

## HIGH LEVEL SPORT IN THE NETHERLANDS - TOP LEVEL SPORTS SELECTION

### *Captain Mark HUIZINGA, the Netherlands*



*“Sports are a part of the Defence organisation. Physical training and sports form the basis for combat-ready armed forces. Physical fitness is a basic requirement for all military personnel. Top-level sportsmen and women support this message.*

*Preparation, focus, discipline, teamwork, strategy and tactics are all required in order to perform at the highest level. Perseverance, physical strength and mental fitness are also essential. That is true for the military profession as well as in the sports arena.*

*Sports are a part of the Defence organisation. The athletes of the Defence Top-level Sports Selection are people with a mission, in the same way as the Defence organisation as a whole has a mission.*

*The members of our top-level sports selection are all outstanding athletes, who have been in action during the Olympic Games in Athens, or who are working towards the Games in Beijing. Their sporting efforts and public appearances help familiarise a wider public with both the identity and the tasks of the Dutch armed forces”.*

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is a quote from Cees van der Knaap, the Dutch State Secretary for Defence. It implies that the Netherlands Defence Forces Top-level Sports Selection is a proper entity, that is referred to in an actual Policy Memorandum The Defence Top-level Sports Selection has both the formal and the informal support of the political leadership of the Ministry.

In the twentieth century, a steady stream of conscripted young sportsmen entered the armed forces, but that intake came to an end when conscription was suspended and the armed forces turned professional. As a consequence, the quality of the military teams imploded and with it the identity of the armed forces as a sporting organisation. Internally, we lost our sporting examples and externally we lost our sports ambassadors.

They have now been replaced by military top athletes with fixed-term contracts. At present we have 14 of these athletes and that number may rise to 25 in the coming years.

Five of our athletes competed in the Olympic Games in Athens.

From the Royal Netherlands Army:

Sergeant Bram Som - Communications Staff NCO with 11 Airmobile Brigade. Athletics, 800m. Semi-finalist in Athens.

Sergeant Dick Boschman - NCO Instructor, light-calibre weapons, at the Infantry School. Air-rifleman. Seven times Dutch champion. European champion in 2001.

From the Royal Netherlands Air Force:

First Lieutenant Deborah Gravenstijn- Officer Physiotherapist at Gilze-Rijen Air Base. Judoka (<57 kg). Olympic Bronze medallist Athens 2004. Bronze medallist at the 2003 World Championships.

Captain Mark Huizinga - Staff Officer Physical Training and Sports. Judoka (<90 kg). Olympic gold medallist in Sydney in 2000. Olympic Bronze Medallist Atlanta 1996 & Athens 2004. Six times Military World Champion.

From the Royal Netherlands Navy:

Lieutenant Junior Grade Sonja Tol - Staff Officer with the Royal Netherlands Navy Training Division in The Hague. National fencing champion in the épée category. Bronze medallist at the last Military World Games.

The fourteen servicemen and women together form the Defence Top-level Sports Selection. They are flanked by former National Olympic Committee president Hans Blankert on the left and the State Secretary for Defence, Cees van der Knaap. One serviceman competed at the Games in Sydney (Captain Mark Huizinga, winning a gold medal). And as we saw earlier, five military personnel competed in Athens.

Those are the athletes, but what does the Defence organisation aim to achieve with the Defence Top-level Sports Selection? Contribute in a qualitative and quantitative sense to the positive development of the Dutch armed forces by recruiting military top athletes.

That is too vague. So we derived a number of specific aims:

Strengthening the image and prestige of the armed forces as a dynamic organisation with ample facilities for their personnel.

Representing the Dutch armed forces in a positive manner during international civilian and military sports competitions.

Motivating Defence personnel to do more sports, and to do them better.

Putting forward our athletes as ambassadors of the Defence organisation, which is also to lead to a positive ambassadorship of former top athletes in the business world.

Providing a career in society to Dutch top athletes, in support of the great value that the Defence organisation sets by the social aspect of sports.

In short, the sporting nature of the Defence organisation should be advocated externally and internally it should lead to more and better sports activity by our own personnel. Sports are an identifying feature of any armed forces. Physical training and sports form the basis for combat-ready armed forces.

But the Defence organisation also wants to take some of the social responsibility for top-level sports, by creating military posts that allow for the successful combination of social development and top-level sports. The Defence organisation as an employer, not as a sponsor. Those military appointments with top-level sports facilities are full-time jobs. Not part-time, but full-time, and more than full-time

The four main tasks of our military athletes are:

Delivering excellent sporting achievements.

Carrying out PR activities in the civilian world.

Giving open training sessions, presentations and other activities that will encourage Defence personnel to do more and better sports activities.

Carrying out the duties of a military post that contributes to the mission of a unit and stimulates the social development of the military top athlete.

As you can see, these four tasks form a full-time job.

**Ad.1** Excellent sporting achievements attract the attention of the media. They generate publications in local, regional and national media. That can provide the Defence organisation with free publicity, as long as our military top athletes forge the link with the Defence organisation with their words and images and as long as journalists and reporters are aware of that link and willing to express it.

What are excellent achievements?

Our military top athletes are in principle the Dutch champions in their discipline, compete in European and world championships European and world competitions.

Positive achievements require training, care, travel and competitions. These activities are an implicit part of the athletes' tasks.

**Ad.2** PR activities in the civilian world are carried out in military attire. This includes giving open training sessions, starting races, handing out prizes, sitting on panels, being there: just being there can sometimes be enough. Requests come in via various networks: from the Olympic network in the Netherlands, schools, ministries, sports associations and military bodies. This is where we see the ambassador's role of the Defence Top-level Sports Selection. For this task, the military top athletes require strong social and communicative skills. They must show potential in this respect in order to be accepted into the programme. Media training and personal guidance remain necessary in order to lift those skills to a professional level.

**Ad.3** The third important derived aim is that of stimulating sports activities among Defence personnel. Open training sessions and demonstrations, presence and presentations, and particularly publications in Defence media are all activities that encourage more and better sporting activities among our own personnel. Sports offices, training institutes and magazine editors can all call on the military athletes for these purposes.

**Ad.4** And then there is the fourth sub-task: carrying out a specific military task within the organisation. A task that is suited to the military athlete's education and encourages social development, so that they do not end up in a kind of void at the end of their military careers. After all that is the main problem in our country in this respect. If you are not a professional sports person, it is almost impossible to combine top-level sports with a job. The Defence organisation offers a solution, a unique solution, to this problem.

This final task element is the driving force behind the vision of the Dutch Defence organisation with regard to sports. There are many countries in which top athletes are employed by the armed forces. The exceptional factor in the Netherlands is that our top athletes are military personnel, attached to various units throughout the country, wearing military uniforms and fully integrated into the Defence organisation. That makes the Dutch concept of the Defence Top-level Sports Selection unique in the world.

### ***The Defence Top-level Sports Selection does not have a place for every Dutch top athlete!***

Four basic criteria have been developed that are used to assess every application to join the Defence Top-level Sports Selection.

The first is that only those disciplines that are suited to the identity of the armed forces can be represented in the Defence Top-level Sports Selection. **The strong affinity with the military profession** is an essential criterion for both the internal recognition and identification by the Defence personnel and the external image of the Defence organisation in Dutch society.

What types of sports does this involve?

Primarily, they are combat sports. Their affinity with the military profession is evident. Firing weapons and entering into physical duels touch upon the core of what it is to be a warrior.

**The second criterion is Olympic status.** Olympic status guarantees competition possibilities at the highest level: the Olympic Games.

Everything is organised around the Olympic cycle. And every Olympic discipline has its own competition cycle, qualification rules and culture.

**Only sports that can be practised individually.** Teams make it impossibly complicated to find suitable military posts. So no sports teams, but no fifteen individual judokas either. The right balance has to be found. The same is true for the ratio of men to women in the Defence Top-level Sports Selection. The Defence organisation wants more women in its ranks. Ideally, the Defence Top-level Sports Selection would consist of 50% men and 50% women. At present the ratio is 64% men to 36% women. That is a much higher percentage of women than the generic figure within the Defence organisation, and it should stay that way.

The Defence organisation wants to be an employer of military personnel who want to successfully combine top-level sports with the development of skills that can be used in society. That requires a tailor-made job. Geographically near to where the athlete lives and trains. Suited to the athlete's level of education and need for development. The Defence organisation as the ideal employer, but not as a sponsor. **So there is no room in the Defence Top-level Sports Selection for sports that involve huge amounts of money.** For

professional sportsmen and women, money is more important than developing personal skills. Professional sports and the Defence organisation therefore do not go together.

This fourth criterion has significant consequences. After all, 95% of the attention of the sports media is focused on professional sports: soccer, cycling, tennis, motorized sports. The Defence organisation will therefore have to adopt a proactive attitude when presenting the athletes of the Defence Top-level Sports Selection in the media.

It will not happen automatically.

The four basic criteria, 1. Affinity, 2. Olympic, 3. Individual and 4. No professional sports, have led to the following list of sports that could be represented in the Defence Top-level Sports Selection:

Shooting \*  
Archery  
Fencing \*\*  
Boxing \*  
Taekwondo \*\*\*  
Judo \*\*\*\*\*  
Wrestling  
Gymnastics  
Swimming  
Athletics \*\*  
Triathlon  
Cycling - mountain bike  
Rowing  
Canoeing  
Sailing

These sports could be represented, but are not necessarily! The asterisks indicate the present situation.

What personnel are important in achieving optimal effects?

We have the **commanding officer or manager**, to whom the military athlete is entrusted for his or her specific military task. The commanding officer is also the athlete's mentor in acquiring social skills. He or she teaches the athlete the military code of conduct. The commanding officer and the co-ordinator together assess the performance of the military top athlete. They both give recommendations on whether or not to extend contracts.

Then we have the **co-ordinator**, who makes decision about the use of the Defence Top-level Sports Selection for PR tasks and activities to encourage people to take up sports. He organises media training and offers personal guidance in dealing with the media. He maintains contact with personal coaches, national coaches, PR officials from sports associations and personal spokespersons. He also issues press statements. He is the linchpin of the Defence Top-level Sports Selection, a networker.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Defence Top-level Sports Selection is a new entity. Small, modern and professional, focused on communication within the Defence organisation as well as external communication with society. It has become a cost-effective PR instrument for the Ministry. The Defence Top-level Sports Selection is the standard bearer of military sports, both nationally and internationally.

The Defence Top-level Sports Selection achieves splendid effects in Dutch society. For instance, look at this photograph that was printed in colour last year in *De Telegraaf*, the largest daily newspaper in the Netherlands.

What more could the Defence organisation ask for?

Thank you for your attention.