

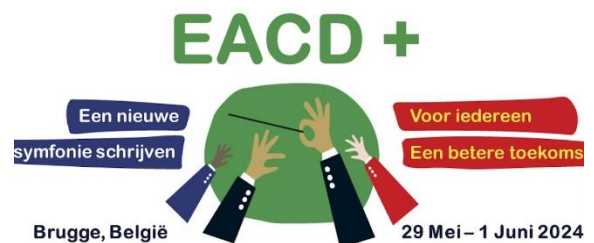
“Belgian CP Football Team Shines Bright at ‘the Para-voetbaldagen’”

A report from two inspiring days in Zeist (The Netherlands)

May 24-25, 2025



As a new national CP football team, Belgium had the honor of participating in ‘the **Para-voetbaldagen**’ in Zeist (Netherlands) during the weekend of **May 24–25, 2025**. A weekend full of inclusion, friendship, and sportsmanship. With this report, we would like to inform you about the content and impact of their participation.



Introduction to 'the Para-voetbaldagen'

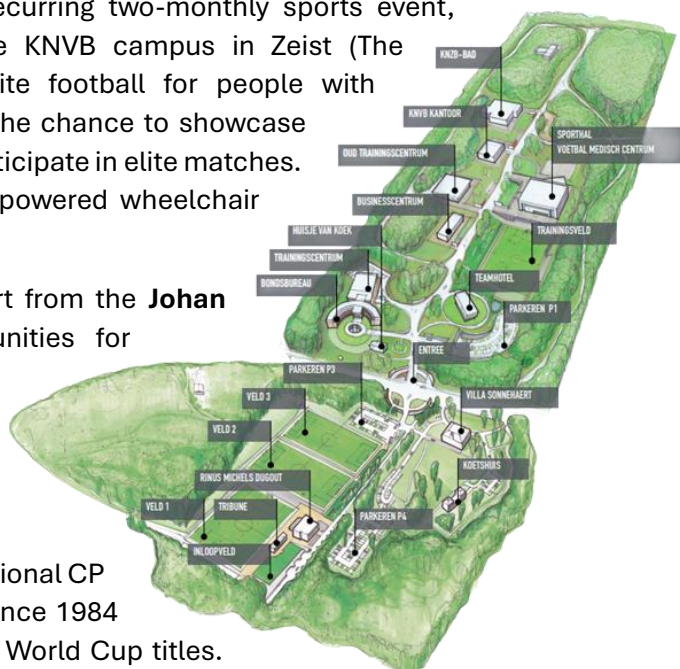
General

'The Para-voetbaldagen' or 'Para-footballdays' is a recurring two-monthly sports event, organized by the Dutch Football Association at the KNVB campus in Zeist (The Netherlands). The event is aimed at promoting elite football for people with disabilities. These days offer players with disabilities the chance to showcase their talents, train under professional guidance, and participate in elite matches. Focus areas include **CP football**, amputee football, powered wheelchair football, frame football and blind football.

The Para-footballdays are made possible with support from the **Johan Cruyff Foundation**, that promotes sports opportunities for children and young people with disabilities.

One time a year these Para-footballdays are combined with 'Talent Days', where new players can present themselves and can be selected for the national teams.

The **KNVB campus in Zeist** is the home of the Dutch national CP football teams. The national CP football teams exist since 1984 and boast a rich history of Paralympic, European, and World Cup titles. According to the **ranking** of International Federation of CP-Football (**IFCPF**), the Dutch men's team shares 4th place with England, behind Ukraine, Iran, and Brazil. While the women's team takes up the 6th place worldwide.



KNVB campus, including sports hall, business center, football fields,...

Participation of the Red Penguins

After a first international match against the Dutch CP-team at the **EACD+ Sports Festival in Bruges** on **June 1st, 2024**, the Belgian national CP football team, the Red Penguins, were invited for a rematch during the **Para-footballdays** on **May 24–25, 2025**.

For both the Dutch and Belgian national team, the organisation of such international matches offers great advantages for the football players individually, but also on a team level. Such as:

- Athletic and functional development through high-level training and competition
- Strengthening team spirit: social interaction, collaboration and leadership abilities
- A sense of connection and inclusion at national and international levels

On an organizational level, for Belgium specifically, these matches create the opportunity to learn from the Netherlands on how to further promote inclusive sports and CP-football in Belgium.



The CP-football team of Belgium and the Netherlands during the Para-voetbaldagen, while bringing their National



Event report

Day 1 – Saturday, May 24 2025

The Red Penguins departed from various locations in Belgium to Zeist. For all players, it was their first international CP-football experience, bringing both excitement and nervousness.

Upon arrival, the team received a warm welcome, an introduction to CP Netherlands' structure and the weekends' event schedule. The players got to watch a live international match between CP Netherlands and England, observing strategies and gameplay closely. Additionally, we gained valuable insights from CP Netherlands' social media approach.

The KNVB campus impressed with its vast facilities, including pitches, training centers, locker rooms, sports halls, and gyms. Overall, accessibility was well-managed. The absence of outdoor handrails presented some challenges, which were met with resilience and teamwork, as players supported one another throughout.

After a packed lunch, the team began their training session — in pouring rain. Despite this, the Red Penguins showed great determination and focus. Additional assistance was needed for putting on socks and braces.



The first training in pouring rain, but with a lot of cheerful faces.



Dinner was enjoyed at the central training center, with a nutritious buffet. Coaches helped with serving and preparing meals. The evening included a tour of the training center — a dream coming true for many. A highlight was seeing the historic 1988 European Championship trophy of The Dutch National team.

Xander very happy to see the trophy won by The Netherlands in 1988 in real life.

Overnight stay was at **Hotel Woudschoten**, right next to the campus. Although reachable by car, the unpaved path between the hotel and campus was not accessible for all players. The hotel was wheelchair-accessible, but room space was somewhat limited. Still, the team adapted well.

The evening ended with a shared drink, tactical discussion, and a card game. Players were focused, excited, and ready for their best performance the next day.



Tactical discussion at Hotel Woudschoten.



Day 2 – Sunday, May 25 2025

The day started early with a diverse and energizing breakfast buffet. The Red Penguins' first team kicked off the tournament with a match against the Dutch U18 CP team. Although the final score was 3-1 in favor of the Netherlands, the Red Penguins made a remarkable impression. Compared to last year's 27-0 result, their performance showed tremendous progress – in dedication, understanding of the game, and teamwork.



Pictures of our Belgian Red Penguins in action against the Dutch under 18 CP-team.

A key difference between both teams: The Netherlands selects players using the **Miminal Impairment Criteria (MIC)**, resulting in a more competitive team composition. All of their footballers are also active within the regular football competition, next to their participation in the national CP-team. In contrast, Belgium currently does not select players based on their motor abilities and prioritizes **inclusion, team spirit and fun**.

The second team — consisting of younger or less experienced players — played against the **Dutch national women's CP team**. The final score was secondary to the joy, pride, and sportsmanship both teams displayed.



Pictures of our Belgian Red Penguins in action against the Dutch national women's CP-team. The first picture shows a Belgian team member with more severe motor impairments being included in the team by giving the kick-off of the game.

In between matches, our team observed the **Talent Days**, where young CP players from The Netherlands showed their skills to become part of the national team. This was a source of inspiration and motivation for the Belgian players and organization.

The Red Penguins returned home with full hearts and minds, energized and dreaming of another international experience in 2026!



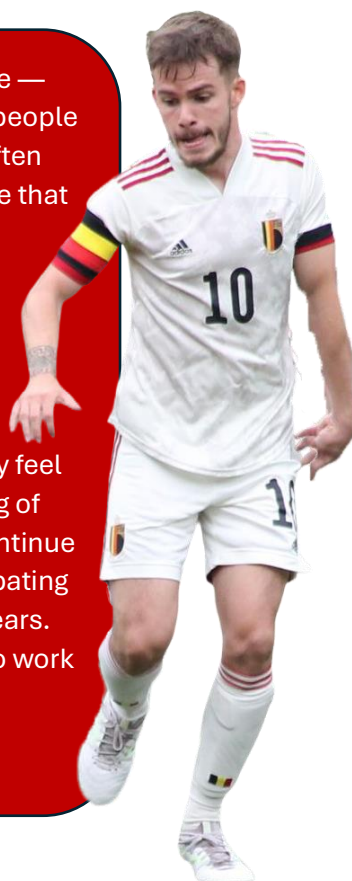
Some additional impression photos. During the match day, the sun even came out to support for our teams!



Testimonials

“This weekend was indescribably beautiful for me — an experience that feels like a dream. For young people with cerebral palsy, playing for a national team often seems unthinkable, and yet we were able to make that dream come true, even if just for a moment. As captain, I feel incredibly proud to see how far our players have come: from never having played an official match to keeping up with the fourth-best team in the world. This is so much more than football; it’s about building a safe and close-knit community where young people with CP can truly feel at home. And that may be the most valuable thing of all. It would be absolutely amazing if we could continue to grow this way, with the ultimate goal of participating in a European or World Championship in a few years. That dream is alive — and together, we’re going to work incredibly hard to make it happen.”

- Team Captain, Jordy (24 years old) -



“A Dream Coming True...”

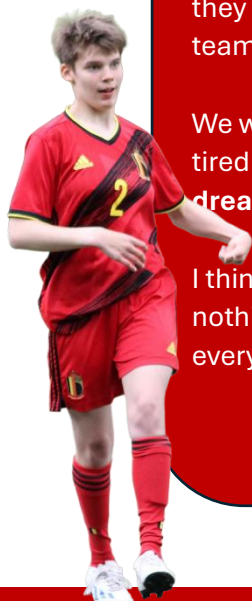
The weekend of the Para-football days in Zeist was anything but an ordinary weekend for Feline. Together with the Red Pinguins, she took part in this incredible event dedicated entirely to inclusion and the joy of sport. One moment stood out above all the rest: the special match against the women’s CP team. She had been looking forward to it for weeks.

For Féline, playing against this team was truly special — they showed her that anything is possible when you truly believe in yourself. With a big smile on her face, she gave it her all. Every pass, every sprint, every chance on a goal was an experience she will never forget. You could see how much joy they were all having, how united they were, how completely immersed they were in the game as one team.

We were still hearing her in-depth analysis of the match late into the evening. And on the drive home, tired but fulfilled, she said: **“Mom, see? You always have to keep dreaming — because today, a dream came true.”**

I think that says it all... Seeing her enjoy this so deeply and hearing those words filled my heart with nothing but warmth and gratitude — for the organizers, the coaches, the staff, the volunteers, everyone who made this magical day possible.

- Mom of football player, Féline -



“As a father of a son with cerebral palsy, every milestone he reaches fills me with pride. Helping him achieve his dreams isn’t just natural — it’s essential.

That same belief drives me in my role as CP football trainer and member of the working group for CP-football in Flanders: to give young people the opportunities they deserve to live a fulfilling life and chase their dreams. We support every step of their journey and do everything we can to help make those dreams a reality.”

- Occupational therapist and father of a footballer, Filip -



“What a weekend! What a team spirit! For us ‘the Red Penguins adventure’ started last year. We helped organizing the EACD+ sports festival, a fantastic sports day that ended with the very first international match for our Red Penguins. After that, we weren’t closely involved with the Belgian national CP-team.... until the question came if we would like to join their trip to Zeist for a rematch?

Although Ellen and I don’t know much (or anything 😊) about football rules and regulations, we immediately said yes. We were there to support the players with daily routines and make sure they had healthy, nourishing meals and snacks - but in the end, we witnessed something much bigger.

The team spirit among these young footballers was unreal. You could feel the energy, the pride and the excitement throughout the entire weekend! And it wasn’t just about football either. On an organizational level, talks are ongoing with the KNVB, Nestlé, Voetbal Vlaanderen, and even the Belgian federation. It felt like a next important step helping the Red Penguins grow - both personally and as an organization.

Huge shoutout to EACD+ for the financial support and to everyone who helped to organize this amazing weekend. Taking a group of children and young people with disabilities abroad takes some extra logistics, but everyone supported each other making it go incredibly smoothly.

We’re just super proud to be part of this journey. And honestly? We can’t wait to see where it goes next and how we can further support these youngster (i.e., run social media account, obtain sponsorship,...)”

- Pediatric physiotherapists, Lize & Ellen -



Conclusion

THE PARA-FOOTBALL DAYS: A CLEAR DEMONSTRATION OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT

The Para-Football Days powerfully demonstrated how access to the right support can unlock possibilities far beyond what is typically available. The Para-Football Days showed possibility for giving access not only to sport, but also to engage in high-performance training and competitive play — experiences that are often out of reach in traditional settings.

These days created meaningful, carefree moments in which disability faded into the background — where young people with cerebral palsy felt normal, included, and truly understood. More than just a sports initiative, the Para-Football Days inspired a powerful shift in mindset: from focusing on limitations to celebrating potential.

What the Para-Football Days fostered goes beyond the playing field:

- A strong sense of team spirit, solidarity, and belonging
- Increased self-confidence, independence, and deep, meaningful friendships
- Real-world leadership development, as participants take on roles, make decisions, and support peers
- Inspiration and international learning: as athletes and organization looked up to and learned from the culture and quality of GSport in other countries

THE RIGHT SUPPORT: WHAT'S NEEDED TO MAKE ORGANIZATION AND PARTICIPATION POSSIBLE

INFRASTRUCTURE

Accessible and wheelchair-friendly sports facilities, accommodations, and transport

PROFESSIONAL AND SUFFICIENT GUIDANCE

- On the field: Experienced coaches and experts in CP football
- Off the field: Support during meals, dressing, transfers, hygiene, and overnight stays
- Medical & therapeutic expertise:
 - Physiotherapists and occupational therapists
 - Medical staff familiar with the needs of participants with cerebral palsy

STRONG ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

- A dedicated and informed organizing team to coordinate logistics, safety, and programming
- Comprehensive communication strategies for participants, families, and support staff

HIDDEN COSTS

- Rental of specialized, wheelchair-accessible transportation
- Accommodations that meet accessibility criteria — often more expensive, scarce, or located far from venues
- Assistive devices and equipment adapted to individual needs
- Special dietary meals tailored to medical or motor restrictions
- Insurance coverage suited to higher-risk profiles
- Communication through social media

