



Steven JH van Hengel

In the Foreword to the book Early Golf by Dutchman Steven van Hengel published in 1982, Peter Dobereiner stated: 'In the field of early Dutch golf, and that means early golf no matter how those nationalistic Scots may squirm, the ultimate authority is Steven van Hengel'. Steven had already begun publishing his findings and controversial statements around 1972. At that time they created quite a stir among most well-known golf historians.

Rick van den Boom recalls his acquaintanceship with the eminent historian.

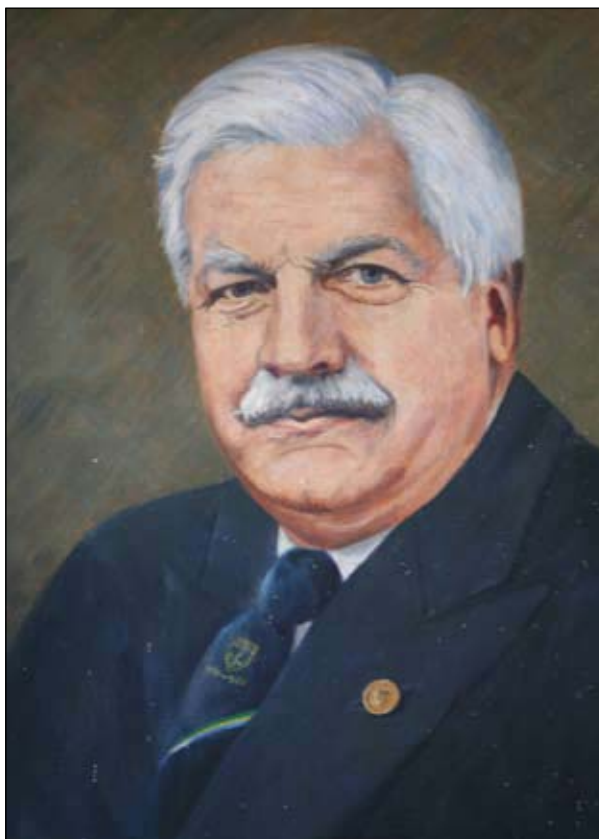
WHEN I INTERVIEWED STEVEN in March 1982, he had really been **The 'Mister Golf'** in The Netherlands for at least fifteen years. That year he discontinued his work for the Dutch Golf Federation, after twelve years of very loyal service. Although not a highly skilled player, he had been a fierce promoter of the game of golf. He detested the explosive development of the game in the Netherlands in those days. He felt that the traditions and values of golf could be jeopardised by this extremely rapid growth.

In his view the game of golf was an extremely individual endeavour. Thus when the Dutch Golf Federation started to modernise and streamline all the individual training programmes for talented young players at club level, into central practising facilities, group training programmes and the like, he felt it was no longer his 'cup of tea'.

Nevertheless we should never underestimate what Steven did for the growth and development of Dutch golf. He often took on very difficult and tricky tasks. A good example is the rather delicate first match he organised between Dutch and German

junior golf teams only five years after the Second World War. He was the referee and promoter of The Dutch Open for more than ten years. Also he was founding member of the Netherlands' first public golf course.

This course called *Spaarnwoude* close to Amsterdam, has grown into the busiest public golf course in Europe. It began with nine holes in 1977 and now counts an additional 57 holes. Around 1977 the Dutch Golf Federation took control of golf's extremely quick growth in Holland and succeeded in shaping the sport into what it represents today. Right behind soccer and tennis it is the third largest Sports Union in The Netherlands with more than 300,000 registered players.



Early Golf

The reason why Steven's 1972 publications created quite a stir was obvious. It boiled down to the fact that according to him it could be proven that the game of golf originated in the Netherlands. His book *Early Golf*, published around ten years later is much better. The reader is allowed to form an opinion and

possibly draw his own conclusion from, Steven's facts and findings. Still there is an old Dutch saying: *The wish is the father of the thought* and this is definitely the feeling that lingers in one's mind after reading this book. A particular eye-opener for many Dutch and Scottish readers is the chapter on the very close relations between Holland and Scotland in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Not only the mingling of the royal families, but the very active trading led to cross-fertilisation in several areas, and as a logical consequence, possibly and inevitably also in sports.

Steven's incredible drive to discover the truth about golf facts (often taken for granted) could be breathtaking at times. I saw him at work making copper modelling-moulds for cutting the leather for feathery balls. I soon realised that he was trying to prove that these moulds were the same as those used for *kaats-balls* (a very old sixteenth-century Dutch type of hand-tennis) and so gently establishing another possible Dutch connection.

I personally feel that it cannot be a coincidence that the names for the very ancient Dutch games of *colf* / *kolf* were used for ball-games played with a club or a stick. This surely led to the word 'golf'. Steven's book is a must for anyone interested in golf history as it is a fount of interesting and absolutely correct historical facts. However, I would be wary of drawing too many, hard and fast conclusions.

Dirty Hands.

It was a challenge to understand why so many experts simply refused to accept some of the findings and facts published in this book. I therefore took a closer look at some of the statements. As also mentioned in Chapter 5, there was a strong desire to ban ball-games from the streets in the old town centres in Holland around the year 1390. *Early Golf* makes **no** reference whatsoever to a very ancient Dutch ball game called *Klootschieten*. The ball (or *kloot*), with a diameter of approximately three inches, and an average weight of approximately 500 grams, was thrown by hand at certain targets over an agreed course. Obviously these wooden balls could cause tremendous damage if thrown out of bounds.

Reviewing the history of *Klootschieten*, a very popular sport in those days, it can be traced back to the early part of the thirteenth century, so much earlier than the first signs of *colf* in Holland. In the book, reference is made to Count Albrecht of Holland who granted the city of Haarlem a course as a token of his gratitude to this city in 1389. According

to van Hengel the term 'course' was used **only** in connection with *kaatsen* (the ancient Dutch game of hand-tennis) and *colf* at the time, leaving out the at that time much more popular game of *Kolf*.

A closer look at the history of *Klootschieten* reveals that in exactly the same year and in exactly the same city (Haarlem) a course for *Klootschieten* was laid out. This can hardly be a coincidence. Maybe this was in fact the same course and could mark the beginning of golf in Holland.

The players of *Klootschieten* threw these often muddy balls around by hand. One could envisage how, one day, one of the *klootschieters* asked a *kolf*-player if he could try out his club/stick to try and replace his throw with a stroke from the *kolfer's* stick/club. At least he could keep his hands clean that way! But then again this explanation is just too simple.

It does however indicate the tenuousness of some of van Hengel's statements.

Early Golf Foundation

I strongly advise everybody to read Steven's interesting and excellent book. The so-called Dutch Golf Museum at the Purmerend Golf Club, north of Amsterdam, has many items relating to Van Hengel's and the so-called Bronger's collections, which are kept together by the Early Golf Foundation in Holland. The joint collection boasts some very interesting old clubs, balls, books, beautiful ancient Delft blue tiles and other golf memorabilia. Some of Steven's tiles were donated to the R&A and can still be seen in the showcase in the hallway of the R&A clubhouse leading to the Northern Room. Steven personified golf in Holland for a very long time. He was an honorary member of the Dutch Golf Federation and of his beloved Kennemer Golf & Country Club in Zandvoort in the dunes west of Amsterdam, one of the best links-courses on the continent of Europe. His (golf-) heart was in the right place. It gave up on him on the course of Royal Birkdale while watching The Open in 1985. Obviously his death was premature (he was only 61 years old) but I am confident that for Steven, this was undeniably, the most appropriate place for him to pass away.

Steven van Hengel's classic book Early Golf is still available at the Early Golf Foundation in the Netherlands. Members wishing a copy should contact Rick van den Boom at rvdboom@xs4all.nl and he will pass on the request. Price is £18 excluding postage.