

Baseball hits a home run in Holland



Photo: IBAF

After a historic Baseball World Cup victory, the Dutch national baseball squad has proved itself a force to be reckoned with. But TIFFANY JANSEN reveals Holland actually has an impressive honkbal history.

Though the world was only just officially made aware of Holland's honkbal prowess when they took home the Baseball World Cup on 15 October, this tiny little country has been hard at work on this ever-popular American pastime for almost 100 years.

The sport of the so-called boys of summer was brought to the Netherlands in 1912 by Amsterdammer J.C.G. Grase, who caught several games of the sport while vacationing in the US.

In 1971, Grase's Dutch baseball league fused with the Dutch Amateur Softball Organization to form the Royal Dutch Baseball and Softball Association (Koninklijk Nederlandse Baseball en Softball Bond, KNBSB). The organisation supports a Little League team and provides youth baseball and softball clinics in addition to overseeing the Dutch National Team.

Today, Holland boasts around 180 baseball clubs spread throughout the country. Among these is the Amsterdam Pirates, one of the largest clubs in Holland and home of famed Dutch pitcher Rob Cordemans.

Though the world at large was surprised by Holland's Baseball World Cup win, the Dutch National Team has a fairly impressive track record. The team ranked fifth at both the 1996 and 2000 Summer Olympics.

At the moment, they have the distinction of being the top baseball team in Europe and the International Baseball Federation currently has them ranked sixth for men's baseball in their World Rankings.

The Dutch also seem to be hitting 'em out of the park in the sport's country of

origin. Just this year, Dutch-born pitcher Bert Blyleven was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. He even wore a pair of clogs to the initiation ceremony.

Following in his footsteps is Rick van den Hurk, a pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles. Van den Hurk's affair with baseball began at the age of four.

"My dad was the baseball coach for PSV Eindhoven and I went with him to a lot of the practices and games," Van den Hurk remembers fondly.

As soon as he was old enough, he began playing the game that had stolen his heart, ending up on the national team. It was there that he was scouted by Chicho Jesurun and eventually offered a contract with the Florida Marlins.

That was 10 years ago and Van den Hurk admits that he has noticed a surge in Dutch players hitting the major leagues since then.

"There were only four Dutch guys at first," Van den Hurk says. "But now there are more Dutch players than ever. It's given hope to others and more Dutch kids are signing pro-ball."

Other current Dutch players in the MLB are Washington Nationals outfielder Roger Bernadina from Curacao and Seattle Mariners outfielder Gregory Halman from Haarlem.

With all these baseball-loving Dutchies heading State-side to play ball, the next logical step is to bring the MLB to Holland. And that's exactly the route Dutch baseball officials are looking to take.

The KNBSB has already put in a bid to host MLB games in Hoofddoorp in 2014. The original plan was to hold the games

in celebration of baseball's 100 year anniversary in Holland, but the Park21 stadium was not yet ready to accommodate such a large undertaking.

Unfortunately for Holland, they have one less outlet in which to stretch their honkbal muscles. In 2005, it was announced that by 2012, the Olympic Games would no longer include baseball or softball.

"I think they've made a big, big mistake," Tommy Lasorda told USA today in July of 2005. "Baseball is played by all countries now and softball, too. I think that's really going to hurt the Olympics."

Lasorda, a former Dodgers manager, managed the American baseball team during the 2000 Sydney Games, winning the country its only gold medal.

Van den Hurk remains hopeful that

the popularity of baseball will continue to grow in Holland. He has even started an initiative called the European Big League tour to help make that happen.

The tour had its inaugural year in 2010 with the goals of bringing more attention to baseball in Europe, returning baseball to the Olympics, supporting baseball academies in Europe and helping young players realise their dreams of making the big leagues.

Over the past two years, Van den Hurk, along with other MLB players, has toured countries such as Belgium, Prague, Germany, Holland and Italy.

"Holland's number one sport will always be football," Van den Hurk concedes, "but the Dutch are good at many sports and baseball is definitely growing in Holland."

Dutch MLB player murdered in Rotterdam

Professional baseballer Gregory Halman was found stabbed to death on 21 November in Rotterdam. In the early hours of the morning, police arrived at an apartment registered to his brother Jason, to find the 24-year-old outfielder bleeding from a stab wound. Attempts to resuscitate him were unsuccessful and he died at the scene.

"We have arrested the 22-year-old brother of the victim," police spokesperson Patricia Wessels told reporters.

"From what we have learned, there was an argument between the two brothers over loud music being played. An investigation is underway

to determine exactly what happened."

Halman was a star player with the Seattle Mariners in the US. Playing over 40 games with the major league team, he earned both the title 'best power hitter' and 'best athlete' in 2009.

Although he lived in the US, he often travelled home to coach European youth players.

"Greg was passionate about the game of baseball and generously gave of himself to share his passion with others in an attempt to grow the sport's popularity across Europe," MLB executive director Michael Weiner said in a statement. "He will be sorely missed."

Gold for Dutch skaters

CHELYABINSK | Dutch speed skaters came home from the Essent ISU World Cup Speed Skating competition in Chelyabinsk, Russia with a total of 15 medals. Notably, Stefan Groothuis won the 1,000 metre as well as the 1,500 metres. Following his victory was Jorrit Bergsma, who took gold in the 5,000 metres, pushing Sven Kramer into second place. Ireen Wust took gold in the women's 1,500 metres, in addition to a silver win in the 3,000 metres. Six total events comprise the ISU with the winner chosen after a tally of individual points. The finale is scheduled for March in Berlin.

Holland to host Euro 2016

HELSINKI | The Netherlands will welcome Europe's top athletes in Amsterdam for the 2016 European outdoor athletic championships. The European athletics federation announced on 4 November the Dutch capital had beat out Istanbul and Split for hosting privileges. The games will be held at the Amsterdam Olympisch Stadium, home of the 1928 Olympic Games. This is the first time Amsterdam has hosted the outdoor championships. City officials say the event may boost the city's chances to win a 2028 Olympic bid.



Troubles resume for Ajax

AMSTERDAM | Ajax honorary board member Johan Cruyff announced on 20 November a rift with the football club's board after the appointment of Louis van Gaal as general director. Cruyff said the "unacceptable" move was made behind his back. Ajax chair Uri Coronel, however, said there is a "breach of trust between Johan Cruyff and the other members." As a result, he and two other board members resigned on 21 November. Adding fuel to the feud, two other board members publicly claimed Cruyff made racist and sexist comments at meetings. An interim board will step in in December.

Dutch bridge champions

VELDHOVEN | The Netherlands won their second ever world title in bridge on 29 October. During the 40th World Championships, the Dutch beat the US 300-255. During the three days of play, the Dutch held a strong lead and easily clinched the so-called Bermuda Bowl. "Unbelievable," Bauke Muller told reporters after the tournament. Muller was the only member on the team who also played with the previous Dutch victors in 1993. "Being crowned world champions in your own country after such a long time, it was a big surprise."



Rob Cordemans voted best

AMSTERDAM | Dutch baseball player Rob Cordemans has been nominated for the title of best sportsman of 2011. The 37-year-old pitcher is considered a pivotal part of the game internationally and has played in four consecutive Olympic Games for the Netherlands. His nomination was announced on 1 November alongside tennis star Thomas Schoorel and beach volleyball master Richard Schuil. Female cyclist Ellen van Dijk and bobsledding legend Esme Kamphuis are in the running for the women's award.