

## FINALS HOCKEY IN THE NETHERLANDS

by Troy Elder

At the end of a tough 24 match 2004/2005 home and away competition. Four teams were left to fight out for 'KNHB Rabobank Hoofdklasse Kampioen'. (National Champions of Holland)

1. Blomendaal (Teun de Nooijer, Karel Klaver, Jamie Dwyer)
2. Oranje / Zwart (Jay Stacey, Rob Reckers, myself)
3. SCHC (Floris Evers, Eric Jazet, Robbie Derikx, Roderick Weusthof)
4. Amsterdam (Timme Hoyng, Jesse Mahieu, Paul-Frederik van Esseveldt)



### A QUICK OVERVIEW

*The finals or 'Play-offs' as referred to in Holland, consist of two 'best of three series', 1 v 4 and 2 v 3. The respective winners progress to the final play-offs where again a 'best of three series' is played. The first game of each of the series is played at the lower ranked team's home ground (away) and the second and third, if needed, is played at the higher ranked teams home ground, giving them a home game advantage.*



Our first Play-Off (semi-final), (Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May) was played in Utrecht against SCHC about an hour and a half's drive from home (Eindhoven). For the first time in the club's history we won our first away game! It was exciting to say the least with the several thousand spectators armed with flares, hooters or anything that made noise, witnessing a close game with the deciding goal scored in the final minute.



This win was a confidence booster for our team as we knew the next two games were going to be in front of our home crowd and we only had to win one more to make the finals.

Our second game (Wed 25<sup>th</sup> May) came quickly and drew an even larger crowd with a similar atmosphere. We played much better as a team and easily accounted for SCHC. Although the game was not as thrilling as the first the excitement came from the knowledge we had now made the finals...there was no need for the third game! A thankful relief to both players and supporters.

Our opponents for the final play-offs were to be Blomendaal who had battled it out with Amsterdam. Blomendaal also won their first two encounters, both games going to extra time 'golden goal'.

So it was settled, we were to meet the same club who ended the hopes of O/Z last year in the Play-Offs.

This is where I thought I would give you a day by day account of the week that was.

### FRIDAY.

Today I stuck with a normal breakfast 1 glass of juice, 1 bowl of cereal, 2 pieces of toast with honey and a 500ml protein shake consisting of; no fat yogurt, milk, 1 banana, 2.5 tablespoons protein powder and a little honey to take the bitter taste of the banana out once it is blended.

While I let it all settle in the belly I do some emails on the couch in front of the TV. The time always gets away from me, it's 11.00am and I need to make my way down to the markets. Each suburb has a weekly market where local produce such as fruit, veg, meats, fish and some great tasting cheese are sold. I am really getting into the cheeses! We like to buy our groceries from here because we have found it to be a bit cheaper than the normal super market, there is more choice and it also gives us a chance to practice some Dutch. I only know the very basics but some people working at the market stalls speak little English so I'm forced to learn more. My very rough pronunciations and arm movements attract a few weird looks! I think I do more sign language than anything. All in all it is a bit of fun and it fills in the day until lunch.

I like to have a late lunch at home on Fridays as we have our team dinner after training at around 11.00pm. Everyone is so hungry by then. So without doing anything at all really I have used up most of the day. In the afternoon I usually just ring one of the young guys in the team to see if they are at home and go and visit them until Hannah needs to be picked up from work. Just to kill an hour or two.

Once Hannah and I have returned home we do some Pilates work together which I found to be very challenging and beneficial. It takes about 55mins and you get a fair sweat up. After this work out I have a little rest and get ready for training at 7.00pm. We don't start till 7.30pm but I like to get there early to do some skills work, goal shooting, dribbling etc. things you can do by yourself. Before the start of practice we discuss what the practice will entail and anything exciting or gossip, today there was talk of a new competition starting up, a 'Europe League' like the 'Champions League' in Soccer, but it might take a few years to get off the ground. They are hopeful.

Today in practice we refined our midline press and counter attack over 50m and worked on our defensive circle positioning, specifically for the Blomendaal attack we will be facing (generally we do this for each team we play). Then we broke into two groups for the next 30 min, one end is just defensive work the other end is goal shooting. Most times I organize the scoring exercises and help with technique (part of my contract). I try to stay at this end as much as possible but I still like to do the defensive work to keep my game balanced. Next was 30 min of Penalty Corner work. Luckily I have had the chance to work with one of the most renowned coaches in this area because he is the assistant trainer at the club. Finally, at the end of training we play a 20 min small game to decide who has to collect all the balls from the field and do the washing up after dinner. As you can imagine these games can get pretty competitive!!

After dinner I am ready to head off home to hit the pillow. Most times a lot of the guys head into the pubs in town for a few, but because of the finals and practice match tomorrow, everyone heads home to bed.

## **SATURDAY**

Normally I always get up late on Saturday because of the late training on Friday's but as I mentioned we have a practice match at 2.00pm against Breda who also need practice because they have to play Relegation matches. They finished 3<sup>rd</sup> last and have to play the second placed team in the division below in the best of three to stay up in the Hoodfklasse. The game was ok and we had the chance to work on a few things we wanted to use in Wednesday's semi-final without having the pressure of having to win. The small crowd was unusually rowdy at Breda because it happened to coincide with the club's annual hockey tournament. These tournaments are a

common fixture to many clubs and are social in nature. Mixed teams play over the weekend with many sleeping out in tents at the field. More drinking than anything else is done, it's a great atmosphere. We leave Breda with a win and head off for a team bonding session at a golf course, to play a round of 'twilight golf'. Although relaxing it was one of the longest days this week.

## **SUNDAY**

On the days I don't have any hockey or work commitments we take the chance to see some of Europe. We are in the south of Holland so we can be in Belgium or Germany within 40 min. We just pick a place of interest and have a casual afternoon. (Just a quick note about travel in Europe, Sunday is not a very good day for travel; most things are shut the same goes for Monday mornings till lunch time)

## **MONDAY**

This is normally a part rest day because of Sunday night's post game party but today I substituted my normal weights session for an active recovery on the bike. After many attempts and different techniques to solve an enduring injury problem I decided to cease my weights programme to concentrate on core stability and active recovery to see if it eases it in any way. I am 6 weeks into it and have enjoyed great success which is a relief. I also take the chance to see the physio just to get a bit of a 'loosen up' for Wednesday.

## **TUESDAY**

Today starts like the others, pretty casual, but today I have to put my real profession (Plumbing) to use as one of the guys in the team is renovating his house and regularly asks for advice and help. Today he asked me to water proof his shower... again! His first attempt wasn't that successful.

Tonight's training is the last before the first final. We do a relatively light session with some speed technique work, running with the ball over 25 m uncontested with a goal shot included. We also do a ball possession game where there are 2 teams in a confined space with no goals. The idea is for your team to keep possession as long as possible and halfway through we make it more difficult allowing only 3 touches before having to pass. This I found good for my vision, movement and preparation before getting the ball. You don't get a chance to dwell on the ball with someone within tackling distance at all times. You have to be prepared early. To finish we do some Penalty Shot practice before heading inside to do some Sportscode work (video work on the computer). We normally do this for each team we play, to go over target points and strategies, tonight however was a little more detailed.

I head home to get a good night sleep for the big game.

## **WEDNESDAY**

The day has arrived. I am up reasonably early and decide to go for a walk before breakfast (we are out of milk that is the main reason for the walk). I wish the final was at midday so I don't have to wait so long to play. I think an 8.30 pm game is the hardest to play for this very reason.

We have arranged for everyone to meet at the manager's house for dinner at 4.30pm, he is a great cook so when we are invited to eat there, you can expect that everyone will be on time. Although we always enjoy sharing a

meal the main reason for gathering is to have a team meeting before driving or riding to our ground for the much anticipated game.

To get to the change room we work our way through the growing crowd, about one thousand people are there by the time we arrive and you can feel the tension and excitement. Our club has a history of under achieving in finals and the pressure is huge but we are confident if we can do what we have set ourselves to do. By the time we have made our way out to the field for the warm-up the crowd has swelled to about 6000 people. Horns, bands and any noise maker they have is put to use in the warm-up.

The game was a very tight and torrid affair with no team really dominating the game. Blomendaal scored first then we equalized within 5 min. The score did not change for the remainder of the game. An opportunistic diving shot from a PC rebound in extra time ended the semi final Play-Off. We had done it. To win the first game of the final 'Play – Off' was a first for the club so the praise was free flowing as was the beer. To give ourselves the best opportunity to win this thing we had to squash the urge to celebrate allowing ourselves only a few beers before heading home early.



#### **THURSDAY**

What a great day, no commitments and great weather for a change. I gave a few of the boys a call to see if they wanted to head down to the pool for the afternoon and have a BBQ dinner. In all there were 8 of us who enjoyed a relaxing afternoon finishing with a good old BBQ.

#### **FRIDAY**

Today I thought I should get a massage and have some work done by the physio in preparation before the weekend ahead. It ended up being a very busy day because we got a call 1hr before we were due to have practice to say that plans have changed and we are going travel up to Haarlem (a town just outside Amsterdam) after practice. This means we have to pack for a possible 2 nights stay, but hoping for only the one. This causes all sorts of mayhem, people need to get lifts to the game as they normally ride and have no car, people are at work and have no time to get ready. This reflects in our practice, it was ordinary. We finish a little earlier than normal so we can get up there at a reasonable hour. There was some consolation, we had the luxury coach to travel in and the manager had made some spaghetti bolognaise and some sandwiches to eat on the way. I didn't mind that we were traveling the 2hrs tonight instead of in the morning, if we didn't it would have meant being on the bus in the morning by 8.30am. By the time we got to the motel it was fairly late one but we get to have a few extra hours sleep in the morning to make up for it.

#### **SATURDAY**

Game day has arrived.

We are woken at 8.00am to go for a walk before having some breakfast. I love the fact we don't have to make our own breakfast it is all done, just have to serve your self. I have some juice, toast with scrambled eggs and Dutch pancakes. Have some if you are ever in Holland, well worth it.

Back to the room after breakfast to get packed to leave but not before having the team meeting to remind and reinforce the team plan for the day. Our bus trip is only 30 min, and everyone is anxious to play. Unlike most other clubs in Holland Blomendaal is typically not renowned for huge crowds or parties after the game so you could imagine our surprise when greeted by temporary stands, music and a general carnival atmosphere. When our supporters arrived (all 3 bus loads of them) they were just as astounded.

As well as being the final this match is very much like a city / country clash. My team is what the northern teams refer to as 'the farmers from the south'. They don't like to be beaten by the farmers, so it is on, on and off the field.

Like the final on Wednesday it is a very close contest with no team taking real control of the game. Each team plays some great passages of hockey at a fast tempo but again regular time ends in an equal score line, so off to sudden death golden goal once again.

Despite both teams best efforts it remains a deadlock and now it is straight to a penalty shootout. In my opinion the worst way to decide a final is to win or lose in this manner. I would much rather continue playing till someone finally scores to win the game with your whole team on the field, opposed to having 3/4 of a team not take part in the final outcome of the game. I personally would like to see this aspect of the game change as there is way too much time and effort put into preparing and competing to finally get there and win or lose in this way. We play a team sport and should finish that way, after all these are the last games of the year, so time should not be an issue. Sorry enough of the soapbox.... The shootout goes ahead and the tension is high the keepers do really well and save four strokes between them forcing the game into golden goal penalty shootout. It takes our 3<sup>rd</sup> penalty taker to miss to end the game, and for us to rue our chances whilst Blomendaal celebrate their success. It now stands at one game all.

We gather ourselves quickly knowing we have to back up tomorrow at the same time in the same place for the third and deciding game. We head off in our bus back to the motel.

The night was fairly dull. All we did was have dinner together in the restaurant before another quick meeting to go through some of the finer points that were brought up from our loss. We didn't change the way we wanted to play, we thought that we were close enough to winning today that if we just all played better as a team we would get the outcome we wanted. Straight from the meeting it was time for bed after a big day at the office, lots of emotion and a very physically demanding game, need to get all the rest I can get.

## **Sunday**

Up early again for the same schedule as yesterday but hoping to have a better outcome at around 3.00pm. We arrive at the ground anticipating the same sort of crowd and atmosphere though it would seem there is a few more people around and they are a lot more vocal. We get prepared to do battle again, and a battle it was, even more physically demanding than yesterday.

Again the first half was a scoreless one however it felt as if we were getting the better of the play. Finally we were able to convert at the middle of the second half. We put a lot of pressure on them all over the field and we scored

3 goals in a matter of 10 min. This was enough to break their confidence. We held this lead until about 3 min from the end when a lapse in our defense allowed an easy goal for the home team.

When the final whistle sounded everyone went crazy, people from the crowd were all over the field, the team was running around more than what they had in the game. There was champagne bottles being sprayed and we, in the end, had won for the first time in the history of the club.

After the formalities we had to make our way back to our club house (2 hours south of where we were) for one huge party. Just to give you an idea of the mood the people were in. The 2 hours we were in transit around 4,000 people already at the club had guzzled their way through 2,000L of beer. They had to get the beer truck back to top up as we had not yet arrived and there was 5hrs of party still to go. The official tally of beer drunk or thrown was an enormous 4500L. To say the least, all there had a great time, myself included.

The 'official stuff' was not over until the next day. The Major of Eindhoven had invited us to be officially celebrated and announced to the city for our accomplishments. Basically more free drinks and food, just what you need the day after.

To round up, I had a great experience, winning making it that much more enjoyable. I would encourage people to go and experience what I have had the opportunity to do in the last 4 years. I have learnt a great deal not only in hockey but in life skills gained. I wish I had done it earlier in my career because I have no doubt it would have accelerated my hockey development. I hope this has given you a reasonable insight in to my hockey experiences in Holland and hope that some of you get to enjoy the same for yourself one day.

Bye for now.

Woody (Troy Elder)

