

The Dutch Thaw Out When It Freezes

Skating as a National Sport

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[MAX DOHLE]

The Dutch like to skate, and they do it a lot. When there is safe natural ice, on any weekend three million Dutch people will be out on it. Throughout the country there are artificial ice rinks and every village has one with natural ice. Skating is popular, and it's also part of the image of the Netherlands as a country of water, windmills, tulips and bicycles. How did this image come about and why is skating so popular in the Netherlands?

Skating on iron blades began in the 13th century in the Low Countries: Holland and Flanders. The oldest skates were discovered in Holland, the low-lying area on the west coast of the Netherlands. They date from 1225 and were found in Dordrecht. The oldest picture of a skater we find as a marginal illustration on the calendar page for February in a Flemish psalter of 1325, which is now in Oxford. In the Middle Ages skating was reserved for the upper class.

Skating only became a popular sport in the 17th century, the so-called Golden Age when Dutch commerce, art and science led the world. And in Flanders, during that century and later, skating was just as popular as it was in the Netherlands. On several of Pieter Brueghel's paintings we see expanses of ice, dotted with skaters and pall-mall players. When the Scheldt froze over, the river would be black with people on skates. But in Flanders skating's popularity has largely faded away. Skaters in Flanders need harder frosts than those in the Netherlands, since rivers take much longer to freeze over than stagnant water in canals.

Such hard frosts were common during the Little Ice Age, which lasted roughly from 1450 until 1850. In the Little Ice Age winters were significantly longer and more severe than they are now. The winter of 1740, in particular, was renowned: it had 13 weeks of severe frost. By our standards, winters were harsh indeed. People died from the cold or from starvation. And when the ice broke up after the frost, it would damage the dikes. But in spite of all these difficulties thousands of people would take to the ice. The Dutch thaw out when it freezes. Even the dourest Calvinist became a bon vivant. And the Catholics celebrated carnival on the ice. The ice regularly turned into a great fairground where almost everything that wasn't allowed on land was permitted: gambling, whoring and such heavy drinking that many a skater could no longer stand up.

Hendrick Avercamp,
Ice skating in a Village,
c. 1610. Oil on panel,
36 x 71 cm.
©Mauritshuis,
The Hague. Detail.



Fen skating

During the Little Ice Age the Thames too regularly froze over. There were 'frost fairs' and people skated on the river. The Dutch brought skating to England at the end of the 17th century. The first to write about it was Samuel Pepys in 1662. '*...over to the Parke (where I first in my life, it being great frost, did see people sliding with their skeats which is a very pretty art)...*' Especially in the area of the Fens skating became just as popular as in Holland.

If you leave Cambridge on a fine summer's day and head downstream along the River Cam, just outside the city you will see a field with a few old, rusted street-lamps in it. Most Brits would wonder what its function was, but Dutch people will immediately recognize it as a skating rink deserted for the summer. In the second half of the Little Ice Age skating actually migrated from Holland to the Fens, a former marshy delta that was drained by the Dutchman Cornelis Vermuyden on the orders of King Charles I of England. To enable the draining to take place an extensive system of ditches (which the locals call dykes) and canals was constructed, creating unprecedented possibilities for skating. The Dutch workers had brought their skates to the Fens, so that when frost prevented them working they could enjoy the ice. Skating then became wildly popular in the Fens. In the second half of the 19th century Fen skating reached its peak. The fastest skaters in the world came from the Fens. The availability of long straight stretches of ice, as in Holland and the Fens, is one of the best explanations for the popularity of skating.

Holland mania

At the height of Fen-skating a curious movement began in the United States, sparked by the celebrations of the country's centenary. Quite a few Americans claimed that not England but the Dutch Republic was the mother of the U.S. Americans fondly called the Netherlands 'Holland', though Holland is only one part of the country. American artists traveled to Volendam, Edam and Zeeland to paint the last remnants of a bygone world. American tourists wanted to know where Hans Brinker had lived. They had to look hard to find the stereotypes. The pancakes, windmills, wooden shoes, skates and traditional costumes were mainly to be found in America itself: in children's books. Mary Mapes Dodge had written *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*, although she had never set foot in the Netherlands. Hans Brinker skated his way through the provinces of North and South Holland in search of a doctor who could treat his father. The beguiling story about the son of a Haarlem lockmaster who puts his finger in the dike to prevent a flooding disaster appeals to the imagination of the whole world, from Japan and Siberia to South Africa. Everybody has heard of Hans Brinker.

This period of American history has become known as 'Holland mania'. The Americans created this image of the Netherlands, and the Netherlands is still profiting from it. Every year hundreds of thousands of foreigners come looking for tulip fields, wooden shoes, windmills and quaint traditional dress. In a limited number of villages they can find exactly that. But many Dutch people find this image pathetic; the only aspect they can relate to is the skating. It is the national sport and we derive a part of our identity from it. As we do from our fight against the water.



Luctor et emergo: I struggle and emerge

The Netherlands very largely has itself to thank for this fight against the water. The Dutch dug holes in their peat deposits and cultivated them. An extensive system of ditches and canals became necessary, so the water could drain away. In order to keep its feet dry the Netherlands is regularly pumped out through these waterways, and at the same time we store enormous amounts of fresh water in lakes. However, the ground compacted, down to below the level of groundwater. Part of the Netherlands now lies below sea level: if the sea were left to its own devices many polders would flood in no time at all. That is why, besides the dunes, we have fourteen thousand kilometres of dike to protect us against the water of the sea and the big rivers.

The big rivers do not freeze over quickly, but ditches, canals, lakes and waterways are regularly covered with ice. On these frozen watercourses and reservoirs a Dutchman could skate a distance equal to several times around the world. Many historians see skating as the ultimate victory in the battle against the water. But is that true?

The problem with a scientific explanation like this is that it's not an answer you'd be likely to get if you asked a skater why he skates. So on a conscious level this argument doesn't hold good. As for what might be going on at a subconscious level, I gladly leave that to the experts. I personally have a problem with this theory. It doesn't appeal to me as a skater. And that goes for many skaters.



Elfstedentocht
(11 Town Tour)
passing through Sloten,
Friesland, 1985.
Photo by Vincent Mentzel.

Why do we skate?

The first answer to this question has already been implicitly given: we skate because we can. That's not only so in the Netherlands, but also in the Fens, as it was in London on the Thames in the 18th century. In Norway and Russia skating has also been very popular. In the first half of the last century the Norwegians always outclassed the Dutch on skates. But the problem in Scandinavia and Russia is that the ice is often covered with a thick layer of snow. In the Netherlands this is hardly ever the case: when we have ice in the winter, an east wind from Siberia brings a dry cold to the Netherlands. It seldom snows when it's freezing. And that's a necessary condition for skating long distances. The Dutch are crazy about long-distance skating. So geography and climate are ideal in the Netherlands. Still, our fight against the water, the resulting geography and the climate are not the reasons why we skate, but they do provide the conditions that make skating possible. The fight against the water is something most Dutch people are oblivious of. Like many other of the world's citizens we go to the office, the store, the factory, to earn a living and our knowledge of this daily 'battle' is small. And it is actually fought in silence by the district water boards. With great reluctance the Dutch pay their yearly taxes to them and only 20% of the eligible voters turn out for their elections. And that while this is one of the oldest forms of democracy in Western Europe: district water boards have been around since the 12th century. Counts of Holland, townspeople and farmers were forced to fight the water together. For anything done to the water system could have big consequences for the neighbours. But though the fight against the water is still going on in the Netherlands, that's something you don't talk about. So it's not a conclusive answer to the question of why we skate.



The competition skater

In the cold winter of 1740, mentioned earlier, we find the first descriptions of skating competitions. The contestants competed on a straight track about 150 metres long and the one who crossed the finish line first went on to the next round. These contests were organized by innkeepers and were a great success, for they drew thousands of spectators. It was during this winter, too, that Frisian skaters tried to skate round all eleven Frisian cities in one day. As proof that they had done so, they asked the local innkeeper for his signature. Both traditions still exist. The modern competition skater skates laps on a 400-metre oval track. This oval is a Norwegian invention that allows the skater to take in curves. For it is there that he builds up speed.

Top skaters can make a lot of money. The first skating millionaire was Rintje Ritsma in the 1990s. Several American speed skaters have accepted sponsorship from Dutch companies. This does not mean that talented young skaters are intent on becoming rich through their sport. Nor is winning competitions a daily preoccupation. Research shows that along with social factors – the friendly contact with other skaters – their main motivation is the desire to improve their technique. Skating is after all a technically complicated sport, which you only really master after four seasons. ‘One day I want to skate a perfect curve,’ a young skater said: a telling example of why he and his like are on the ice every day. Complete mastery of the technique, then, as far as that’s ever possible in skating.

The recreational skater

Among recreational skaters you also find people who like to notch up as many kilometres as possible, biking in summer, skating in winter. Technically speaking, these are quite different sports. Skating is much more complicated than cycling, which is perhaps the reason why skaters cycle, but cyclists rarely take up skating. The high point of the season for the dedicated recreational skater is the Elfstedentocht, the 11 Town Tour mentioned earlier. A monster ride of 200 kilometres, only open to members. On this tour, which could be held only fifteen times during the last century, the skaters pass by all the Frisian cities. It is partly a competition and partly a non-competitive ride. Winners of the race are

certainly the greatest sporting heroes of the Netherlands. Everyone knows the names and faces of the skaters who have won since the Second World War. The 16,000 non-competitive participants are also heroes for a day, cheered on by hundreds of thousands of onlookers along the route. Crown Prince Willem Alexander completed the tour in 1986. Because this somehow reduced the heroic status of the others, some of them still maintain that the prince skated only half the course. But if you have trained for it and can start early, you can certainly complete it in 15 hours. Even a prince.

Why does the recreational skater skate?

Most recreational skaters think that a distance of 30 kilometres is more than enough. When there are 8 centimetres of ice, tours are organized at many places in the country. They lead to places the skaters normally don't get to or can't get to otherwise. Beautiful, quiet pockets of nature where you only hear the swishing of your skates. All nature is hushed. The hoar-frost on the trees and bushes makes the Netherlands look like a Christmas card. Many skaters seek the silence, others the hustle and bustle. Although the Netherlands is already a fairly egalitarian society, all class differences vanish totally on the ice. The ice not only thaws out the Dutch, it also creates a sense of community. Making contact with others is never easier than when you're on skates. People are helpful and many skaters have found the love of their life on the ice. Not too long ago it was a gentleman's moral duty to 'take on' a lady who was alone on the ice. It meant that the gentleman skated in front of the lady to keep her out of the wind. She would lay her right hand on one of the hands he had put on his back. They would skate a fair distance like that. Today the Dutch are no longer that gallant. And besides, nowadays the ladies are quite capable of managing by themselves on the ice.

Why do I skate?

In this article we have looked at the motivation for skating from different perspectives: spatial (the geographical possibility), economic (money), social (the atmosphere), natural (the hushed landscape). There remains the personal perspective, or rather the question: 'why do I skate?'

I skate because it feels almost like flying. On skates there is only 1.1 millimetres of steel connecting you to the earth. You give a little push with your left leg and already the right skate has glided several metres across the smooth surface of the ice. Top skaters can reach a speed of 60 kilometres per hour, recreational ones about 30. Skating is a form of floating, it is flying without wings. Skating sets you free. ■

Translated by Pleuke Boyce