

Always in control, Nycke Groot leads Netherlands to success

EHF EURO KEY PLAYERS: *Having improved every year since moving abroad at the age of 18, centre back Nycke Groot has become instrumental to the impressive rise of the Dutch women's national team*

After yet another strong performance by Nycke Groot at the 2016 Olympics in August, Dutch newspaper "Algemeen Dagblad" was looking for the right words to describe the 28-year-old centre back in the Dutch women's national team.

The paper made a comparison to football, calling Groot "the chief of the team, the number 10, the creative brain" on the court, "a mixture of Andres Iniesta and Paul Pogba. Because she is fast, strong, creative, determined, calm, and she has a control of the ball that comes close to magic."

Lyrical about handball

The Dutch are getting lyrical about handball after the women's national team won silver at the World Championship 2015 and placed fourth at their first Olympics.

And Groot certainly has played a major role in the recent 'Oranje' achievements – and she undoubtedly will do so again at the [EHF EURO 2016](#) in Sweden.

Also on the club level, Groot has put her stamp on last season. She won the national title and cup, and reached the Women's EHF FINAL4 in her first year with Hungarian side Györi Audi ETO KC.

Consistently playing on top level earned her a nomination for the IHF'S Handball Player of the Year in which she eventually ended up third behind winner Cristina Neagu and second placed Heidi Løke.

Her Dutch teammate at Györ, Yvette Broch, said "it's totally deserved that Nycke got nominated. She really is a world class player. I'm super proud of her."

Invaluable asset

But what exactly is it that makes Groot the dominant, outstanding player for the Netherlands?

Her roots have provided her with an invaluable asset. Groot, who has been called Nycke all her life though her real first name is Cornelia, grew up and learned to play handball in the northern part of the Noord-Holland province, a region generally known for its down-to-earth mentality.

A humble and polite character off the court, Groot carries her calmness onto the court.

She never seems to lose her head. Where the Dutch team mainly consists of young and hungry talents with their unavoidable ups and downs in the heat of a game, Groot shows consistency throughout.

In the Olympic quarter-final against hosts Brazil, Groot started with two blatantly bad passes. But she kept her composure. And neither was she put off when the opponent's physical defence went to the limits. Groot just stood up, went on, and led the Netherlands to an empathic 32:23 victory.

More extrovert and outspoken teammates, like Estavana Polman or goalkeeper Tess Wester, often grab the headlines in the media but Groot is the natural leader, a player who directs her team and has the ability to dictate the pace of play, which is key to the Dutch style of aggressive pressing.

Strong will and composure

But there is more to Groot's rise to the top. Having learned to play handball at two local clubs, Nycke joined SEW in Wognum as a 15-year-old and soon enjoyed her first European Cup experience.

Determined to further improve as a player, Groot didn't waste any time and she was just 18 when she moved to Denmark.

It was her strong will and composure in a foreign country that helped shape her personality and develop into a star player, while earning a degree in social education and mastering the Danish language to perfection along the way.

During five years with Team Tvis Holstebro and four with FC Midtjylland, Groot learned a complete set of technical and tactical handball skills.

She finds creative solutions in difficult playing situations and hardly makes wrong decisions. Her transfer to Györ last year just confirmed her status as an all-round international top player.

Team player 'pur sang'

Groot is one of only few members of the current Dutch team who did not visit the HandbalAcademie, the national training centre for upcoming talents.

"Most of the girls have done the HandbalAcademie but it is not a must," Netherlands coach Henk Groener, [who has just announced that he will step down after the EHF EURO](#), recently said. "Players like Nycke Groot have taken huge steps at their European clubs. If they come to the national team, it is my task to ensure a good atmosphere and that everyone is playing well together. I think we have done that pretty well lately."

Groot, who played her 100th game in the orange jersey in the team's Olympic opener against France, has an average of three goals per match for the Netherlands.

A team player 'pur sang', Groot's own game is not just about scoring. Providing an assist for a teammate gives her just as much satisfaction. Even more so after one her magical no-look-passes.