



## **The complete history of the Four Days Marches** (November 2012)

Football tournament and better fitness 'through after school sports and games' laid the foundation for the Nijmegen International Four Days Marches.

In the autumn of 1904, sergeants from the 6th Infantry Regiment in Breda founded a football club. This created much excitement among the soldiers and on the first anniversary of the club, they organised a tournament which became the 1906 and 1907 Field Army Sports Days.

The success of their initiative motivated various sports associations and social organisations to set up an umbrella organisation. For years, physical education in the Netherlands had been organised by teachers and former soldiers who provided instruction in school gymnastics and basic military training.

### **First sports umbrella organization**

On 3 April 1908 the ladies and gentlemen who met in the Zuid-Hollandsch Koffiehuis on The Hague's Groenmarkt founded the Dutch Physical Education Association (NbvLO), the first sports umbrella organisation in the Netherlands. Shortly thereafter forty organisations had already joined their initiative.

All over the country, members were involved in improving children's fitness by providing after-school sports and games. Children regularly gave demonstrations of gymnastics and (ball) games.

Unfortunately the ambitions of this new organisation suffered financially, despite good funding from the Ministry of the Interior.

### **'Four Days Marches' popular**

Based on an idea to organise a four days march to the sports days in Breda, proposed in July 1907 by Lieutenant C. Viehoff from Arnhem, the NBvLO designed 15 routes for the first Four Days' Marches in 1909.

The day after the Queen's Day celebrations, on Wednesday 1 September, 306 participants set out from ten barracks on the 150 kilometre walk from garrison to garrison. They were accompanied by ten civilians. In Friesland the poor condition of the roads caused this section to be cancelled and three other sections were omitted due to an outbreak of cholera in Rotterdam.

'The Four Days' theme was very popular in those days. At various times of the year, other events were held such as a four days (horseback) riding event, a four days cycle event over almost 500 kilometres and four days rowing on our rivers. In 1910 the Association limited its four days marches to one route from Arnhem through Doesburg, Zutphen and Apeldoorn.

This was the year that Pierre de Coubertin visited the Association in The Hague in his capacity as president of the IOC. However it was not chairman of the association, Colonel W.F.K. Bischoff van Heemskerk, but Frits Baron van Tuyll van Serooskerken who became the first president of the Netherlands Olympic Committee in 1912.

### **First woman**

The importance attributed by the government to the performances achieved was already reflected in the recognition of a Decoration to military participants for their marching skills (the Four Days Cross) by Queen Wilhelmina in October 1909.

Utrecht (1911), Nieuw-Milligen (1916), Den Bosch (1918), Amersfoort (1919) and Breda (1924) joined Nijmegen as a starting point or centre of the Four Days Marches, before the oldest city of the Netherlands finally embraced the Four Days Marches within its walls in 1925.



Despite a gradual rise in the number of civilian participants, it was not until 1919 that the first women successfully completed the Four Days Marches: Mrs N. van Stockum-Metelerkamp from Amersfoort.

### **1928: International**

It was not until 1928, however, that the first walking club was founded in Rotterdam (Rotterdamse Wandelsport Vereeniging).

With Amsterdam hosting the Olympic Games, march leader Jonkheer W. Schorer decided to invite international delegations to the Four Days' Marches. Delegations from Germany, France, Norway and the United Kingdom arrived in Nijmegen. The forty British participants of the Road Walking Association were divided into four groups according to social class, all of which won a group prize. Even today, a relay competition is held for the 'Nijmegen shield', to which these four medals are attached!

### **The Four Days anthem**

The fame of the Four Days Marches grew during the 1930s, thanks to the efforts of the Koloniale Reserve [Colonial Reserve] in Nijmegen, and in particular the Indonesian 'nasi' meal prepared by their cooks.

Walkers took home unforgettable memories of pillow fights in the attics of the Prins Hendrik barracks and in the tent camp on the Molenveld.

In 1932 H.A. van Mechelen composed the music for a Four Days Marches anthem to words written by J.P.J.H. Clinge Doorenbos. Politician Maarten Schakel Sr first visited the Four Days Marches from Noordeloos in 1933 "with a little wicker case on the back of the bicycle". Many years later, during the first walking sports council in 1983, he said: "There are few anthems from the 1930s which still appeal to me, but the Four Days Marches anthem is one of them."

As the years went by, both the organisation and the participants learned what made the Four Days Marches such a special event, renowned throughout the whole (walking) world. While some forty percent of the participants dropped out in 1921 due to the heat wave around Amersfoort (602 reached the finish post), in 1939 there was only a 2.39% drop-out rate - an unrivalled record.

### **After the war**

After the Second World War, despite the ravages caused by the bombing of 22 February 1944, Nijmegen took up the challenge of reviving the Four Days Marches. Thanks to a fund-raising campaign among the population and the efforts of many volunteers, its efforts were successful. In 1946 there were more participants than ever before, a trend which would continue.

But the war had left deep scars in 1954 the four days' marches organised by the Nederlandse Wandelsport Bond [Dutch Walking Association] started in Apeldoorn. However this did not stop developments in Nijmegen and after several decades there is room for both: Apeldoorn starts its marches on the second Tuesday in July, Nijmegen starts on the third Tuesday.



### **Spectacular rise**

Rising numbers of participants arriving from all over the world has meant that the Flag Parade had to be relocated from the courtyard of the Prins Hendrik barracks, via the Molenveld and the Wedren to the Goffert stadium.

Better welfare and leisure time have meant a rise in the number of countries taking part in the Four Days Marches from 7 or 8 to over 60 after the turn of the century. Moreover, the predicate 'Royal' awarded to the Association (1958) and the participation of HRH Prince Claus resulted in a spectacular rise in the number of participants.

By that time, more than a hundred different countries have been represented in the Four Days Marches, including many participants from Eastern Europe after 1989, under the leadership of march leaders Tonnie van Dongen and Chris Bos.

### **Hospitality**

The support of the municipality of Nijmegen, the Ministry of Defence, sponsors and volunteers has been indispensable. When the schools, which had been drafted in to supplement the accommodation available for (military) participants in the barracks were finally unable to meet the increasing demand, around 25 years ago a location was found at Heumensoord which could accommodate five thousand soldiers.

Year after year many civilians return to the same host families who consider it an honour to entertain their guests during Four Days Marches week. And along the roadside, all kinds of facilities are provided, from garden hose showers to mobile toilets, from apples to quench the thirst to a service club.

At the end of the 1960s dissatisfaction with the level of beer prices caused participants to boycott the catering outlets in Nijmegen. However Nico Grijpink and his colleagues now host the Summer Festivities, which after a modest and above all free launch, are now a permanent feature at the beginning of the 21st century: during the Four Days Marches and the Four Days Festivities, the Nijmegen city centre plays host to almost one million people.

### **Maximum number of registrations**

Due to increasing interest, the board is forced to set a restriction on the maximum number of registrations in 2004 for the first time. The maximum number of 47,000 registrations is reached within 6 weeks.

One of the (maximum) 47.500 participants for the 89th Four Days Marches in 2005 is absolute record holder Annie Berkhout from Voorburg, a woman who succeeded in finishing the Four Days Marches 66 times. She is an onlooker of the far-reaching measure of a registration limit set by the Stichting DE 4DAAGSE, led by chairman Wim Jansen, being put into practice since 2004. In 2005, the registration limit led to an official drawing by lot, whereas this was not necessary in 2006. The number of registrations for the 90th Four Days Marches did not reach the limit.

### **The Four Days Marches that lasted one day only**

The 90th Four Days Marches were very unique: after one participant had died during the march and another after finishing the first walking day, and a large amount of the walkers had needed help with heat-related problems during the march, the Four Days Marches were cancelled after one day. This had not happened before, even though walkers have died during one of the marches, for example in 1972, when the distances were shortened by 10 km each day. The participants that have started on the first day of the 90th Four Days Marches have not received a medal, instead a remembrance pin was sent to them.



### **Technological improvements**

Stichting DE 4DAAGSE strives to organise the event to its utmost capacity. To preserve that quality, innovative measures are being implemented regularly. The website is more prominently present than ever. The information booklets no longer exist, since all information can be found on the Internet. The registration form has given way to web registration. And participants are being kept informed on the latest news via digital newsletters. But also during the marching days technology will play a more important role. The hand-written cards have been substituted with barcode cards and experiments have been done to monitor and track the walkers by means of a shoe lace chip and mobile telephones. These systems are important to the organisation to gain more insight in crowds on the route. In this manner, measures can be taken more quickly, for instance with blockages that tend to occur on the route. For those that stay at home these technological improvements may also prove to be convenient. They will be able to tell the exact whereabouts of the participant on the route. Not only can the event be followed on television and radio, but also via Internet, Vierdaagse TV. The whole world can get a glimpse behind the scenes of the world's largest walking event.