



STAMP STORIES

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STAMPS FOR THE OLYMPICS THAT WEREN'T

In 1979, the U.S. Postal Service announced a dizzying array of stamps and postal stationery for the 1980 Moscow summer Olympics — six stamps and four postal stationery pieces. Soon, however, the program descended into controversy.

A dispute with the International Olympic Committee prevented the USPS from using the Olympic rings. The entire issue — 10-cent decathlon single (Scott #1790); se-tenant block of four 15-cent values featuring running, swimming, rowing, and equestrianism (1794a, pictured); 10-cent domestic rate postal card with a sprinter (UX80); 31-cent airmail depicting the high jump (C97); 22-cent international aerogramme portraying a discus thrower (UC52); 15-cent domestic rate stamped envelope with soccer players (U596 in two sizes); and a 21-cent airmail postal card of a gymnast (UXC18) — featured overlapping five-point stars instead.



The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Day 1979 was followed by President Jimmy Carter's declaration of a boycott against the Moscow games in protest. Postmaster General William F. Bolger stunned philatelists on March 11, 1980, declaring that the USPS would honor the boycott by withdrawing the stamps and stationery from sale later that day. It was the first time since 1861 that issued U.S. stamps were removed from sale for political reasons.

Bolger's move touched off a speculative frenzy. Dealers paid as much as seven times face value for the 15-cent stamps. Gimbel's in New York City was selling the 31-cent airmail in sheets of 50 for \$45! The *Washington Post* reported that postal inspectors and the U.S. attorney's office were investigating a congressman-philatelist from Tennessee on charges he had used his connections to purchase thousands of the stamps after the embargo was in place.

The stamps were re-released through the Philatelic Bureau on August 4 as suddenly and unexpectedly as they had been withdrawn. Bolger said that the move was meant to honor "the fine men and women of the U.S. Olympic team who [had] sacrificed months and years of training." It seems more likely, however, that he was responding to political and philatelic pressure to end the bubble. The *Los Angeles Times*, which had reported the Gimbel's story, had run an editorial on June 13 attributing "lust" for the stamps in part to "the Postal Service's own greed" in issuing a "batch of ... mail-associated gizmos ... aimed at raking in revenues."

Today none of the 1979 Olympic issues catalogue for more than \$1.50 in mint condition.

"U.S. Withdraws Stamps on Olympics in Moscow," *New York Times* March 12, 1980; "Olympic Stamp Values Surge," *Los Angeles Times* June 12, 1980; "Stamping out Philatelic Inflation," *Los Angeles Times* June 13, 1980; "The Quillen Stamp Collection: Postal Inspectors are Investigating his Purchase," *Washington Post* August 2, 1980.