdam; member of the Amsterdam Swimming Club 't IJ.



The photographs of the article display Willemijntje "Willi" den Ouden (Private Archives Bijkerk)