

Interview with Honoree Class of 1963 and ISHOF Honoree 2008

## Herman Willemse

Ned Denison

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The Flying Dutchman, legend, champion, author of two books, gentlemen and the first President of the World Professional Marathon Swimming Federation (predecessor of the IMSHOF).



**About the early swimming days, the move to open water and the open water swimming community in the early days...**

(Herman, pointing in this old photograph.)

Herman earned 13 Dutch championships in the pool — 100 to 1,500 meters. With no indoor pool in his hometown, winter training involved an hour bicycle trip there and back.

Going for the English Channel meant a bit of “fun” and swimming in the local canal: 2 and 3 hours on the weekdays and 5 hours on Sundays.

Herman thought the canal made more sense as well because he wanted to practice “fat burning” which today’s swimmers don’t experience with their new foods.

He took second place in his first big marathon: The Billy Butlin Cross Channel International Swim in 12 hours and 49 minutes.

Argentina's [Alfredo Camarero \(IMSHOF Inductee 1978\)](#) won in 11 hours 43 minutes and Greta Andersen (IMSHOF Inductee 1964) failed to win her third in a row in 15 hours and 25 minutes. Herman lost 6kg on the swim – “fat burning” in action!

**Famous people along the way...**Johnny Weissmuller (IMSHOF Inductee but best known as Tarzan), Frank Sinatra, Bill Haley plus Jayne Mansfield (more on her later!)

After retiring from swimming, Herman took up sailing, met his wife and they sailed around the world.

**About the swims...**Herman loved the water in Atlantic City in the water. He won five years in a row 1960-1964 – with top prize money. In one race he won by 90 minutes and Jayne Mansfield was the podium presenter!

He still remembers the adventure of that English Channel swim and prefers to forget one other swim that he described as the worst organized ever. Herman travelled the world.

**Olympic 10k marathon swim now – but not then...**Herman was the top marathon swimmer of his era with 17 wins. He watched the Olympics....but would not be drawn to speculating about his chances in 1960 – IF..... Herman remains surprised that the the top marathoners are in a pack like the Tour de France with a mad sprint finish – he swam alone (mostly in front!).

**Preparing and eating/drinking during the swims...**Winter found Herman back on the bicycle several times a week to the pool, then starting in March back in the canal. At the peak of his career it was twice a day in the open water. He swam straight for the first 2 hours of every race then ate hourly: tea with glucose and a high protein baby food

**Today...**Herman is 82 years old and his health does not permit any more swimming. Not only did Herman know Marty Sinn, (likewise IMSHOF 1963 Honouree), but she beat him in Toronto on a day when the water temperature started at 12c and dropped to 9c.

He passes along his regards to her and he laughed when I said I would issue a challenge from him... *“Marty, I want a rematch— any place, anytime, any distance!”*