

VU Amsterdam objects and their stories:

2005–2010 The Sports Centre and VU Fit at Work



[Photograph: MFFI/AZVU, Sport Centre and café at the Uilenstede Campus. 1970, Collection HDC | Protestant Heritage, VU Amsterdam]

The VU Sports Centre has been located on the Uilenstede student campus since 1966. Over time, it has been transformed from a simple sports hall into a complex with various halls and studios for many different sports. In addition, a fitness centre aimed primarily at staff was opened on the campus in 2006. The same year saw the launch of the VU Fit at Work programme, a free exercise/sports programme for staff. Sport is now an integral part of university life. University historian Ab Flipse writes about the history of sports, and director of the VU Sports Centre Arie Koops discusses the recent past, the present and the future.

Sport in the history of VU Amsterdam

By Ab Flipse

In the early days of VU Amsterdam, there were no organised student sports, and the facilities were limited to a few pieces of gymnastics equipment in the garden of the university building on Keizersgracht. That changed after World War II. In September 1945, a 'Commission for the Promotion of the Cultural and Physical Interests of Students at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam' (COSCOVU) was established – the forerunner of the later Civitasraad ('Civitas Council'). In the interwar and post-WWII periods, universities emphatically wanted to be more than institutions for the pursuit of scholarship and professional training. Universities wanted to focus on the broad education of their students. Studying had to go hand in hand with personality building, and students had to feel like they were part of the academic community. Both physical and cultural education could contribute to this, based on the idea that one should 'develop body and mind equally'. One of the initiatives of COSCOVU was the establishment of the [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam General Sports Association](#) (ASVU) on 15 November 1945.

Initially, the ASVU was closely linked to the traditional student fraternities and sororities, and events such as tournaments were organised between student society teams. As time went on, however, the association became more and more independent, came under the leadership of a 'sports leader' and developed all kinds of activities. From 1953, the ASVU organised annual sports days in May, with individual and team sports, to promote sports among VU Amsterdam students. Sports activities during this period were spread across a large number of locations in the city, such as the Cor du Buy sports centre, the Apollohal, the AMVJ sports fields in the Amsterdamse Bos and Sporthal Zuid ('the old Rai'). By the mid-1950s, the number of association members had grown to nearly 300. Members could choose from 13 different sports: gymnastics, volleyball, basketball, field hockey, football, athletics, table tennis, swimming, rowing, tennis, judo, fencing and chess.

In the same period, VU Amsterdam developed plans for the construction of a large student centre – the later [Uilenstede](#) in Amstelveen – and asked that attention be paid to sports facilities. The student centre was built to a design by architect [Leo de Jonge](#). On 12 October 1966, Minister [J.A. Diepenhorst](#) officially opened eight new VU Amsterdam buildings. The brochure published on the occasion of the opening mentioned 'a sports hall and some rooms for gymnastics, judo, fencing, table tennis, a canteen, etc.' The newspaper *Trouw* devoted a large article to the new VU Amsterdam buildings and spoke of 'a magnificent sports hall'. From then on, most ASVU activities took place in the sports centre.

The ASVU's membership had by now grown to 1,400. Only 10 years later, 3,100 students were using its facilities. More and more students would play sports over the years, necessitating the first major renovation of the sports centre in 2004. In 2016, the sports centre was again [renovated](#) to double the number of square metres. A fitness centre aimed primarily at staff had already been opened on the campus in 2006, in the new OZW building. The same year saw the launch of the [VU Fit at Work](#) programme, a free exercise/sports programme for staff.

Sport at VU Amsterdam in the present and future

By Arie Koops

In 2021, the image of the gymnastics equipment in the garden from VU Amsterdam's early days has gained new relevance. With the coronavirus lockdown, outdoor sports are more topical than ever. More than 150 students, staff members and local residents currently use the 'fitness garden' at the sports centre on a daily basis.

However, this number is in stark contrast to the hundreds to thousands of visitors per day that the [sports centre](#) welcomed in 2019. After the extensive renovation in 2017, the number of visitors has grown rapidly. They can play a range of over 30 different sports. The majority of visitors are active in the ultra-modern gymnasium and the many different types of aerobics classes in the three studios. The indoor football and indoor hockey competitions are also popular. In addition to buying a season ticket, it is also possible to play sports through a student sports society: volleyball, tennis, rowing, skating and cycling.

In the future, the sports centre wants to continue to play a central role for all students, staff and local residents when it comes to sport and exercise, based on the conviction that this contributes to physical, mental and social well-being. Based on expected trends, a more varied sports offer will be developed in the coming years. In view of the overflowing halls in the year 2019, the increase in the number of Dutch and international students and further growth of the Uilenstede student campus, further expansion is also desirable.

In addition to these trends, the sports centre will need to respond to developments such as a hybrid offer (physical and online) and to the experience during and around sports, including entert(r)ainment and the organisation of events. The sports offer can be expanded by constructing padel courts that can be used for multiple purposes, facilitating mind sports, setting up e-sports facilities or constructing facilities for beach volleyball on the Uilenstede campus. The many questions concerning healthy lifestyle and nutrition will also be addressed, seeking the right balance between perspiration and relaxation.

From its origins in 1966, through steady expansion and rapid growth, particularly in the last decade, the VU Sports Centre can proudly celebrate its 55th anniversary in October 2021.

Arie Koops is director of the VU Sports Centre and former national team coach and technical director of the Royal Dutch Skating Federation (KNSB). Ab Flipse is a university historian at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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