

Modern Issues in International Sports and Olympics Exhibiting

by Norman Jacobs

Imagine the surprise and frustration felt by a friend and fellow SPI member when he was recently penalized for including eight items in an international exhibit that the expert committee found to be “prohibited” and “abusive” (but not illegal). He had exhibited the same items in prior FIP international exhibitions without incurring any penalties, but this time he was not so fortunate. Most of the items in question were from African countries. In advising my friend, I could not provide him with written documentation that would explain clearly why this had occurred with these particular stamps. I had already talked about writing an article about criteria for showing modern issues in a thematic exhibit, but his experience pushed me to action.

In building a thematic exhibit for international competition, what do you need to accomplish? Ideally, you should have a compelling and coherent story, and tell that story well. At the same time, include unusual, interesting, and rare items that educate the viewer to the philatelic possibilities of the theme, and provide new philatelic ideas and discoveries.

Each item in an international philatelic exhibit must also fall into an accepted philatelic category according to the rules for exhibiting of the Federation Internationale de Philatelie (FIP). After all, in any contest or game, you have to play by the rules. This sounds straightforward, but let’s look more closely at what this means. Of course, forgeries are not exhibitable unless identified as such. Illegal stamps marketed by private individuals with no connection to the Postal Service of the issuing country are also not allowed. Fakes (real stamps which have been altered in some way) are not allowed unless identified as fakes. Cinderellas or labels produced with no attempt to pass them off as postage stamps are also not exhibitable. So far the rules are clear, but what about the stamps shown in Figure 1? This miniature sheet from Mozambique depicting tennis and table tennis appears to have been issued by the postal service, so it would be exhibitable, right? Now we get into

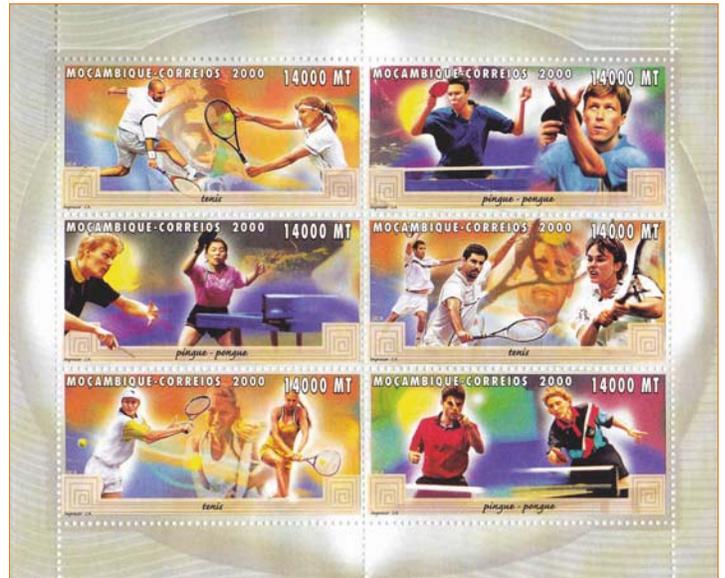


Figure 1

a murkier area, where the rules are harder to pin down, and where my friend may have stumbled. First, some background may help explain how the current situation developed. In April 1962, the *American Philatelist* (AP), the publication of the

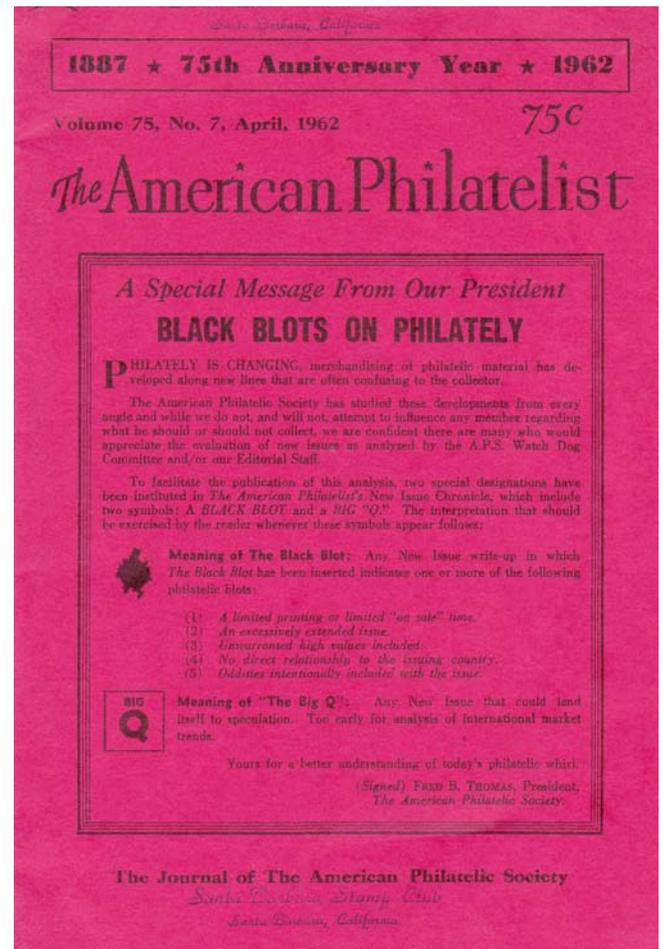


Figure 2



Figure 3

American Philatelic Society, introduced the “Black Blot,” a designation in the New Issues Chronicle which indicated a problematic new issue in the opinion of the APS Watchdog Committee and the Editorial Staff (Figure 2). The “blots” were given for limited printings or limited time on sale; excessively extended issues; unwarranted high values; no direct relationship to the issuing country; and oddities intentionally included with the issue. The Watchdog Committee called out specifically the Olympic Games new issues and the Malaria Eradication series of 1962. But even within that issue of the AP a conflicting message was given to readers, since the editor promised a complete checklist of malaria eradication issues at year’s end! Imagine if each country had followed this approach, with its own unique list of “blotted” stamps. Eventually the “blot” effort was abandoned.

In more recent times, the Universal Postal Union (UPU) has published circulars that identify illegal issues based on reports submitted by the postal service of the affected country. The UPU website only shows circulars from 2003 to the present, but circulars back to 1996 are available on FIP’s website. Since reporting is voluntary, the absence of a circular does not prove that the issue is legitimate. In 2002, the World Association for the Development

of Philately (WADP) and the UPU jointly established the WADP Numbering System (WNS) to provide a system for documenting and numbering new issues as submitted by the postal services of member organizations. However, some countries have elected not to participate, including Germany, Belgium, and Finland from the developed world, and many African nations. Moreover, the listings are often not up to date. They will not help a thematic collector decide whether a new issue is legitimate because of the lag time until the information is posted. More importantly for the exhibitor, the WNS numbers only started in 2002. Absence of a catalog listing might suggest a problem, but the criteria for listing in catalogs depend on the publisher, and may not reflect the FIP position. All of this leaves the exhibitor in limbo, looking to FIP for guidance.

Let’s go back to the Mozambique miniature sheet in Figure 1. On the FIP website, the UPU circulars from 1996-2003 do not include any related to Mozambique.

On the WNS website, the circulars from 2003-2015 include only one from Mozambique, about an illegal Bobby Fischer chess stamp. Starting in 2002, the WNS site lists 67 pages of legitimate issues from Mozambique. The sheet in question, from 2000, is listed in Scott. Mozambique’s stamp agent is Stamperija, but no further information about usage, quantities, or availability at post offices is included in their listings. So how should an exhibitor interpret this information (or lack of information!) for this issue that preceded the WNS initiative? I suggest that the only definitive data would be a UPU circular about the stamp.

Although I haven’t included the stamps from Figure 1 in my tennis exhibit, Figure 3 is a page from my exhibit that looks at the development of tennis in Africa, specifically in Mozambique. It includes a 1902 photographic postal stationery card from Companhia de Mocambique, showing elegantly dressed colonists playing lawn tennis. The 1991 Mozambique stamp showing an African woman hitting a backhand provides a metaphorical counterpoint to this scene, highlighting the transformation in sports participation in Africa as the twentieth century unfolded, and it is important that the later stamp be from the same geographic entity. The available UPU and WNS documents provide no help in deciding whether to include this 1991 stamp, since they do not include stamps prior to 1996 or 2003 respectively.

In reviewing FIP documents, I did find reference to a letter sent from FIP to postal administrations

after the Philadelphia Congress of 1976. The letter indicates four reasons why stamps would be rejected in exhibitions receiving FIP patronage:

- Stamps which are not placed in circulation by means of open sale at the great majority of postal counters and not sold at face value.
- Stamps whose sale, to an overwhelming degree, is through commercial agents who are not officials of the issuing country.
- Stamps which are offered to the public in the concurrent issues in the form of stamps, souvenir sheets or pages, perforate or imperforate, in part with limited issue quantities, even if there are differences in color.
- Stamps which are issued with surcharges that exceed 50% of face value. An exception is made for amounts which do not exceed the normal postage for a domestic letter, as long as the surcharge does not exceed the face value.

Although this letter was apparently sent to postal administrations affiliated with the UPU, these specific prohibitions have not been uniformly applied in international exhibitions, and may not have been communicated effectively to postal administrations that did not exist in 1976, nor to the current cadre of thematic exhibitors.

The current Special Regulations for the Evaluation of Thematic Exhibits at FIP Exhibitions (SREV) states in the Guidelines to “avoid speculative issues, which exploit the “fashion trends” in thematic philately,...with special reference to issues not following the code of ethics of the UPU.” No details are included to help guide the exhibitor.

The website of the Fight Against Fakes and Forgeries Commission of the FIP contains a detailed slide presentation by Richard Gratton from the Paris Planete Timbres symposium available (in French) at http://www.fipfakesforgeries.org/fip/?page_id=403. For those who prefer English, you can go to a summary on the Philatelic Webmasters Organization at <http://pwmo.org/illegals/14-fip-prohibited-issues.htm>.

This presentation provides a detailed look at the problem of abusive and illegal issues, and highlights some egregious examples, but doesn't include criteria which would allow an exhibitor to reliably determine if a particular stamp will be considered abusive by an expert committee at an international exhibition.

How would these prohibitions apply to the exhibiting of recent United States issues? Think about the Jenny, Harry Potter, the Patriotic Wave \$2 issue, and the Circus souvenir sheet. The Jenny \$2 stamp paid no particular rate, was accompanied by limited-edition proofs, and included 100 souvenir sheets of an intentional limited-edition error. These error sheets were randomly included in mail orders for the Jenny, sent to post offices with high-volume customer traffic, and given to three lucky customers of the USPS mail-order sales agency.

The Harry Potter booklet of 20 stamps depicted a British subject rather than an American one. And to create even more varieties, the United States Postal Service (USPS) sold a limited edition of 2,500 press sheets each containing six booklets of Harry Potter.

The \$2 Patriotic Wave stamp press sheets were sold by USPS for \$200 each, but in two varieties, with and without die cuts, amounting to a limited edition unavailable at postal counters.

The 2014 Circus souvenir sheet was never sold individually in post offices; it was only made available through the USPS mail-order agency as press sheets containing 12 souvenir sheets. Then USPS decided to include another Circus souvenir sheet variety in its 2014 Stamp Yearbook, which cost \$64.95. This version of the sheet contained serpentine die cuts around the three stamps. Add to this an accidental error with gold omitted in the sheet margin, and the output starts to look “abusive”.

Figure 4 shows a cover from Conakry in Guinea, postmarked February 23, 1994, franked with three 200F tennis stamps issued in 1987 in honor of the Seoul Olympics of 1988. Addressed to the International Youth Service in Turku, Finland, it appears to be a commercial use paying for Express service. The use of commemorative stamps that are a few years old is not unusual in post offices in developing nations. Now, what would an exhibitor have to

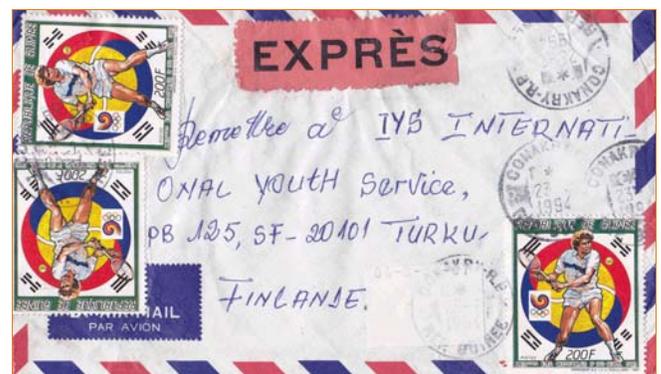


Figure 4



Figure 5

know in order to apply the four criteria above? You would need to know if the stamps were sold at the majority of postal counters in Guinea; how many were sold in this manner rather than through a commercial agent, and whether other imperforate stamps were offered to the public. The Republic of Guinea uses IGPC (Intergovernmental Philatelic Agency) as its agent. So do 79 other nations, including China, Croatia, Greenland, India, Israel, Malaysia, and Turkey. It is impossible for an exhibitor to know the figures for stamp sales via agents compared to sales over postal counters for any of these nations. Is it not enough to show a postally used non-philatelic cover that has gone through the mailstream? I'm not suggesting that showing this cover from a prolific stamp-issuing nation would raise an exhibit's philatelic score, just that it at least should not decrease it. Additionally, it might also play a small role in telling the thematic story. Judges need to realize that most sports and Olympic exhibits have to include modern issues in order to tell the complete thematic story.

When was the last time that you saw an African tennis player on television? Does that mean that tennis isn't played in these countries? The answer is important because if tennis is not a part of the nation's culture, then any issued stamps might be considered abusive on that basis. A few facts will help. First, 135 nations will compete in Davis Cup tennis in 2016, including 16 African nations. Burundi, which does not yet compete in Davis Cup, issued a souvenir sheet (Figure 5) honoring Novak Djokovic for winning the award as BBC Overseas Sports Personality of the Year for 2011. Should Burundi commemorate tennis success? With a little research you can learn that earlier in 2011, the International Tennis Federation opened the East Africa Training Centre in Burundi, with a goal of training young players from ages 10 to 18 to become professional



Figure 6

tennis players. As of 2014, four of the nine full-time players were Burundians. To encourage this effort, International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge traveled all the way to Burundi to meet with the players and coaches (Figure 6). So it's not surprising after all for this small nation to include tennis on a sports issue. Are you wondering what the WNS/UPU says about this issue? Burundi is a WNS member, but has not submitted stamps since March 2011. It is possible that the cost is an issue. No UPU circulars on Burundi were issued from 2011 to date.

In 1991, the Ivory Coast issued two sheets of setenant stamps to honor the centenary of the French Championships. The men's champions sheet is shown in Figure 7. Should we label this attractive sheet abusive?

Let's look at the history. From 1904 to 1958, this area was a part of French West Africa, a colony of France. Tennis was played here, and in 1958 the French Stamp Printing Office in Paris issued a stamp for French West Africa that showed a tennis racket. This was the fifteenth tennis stamp ever produced. After becoming independent, Ivory Coast joined the Davis Cup international competition in 1986, and has participated during 27 years, with a record of 39-40. To me it makes sense for this former French colony with a commitment to tournament tennis to recognize the centenary of the French championships. Ivory Coast has never issued similar sheets for the other major worldwide tournaments, just the French.

A number of questions come to mind at this point:



Figure 7

- What criteria determine if a stamp is “abusive”? Where are these criteria published? Are they applied uniformly to large and small and richer and poorer countries, and at all international exhibitions?
- How will “abusive” stamps issued prior to the UPU circular and WNS system be identified? Whose responsibility is it to identify these - exhibitor, judge, FIP, UPU, or WADP? A list may be impossible, but at present there are not even clearly published written criteria that would be relied upon by all parties.
- What methods of validation have been used or will be used to assure that subjectivity and prejudice do not factor into these determinations?
- If a country is determined to have issued “abusive” philatelic items, what is the status of the country’s other issues? Can they be exhibited?
- When is a gimmick an abuse? Will this apply to large countries that are WNS members? In 2014 France issued a booklet of 12 stamps with different odors, including a tennis shoe with flowers in it to hide the smell. Russia’s souvenir sheet to honor its 2002 Davis Cup win included both embossed silver on the Davis Cup and powder from the actual clay court (Figure 8).

- For thematic issues, I think everyone would agree that it is better if the theme relates to the country of issue. But this is not always an all-or-none determination. Who will decide this, and using what definable criteria? Should the exhibitor be penalized if the stamp does not relate to that country if there is no other item available to show the same thematic information?
- How will we work together to avoid unintended consequences of a stricter interpretation of guidelines? If exhibiting or judging become too onerous, the result could be a drop in participation at all levels.

Clear written criteria for what will be considered “abusive” or “prohibited” at an FIP exhibition could have prevented my friend’s experience with the judging of his thematic exhibit. Working together, the FIP, judges, exhibitors, and philatelic writers should address these issues, and develop and publicize guidelines that all of us can use. A previous version of this article appeared in the July 2015 issue of *The Philatelic Exhibitor* (TPE). I had hoped to stimulate a vigorous debate of this dilemma, but I received only one letter, and no comments in subsequent issues of TPE. If you agree that this issue is worth further discussion, I hope that you will contribute your ideas to JSP and to your other philatelic contacts. 🐼

The author and editor welcome any and all comments and ideas on this subject. The author may be contacted at nfjfr@comcast.net; the editor’s email address is markspi@prodigy.net.



Figure 8