



My Olympic Experience

by Tom Fortunato

As all philatelists know, every cover has a story. Some are better than others, but those relating to events in your own life have special meaning. Allow me to share this cover and my story with you.

My saga began oddly enough on April Fool's Day. I received a call at work from D.L. Blair, Inc. in Nebraska. "Congratulations," said the woman on the other end of the phone, "you have been selected to carry the Olympic flame when it passes through your home in Rochester, New York, on June 12." Now I love a great April Fool's joke and thought that this one topped them all, until she read ten minutes of rules, regulations, and stipulations, barely catching a breath in between sentences.

The Coca-Cola Company sponsored the national "Share the Spirit" contest asking ordinary people to nominate worthy candidates to be torch bearers. I was told that I had been nominated and chosen, and that my sponsor wished to remain anonymous. Further details would be enclosed in a package to arrive a few days later. Sure enough, on April 4 I received written details shipped from Blair (working on behalf of Coca-Cola) via UPS, official letter and parcel carrier of the Olympic Games. It contained a ten-page document of legal forms all needing to be signed, which I sent right off.

Only one thing nagged me: June 12 was right in the middle of my ten-day vacation to CAPEX 96 in Toronto. How could I miss out on an opportunity of a lifetime? Although Toronto

is only a three-hour drive from my home, I had planned to take a leisurely train trip there. Since so many details wouldn't be in place for the run until days beforehand, I opted instead to drive to and from CAPEX twice and change my hotel reservations.

By now you must be asking yourself how philately fits into my adventure. I wanted to make some kind of souvenir and decided to create covers to carry during my run. This caused several problems. First, there were strict rules that only the official torch bearer outfit could be worn, consisting of a special tee-shirt, socks, and a pair of shorts that didn't have pockets! Participants had to provide their own underwear and sneakers. No other clothing or adornment could be carried or worn. Second, I had to settle for just a few covers, as an unruly number would be uncomfortable at best. Third, they had to be relatively small in size to be hidden.

I decided to use the 1984 20-cent torch runner postal cards. A search for mint examples proved unsuccessful, but I did find five with assorted cachets, and first day and pictorial cancels on them. Each was unique in its own way. My plan was to make combo covers out of them using the new Olympic commemoratives.

It wasn't until the beginning of June that additional information arrived from Coca-Cola. While the initial mailing mentioned that runners should expect to travel as far as 150 miles to reach their starting point for their one-kilometer trek, I was pleased to learn that my journey

would begin less than five miles south of my home in the city itself. The torch relay that day was scheduled to begin in Niagara Falls at 7 a.m., then pass through Rochester, Palmyra, Camillus, and end in Syracuse late that night. My appointment with destiny was slated for high noon.

The evening before the big day all torch bearers were invited to a gala dinner sponsored by our regional United Way chapter and Coca-Cola. Short biographies of each of us were read aloud, and I became known as the only stamp collector in the bunch.

Little did the others realize what I had in mind. Runner escorts also were introduced; they were scholar athletes who would travel with four torch bearers and assist us with our task.

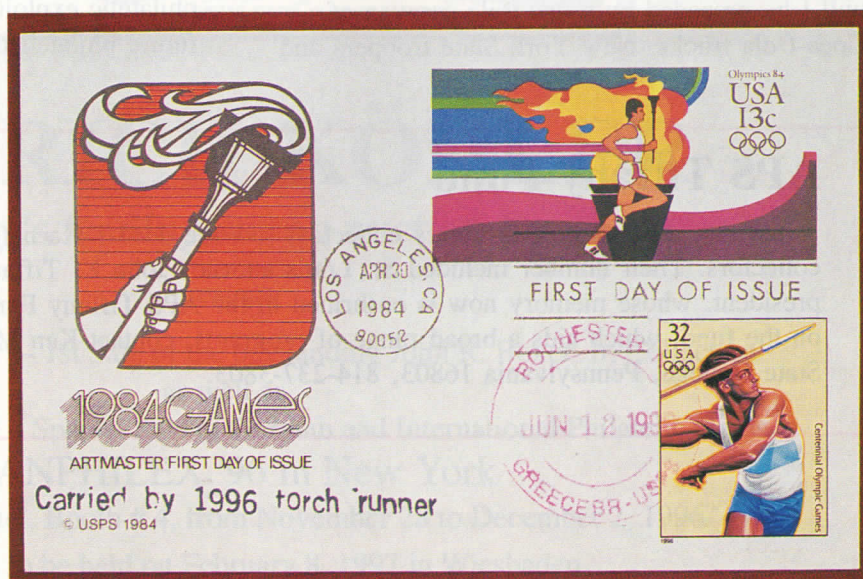
By 9 a.m. the next morning, I arrived at a nearby post office and created my masterpieces. Earlier I had hand-stamped each with an auxiliary mark reading, "Carried by 1996 Olympic torch runner." I actually live in a suburb called Greece, New York, and the cancel used at this location is the only one which mentions both the town and city. I also thought that the thematic tie-in to the country of the Olympics' origin was just too tempting to pass up.

All five covers were duly franked and postmarked, but they lacked one final bit of authenticity. I decided to have them notarized by my brother-in-law, who works for the law firm of Lacy, Katzen, Ryen & Mittleman, LLP. Each was identically inscribed. With this



formality taken care of, it was time to meet my colleagues at the rendezvous point.

To make the relay go more smoothly, runners and escorts were grouped in teams of fifteen or so. My group gathered at the downtown Holiday Inn-Genesee Plaza around 10:15. We had to sign additional disclaimers, then boarded a bus for an orientation and began the journey to the first drop-off point. A video was played about the history of the Olympics



and the significance of the torch design, and showing runners from the prior weeks. We also were given our own torch. Actually, the torch is not passed between torch bearers, only the flame is. I did show the covers to my escort, 17-year-old Brian Oster, and asked him to autograph them as well.

Along the way huge crowds were gathering to get the best view of the flame. It was especially nice to see entire schools along the route emptying to allow the kids to experience a part of history. We were dropped off at our respective starting points less than five minutes before the flame exchange. At least thirty co-workers from the Sutherland Group, a high-tech marketing firm, were there to greet me, as were many of my relatives and friends.

Despite the rush, I had one last thing to do as I was being interviewed by a reporter. I placed my five covers in a stiff plastic holder and pinned it to the inside of my shorts. Yes, the reporter did take note and wrote about it in an article published the following day. There were just a few seconds to snap a photo of me with the covers before the flame came by. In no time at all, my torch was lit and off I went. Our instructions on carrying the flame were quite clear — hold it high, smile, wave a lot to the crowds, and have fun! Running wasn't a requirement, as long as you kept up a brisk pace. I decidedly took my time. After all, where again will I be preceded by a one-mile caravan of Coca-Cola trucks, New York State troopers and

Georgia State police motorcycles, followed by helicopter sky-cams, broadcast live on local TV, and cheered by thousands of my fellow Rochesterians?

It was a day to remember to be sure, but it was over in what now seems an instant. All five covers survived in pristine condition. I kept cover No. 1 for myself and took cover No. 2 to Toronto with me later that day. I had great pleasure in presenting it and the protective pouch the covers were carried in to Nancy Zielinski Clark, chairperson of OLYMPHILEX, which had a booth at CAPEX 96. It became a star attraction there, despite being in the company of countless priceless memorabilia from Olympics past.

I dare say that these are the only covers actually carried on the Centennial Olympic Torch Relay. I will not sell any of my remaining covers; however, I have donated one each as a fund-raiser to three philatelic organizations: the Rochester Philatelic Association, the International Society of Worldwide Stamp Collectors, and the American Philatelic Society.

Cover No. 3, the APS fund-raiser, will be sent to the person who requests the postal card and sends the highest donation in support of the APS Tiffany Fund this month — National Stamp Collecting Month. Hopefully my philatelic exploits will benefit current and future philatelists for years to come!

APS Tiffany Fund

In 1886, a handful of visionary collectors saw the need for a national organization for stamp collectors. Their number included St. Louis attorney John K. Tiffany, our Society's first president, whose memory now is enshrined in the APS Tiffany Fund. For more information on the fund, which aids a broad range of programs, contact Ken Martin, APS, P.O. Box 8000, State College, Pennsylvania 16803, 814-237-3803.