STAMPS ARE ONLY THE BEGINNING

How to Build a Diverse and Innovative Thematic Collection

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IN 1986, I took my 10-year-old daughter to Ameripex, the international stamp show in Chicago. While I was focused on collecting United States postal history, my daughter had eagerly begun her own Disney collection. As an amateur league tennis player, I decided at Ameripex to collect tennis stamps, thinking that acquiring the 100-plus tennis stamps issued at that time would be a quick sideline.

After joining the American Philatelic Society, American Topical Association, and Sports Philatelists International, I realized the limitations of my topical collection, where every item pictured tennis.



Figure 1. A rare imperforate between stamps error on the world's first tennis stamp issued in 1934 by the Philippines (Scott 381a).



Figure 2. The tennis precursor called jeu de paume used leather balls hit with the hands on an indoor court, shown on this 1965 charity stamp (semipostal) from Hungary (Scott B243).

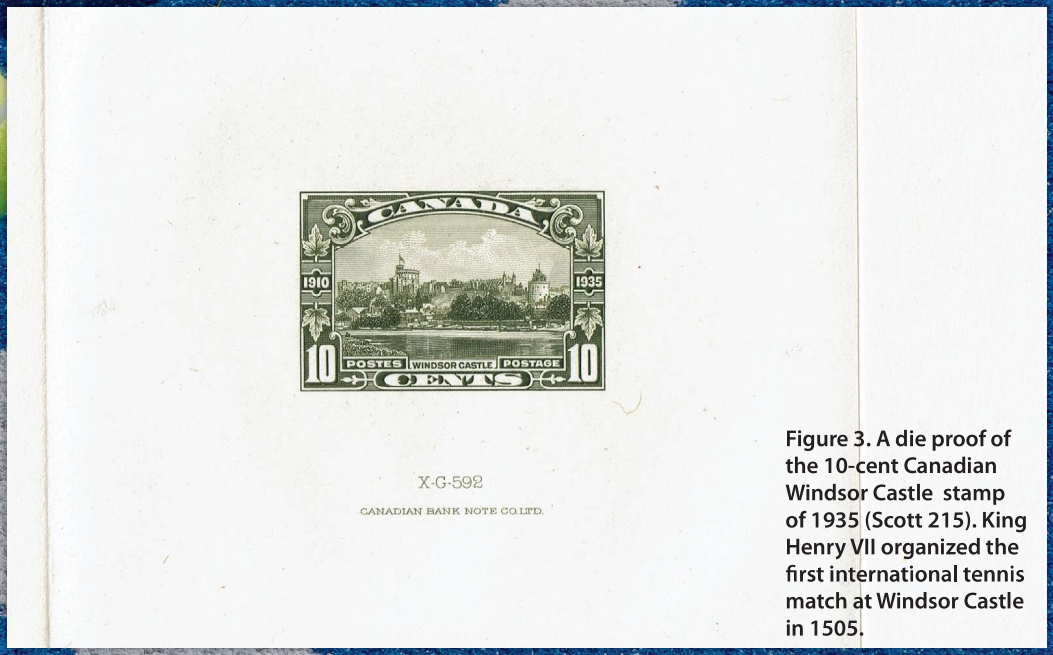


Figure 3. A die proof of the 10-cent Canadian Windsor Castle stamp of 1935 (Scott 215). King Henry VII organized the first international tennis match at Windsor Castle in 1505.



Figure 4. In 1539, King Francis I of France played tennis on a boat he sailed on the Loire River (Scott 1173, issued 1967).



Figure 5. Walter Wingfield, shown on this 1965 Hungarian semipostal (Scott B249) invented and patented a new court and rules for playing tennis on grass in 1874.

Shifting toward a thematic collection, I added postmarks that didn't show tennis, such as lawnmowers and the invention of rubber vulcanization, two technological advances that enabled tennis to be played on grass. As my knowledge deepened in both philately and tennis history, the collection acquired more diversity and philatelic significance.

While starting with stamps and postmarks is easy and logical, the excitement for me today lies in exploring less common postal elements, such as proofs, artist drawings, V-mail, errors, telegrams, and more. Don't overlook items that are not strictly philatelic, such as autographs, advertising covers, and postcards. These add a new dimension to any collection.

My initial two-frame thematic tennis exhibit at a World Series of Philately show in 1995 achieved a silver-bronze award. But an experienced judge cautioned me that achieving a high award with a modern sports exhibit, even with five or eight frames, would not be possible. Challenge accepted! From that point on, I dedicated myself to expanding variety and philatelic depth, incorporating scarce or unexpected items. At the same time, I decided to enlarge my collection of tennis autographs, advertising covers, postcards, and other items not eligible to be shown in a thematic exhibit.

I will show here how to move beyond the conventional boundaries of topical philately. Rather than presenting a predictable summary of the sport of tennis illustrated with stamps and postmarks available at any bourse, I aim to show a different approach to thematic collecting where you can leverage both your thematic and philatelic knowledge.

One way to begin the story is with the first stamp that shows the theme. For tennis, that is a Philippines stamp from 1934, which also produced a major error. The post office sold three sheets of 35 lacking perforations between the bottom two rows. Fewer than 10 examples of this error have been documented (Figure 1). Most themes will not start with such a fortuitous error stamp, but color varieties, proofs, and unusual covers are other possible starting points.

In addition to illustrations from my current exhibit I have also highlighted other interesting items that enhance the tennis collection even though they can't be included in a thematic exhibit. This philatelic journey beyond stamps is designed to illustrate the broad scope possible in a thematic collection devoted to any subject.

The early days of tennis

To begin the tennis story, we need to go back in time long before lawn tennis was invented. In 13th century France, a game called *jeu de paume* was played indoors using a leather ball struck with the palm of the hand (Figure 2). Rackets and nets were added later to the game. In England the game became known as tennis. In 1505, King Henry VII of England organized the first recorded international tennis match between Philip the Fair and the Marquis of Dorset at Windsor Castle. The location of this indoor match is shown on a rare Canadian die proof from the 1935 King George V Silver Jubilee (Figure 3). By 1539, French King Francis I (Figure 4) built a tennis court on a ship he sailed on the Loire River.

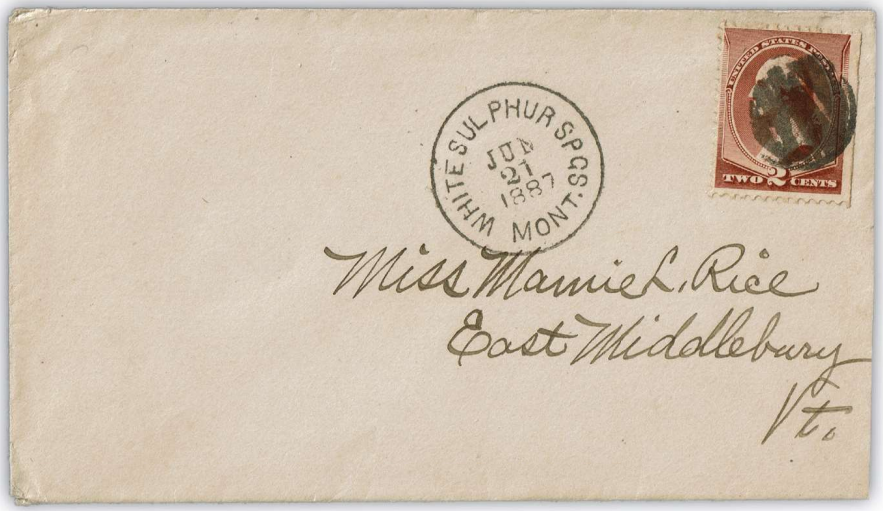


Figure 6. Montana Territorial White Sulphur Springs postmark from 1887. Sulfur from these hot springs was exported to England to make rubber tennis balls more elastic so they could bounce on grass.



Figure 7. The world's most prestigious tennis tournament is popularly known just by the town name "Wimbledon." The British town's name, shown in this cancellation, was adopted in 1893 by a new North Dakota town.

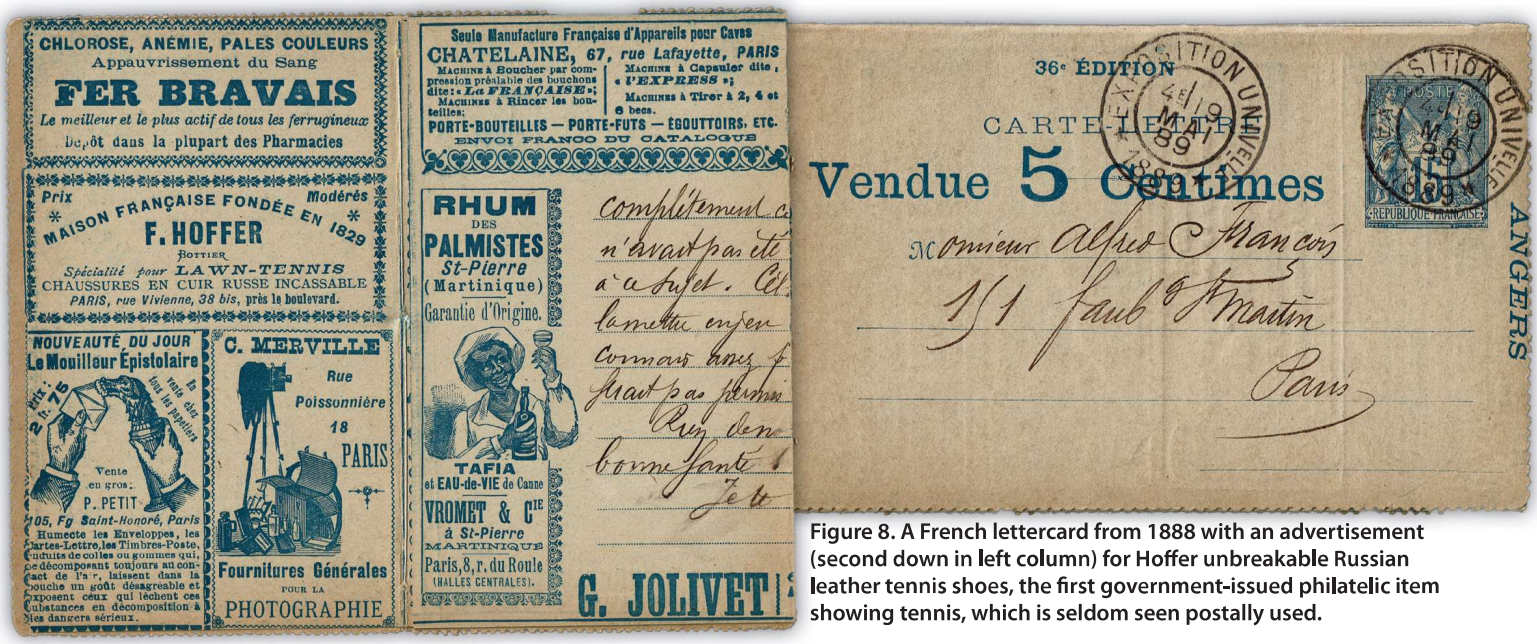


Figure 8. A French lettercard from 1888 with an advertisement (second down in left column) for Hoffer unbreakable Russian leather tennis shoes, the first government-issued philatelic item showing tennis, which is seldom seen postally used.



Figure 9. Postal stationery issued October 1888 in Sweden by R.W. Lindhe Company for the local post, which delivered Goteborg's mail until October 1889. Noted on the far right in the second row of advertising, this is the only tennis-related 19th century local post item known.

On February 23, 1874, Walter Wingfield patented a "new and improved court" to allow tennis to be played on grass using his proprietary boxed sets of equipment and rules (Figure 5). Critical to the success of his new game was the vulcanization treatment of rubber by adding white sulfur to improve elasticity and strength. Tennis balls needed to bounce on grass! Much of the sulfur for this process came from Montana. Figure 6 shows a Montana Territorial postmark from White Sulphur Springs, a town named after the sulfur mines. This is the only known cork cancellation from White Sulphur Springs.

In February 1875, the All England Croquet Club at Wimbledon voted to add lawn tennis. This new game became so popular that the words "lawn tennis" were added to the club's name by 1877, the year of the first tennis tournament at Wimbledon. The club and its tournament are popularly known just as Wimbledon. I include the North Dakota Wimbledon postmark (Figure 7) because my research in the Barnes County Historical Society archives confirms that the town was named "after its tennis namesake."

The spread of lawn tennis to other countries occurred remarkably fast. The first game of tennis played outside of England likely took place in the United States near Boston in the summer of 1874.

By 1888, lawn tennis was popular in Paris, where the shoemaker company F. Hoffer advertised its unbreakable Russian leather tennis shoes on a French government lettercard first issued in June 1888. This is the first government-issued philatelic item to feature lawn tennis, seldom seen postally used as in the example shown (Figure 8).

In October 1888, the R.W. Lindhe Company in Goteborg, Sweden issued postal stationery for its local post. It featured advertising for "all kinds of sports equipment as Lawn Tennis" (Figure 9). Unlike some other local posts you may be familiar with, Lindhe's operation delivered the mail within Goteborg from June 1, 1888, until the Swedish government extended the postal monopoly law to include local mail in October 1889, effectively putting Lindhe's uniformed mailmen out of the business of mail delivery.

Tennis also reached India and Africa in the 19th century. The British brought tennis to India in 1880. Muir Mills textile company opened a factory in Cawnpore (Kanpur) in 1882, and by 1912 it was producing tennis screens, which act as wind breakers. The company advertised these on the back of an India booklet (Figure 10), the first booklet that includes the sport of tennis. In Mozambique, elegantly dressed colonists played and watched lawn tennis at the Beira Sporting Club (Figure 11). This lettercard paid the foreign rate of 65 reis from April 26, 1902, until July 1, 1905.

What every player needs

Both amateurs and professionals need a racket, tennis balls, clothes, and tennis shoes. Within a decade of the invention of lawn tennis, companies produced and advertised a variety of equipment. The earliest recorded tennis advertising cover, sent by the A.G. Spalding Company from Chicago on July 25, 1884, includes a wooden racket among other sports articles (Figure 12).

Since the 1980s, I have collected more than two dozen different 19th century tennis ad covers, and for many of these I have never seen another identical example. The possibility of new discoveries, including a new "earliest use" make this an interesting area to consider for any thematic collection.

Figure 13 shows another unusual advertising cover used to mail a 1917 Spalding Lawn Tennis Annual. These



Figure 10. This India booklet from 1912 includes an advertisement for Muir Mills tennis screens on the back cover, the earliest mention of tennis on a booklet.

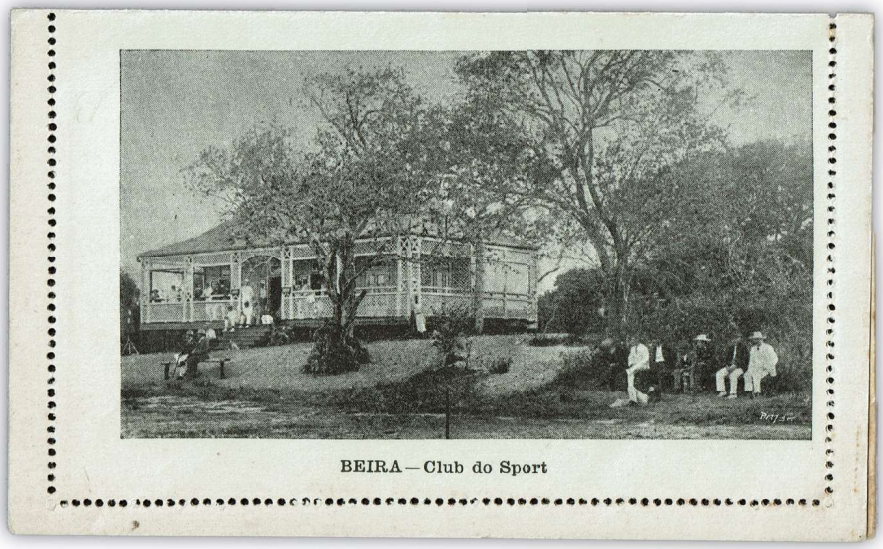


Figure 11. A Mozambique lettercard from 1902 picturing tennis at the Beira Sporting Club.

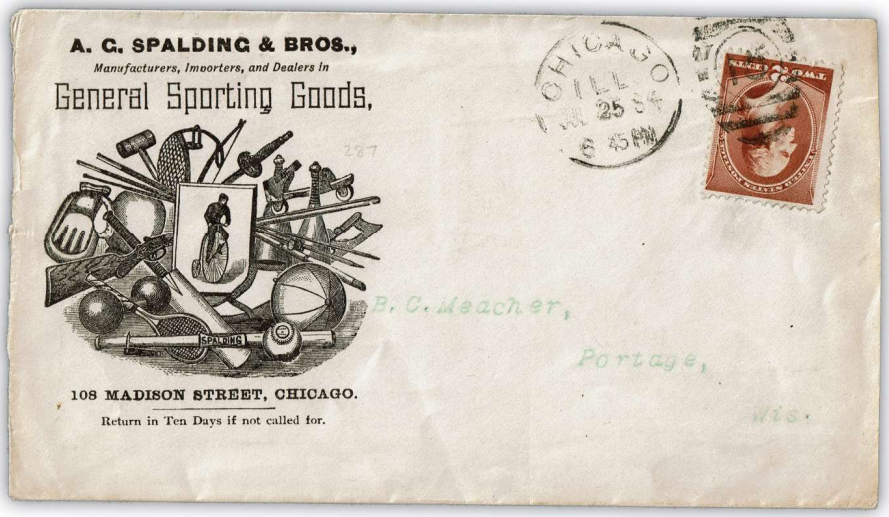


Figure 12. The oldest known tennis advertising cover, postmarked July 25, 1884, shows that lawn tennis had spread to Chicago within 10 years of its invention in England.



Figure 13. A Spalding advertising cover contained a 1917 Spalding Lawn Tennis Annual, mailed using a precanceled 5-cent stamp.

were mailed in sealed envelopes using low-quality paper. I imagine that almost all the envelopes were destroyed when the parcels were opened, and this is the only cover I've seen in over 30 years of collecting tennis. When I purchased it, the Tennis Annual was still inside, helping to preserve the envelope for more than 100 years.

Tennis players often use tape on the racket head to add weight and to repair or prevent scuffing of the frame. But showing this requires some out of the box thinking, since no tennis philatelic items illustrate this concept. Look at Figure 14 to see the use of tape to make repairs. This mill splice was created at the paper mill during the process of making the large roll of paper on which the Bureau of Engraving and Printing printed stamps. Green tape to repair the roll, as shown here, was only used at the mill. These Crazy Horse stamps are perforated through the tape, producing one of only two mill splices known on the Great American series. This use of analogy to illustrate a difficult concept expands the diversity of items that will fit into a thematic collection.



Figure 14. Crazy Horse mill splice repair by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing provides an analogy for the use of tape to repair the frame of a tennis racket.



Figure 15. Tretorn, noted on this meter slogan, is the leading manufacturer of pressureless tennis balls.

You've probably seen the bright yellow tennis balls that became standard in the 1970s because they show up well on television. Two types of tennis balls are available, pressureless and pressurized. Tretorn, the main supplier of pressureless balls, makes the rubber harder and thicker to create bounce without injecting air, but these balls are not used in major tournaments. The Tretorn meter from March 1934 (Figure 15) is from a Francotyp C Multi-Value

machine with impression counter. The cover pays a rate of 4 pfennigs for printed matter from 20 to 50 grams, 30pf registry fee, and 20pf additional for delivery after normal closing time.

What about pressurized tennis balls? Traditionally these were stored in paper cartons, and quickly lost pressure on the shelf. The Pennsylvania Rubber Company's introduction of pressurized cans in 1922 meant that a standard bounce could be maintained through months of storage. To display that in my collection, I've turned to the Berlin postal service for help.

Starting in 1865, long before tennis ball manufacturers thought to borrow the idea, the Rohr-Post system of pneumatic tubes used compressed air to push cylinders of mail rapidly through a complex delivery network. Figure 16 shows a card that travelled from station R7 to R28 in just 15 minutes. I use the analogy of compressed air in the postal pneumatic tube to introduce the concept of using compressed air to preserve the bounce of the balls.



Figure 16. Compressed air to move cylinders of mail through tubes was introduced in Berlin in 1865. Many years later, tennis ball manufacturers used compressed air to maintain the pressure of tennis balls inside metal cans. From March 1886, the Rohr-Post ("pipe post") compressed air system in Berlin used both sending and receiving postmarks that identified stations both by their telegraph code (R) and postal code (P).

Tennis clothing in different eras depends on the style, values, and technology of the time. In 1899, outfits for women included scarves, tight belts, long dresses, and pointed shoes, as seen on the Bavarian postal card in Figure 17. This card also represents the only philatelic depiction of tennis and croquet together.

Later, sweaters with the name of the player's home country were worn at regional tournaments, like the sweater in Figure 18 that says "Ecuador." This stamp's design is a remarkable mistake made by the American Bank Note Company in 1939. It used a photograph of the head of Pancho Segura, the unknown Ecuadorian 18-year-old who won the singles trophy, and then superimposed it on a photograph of the body of a player from Pennsylvania supplied by a photo agency! Segura played with an unusual two-handed forehand, but the stamp shows the common one-handed stroke. For dozens of other examples of design errors on tennis stamps and postmarks, see the "Oops!" article in the Resources.

Tennis shoes started as leather street shoes, but rubber soles soon took over. Hiram Hutchinson transferred his experience in rubber boots to manufacture the L'Aigle brand of rubber-soled tennis shoes in Paris in the 1920s. The L'Aigle meter in Figure 19 is the first meter from any country to mention tennis.



Figure 17. The only philatelic depiction of both tennis and croquet together. This Bavarian official card number 7 promoted a Munich sports exhibition held in 1899.



Figure 18. The sweater on this punched specimen stamp carries the Ecuador team name. The American Bank Note Company made a giant mistake in the stamp's design.

Tennis courts

The earliest outdoor modern tennis courts were grass, which is still the surface for the world's best-known tournament at Wimbledon, England. The deep green grass color of this pen, pencil, and watercolor essay by Andrew Restall (Figure 20) evokes the unique atmosphere of Wimbledon. The stamp honors the centenary of the tournament in 1977.

In Europe, grass dried too fast to be a useful surface, so powdered brick was used instead, as on this court at Groote Kerk in Arnhem (Figure 21). The 5-cent rate for domestic out-of-town postal cards was overprinted on this 7 ½-cent postal stationery originally issued at the international rate. Revaluation was necessary because of shortages caused by World War II.



Figure 19. The first meter from any country to mention tennis, "Chaussures Tennis" (tennis shoes) by L'Aigle, in 1928. Postage was applied by a Havas Tiranty meter machine.

Even in England, all-weather fast-drying courts by the Gaze Company became popular in the 1920s. Figure 22 shows the only recorded on-cover example of the Gaze tennis court advertisement from a Great Britain booklet, se-tenant with a 1½-pence stamp. Together with an added 1-penny stamp, this pays the international rate to Denmark in 1924.

How about a tennis court in which every match takes place in a different location? The postcard in Figure 23 shows tennis players enjoying a doubles match while sailing aboard the SS *Cap Arcona*, a German ocean liner launched in 1927.

Practice, practice, practice ...

Players need strokes they can rely on when a match gets close. Repetitive practice of a stroke like the backhand makes it more reliable. No stamps or postmarks illustrate this idea, but the multifranked Nicaraguan inflation cover in Figure 24 with 34 identical tennis stamps provides a striking philatelic visual analogy for the player's use of a ball machine to hit 34 identical backhands to "groove" the stroke.

The postal rates skyrocketed in Nicaragua in the 1980s. When this registered cover was mailed, the international rate was 500 cordobas for airmail up to 20 grams, and 500 cordobas registration fee. The 34 stamps add up to 1,020 cordobas, a slight convenience overfrank. This is by far the largest multiple of tennis stamps I have seen on cover.



Figure 20. A pen, pencil, and watercolor essay signed by Andrew Restall, designer of the British stamp issued January 12, 1977 (Scott 802), to celebrate the Wimbledon tournament's centenary.

Recreational tennis

Since most people play tennis for exercise and relaxation, it's easy to find philatelic items that depict casual or recreational tennis. With some effort, you can raise the interest level and rarity of this section of a thematic sports collection.

During World War II, V-Mail forms with preprinted Christmas greetings were made by the Wessel Company, holder of

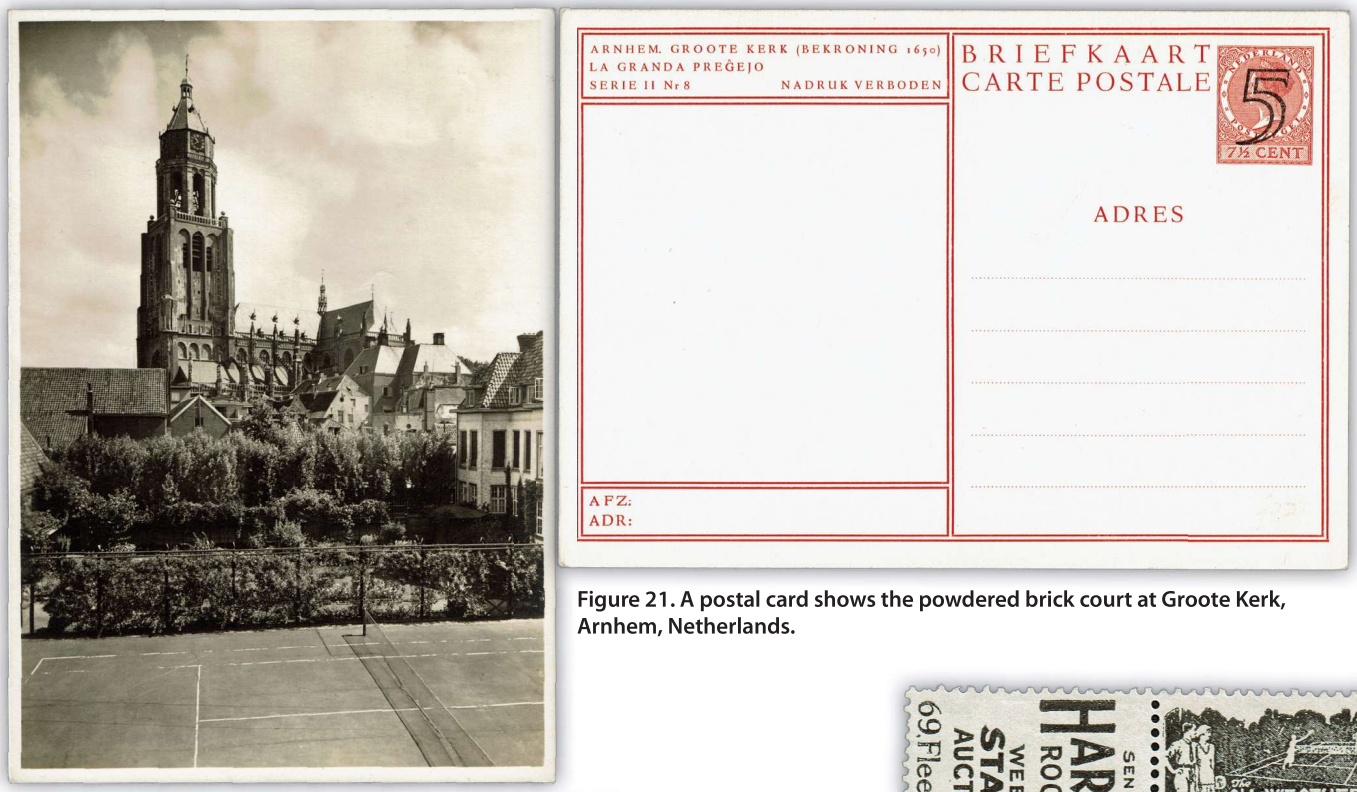


Figure 21. A postal card shows the powdered brick court at Groote Kerk, Arnhem, Netherlands.



Figure 22. The Gaze Company introduced a fast-drying tennis court for England. This is the only recorded example of the stamp and advertisement se-tenant on cover. Also, the label as it was aligned with booklet stamps (Scott 160).

Post Office Department Permit Number 1. The service member received only a copy of the microfilm version (Figure 25). Although the full-size blank forms for this V-Mail containing a tennis racket are not rare, this is so far the only documented example of the used tennis V-Mail printed from the microfilm.

Figure 26 shows another tennis cover with a World War II connection. Nine different towns in France used Daguin box cancellations containing tennis tourism messages at different times during the 1920s to 1950s. This censored cover from Sablé-sur-Sarthe to New York in November 1939 is the only recorded cover with a tennis Daguin used after France declared war on Germany in September 1939. I would not be surprised to learn that other tennis Daguin covers mailed during World War II exist, and I will be happy to hear of any additional examples.

Turning to more recent times, Figure 27 gives us a dramatic view of three major errors on the 1995 United States recreational sports stamps, including imperforate and color missing. These errors show the tennis stamp in the second position on each strip, a difficult arrangement to collect since the designs varied in their position depending on the pane position, and the census includes only about a dozen examples of each error.

If you look closely at the strip on the right it appears to be missing all three colors – yellow, blue, and magenta. But when it was examined under high magnification, traces of blue and magenta were visible, leaving only the yellow as completely absent.



Figure 23. A postcard shows a mixed doubles match afloat on the German ocean liner SS *Cap Arcona*.



Figure 24. A Nicaraguan inflation cover from 1987 with 34 identical 30-cordoba tennis stamps (Scott 1629) provides a visual analogy for repetitive practice to "groove" a stroke.

Tennis champions

It requires incredible skill and determination to become a tennis champion. Not surprisingly, famous tennis players are a favorite topic for many stamp-producing countries and agencies. I prefer to collect and to write about philatelic items for which the topic and the nation issuing it share a connection or heritage.

The United States Hazel Wightman stamp from 1990 (Figure 28) commemorates her two gold medals from the 1924 Olympic Games. Also shown is the only artist material for this stamp in private hands, a graphite on paper essay using a vertical format that was changed to horizontal for the stamp as issued.

In 2002, Russia celebrated its first-ever Davis Cup championship, an unexpected victory after Russia lost the first two sets of the deciding match, only to come back with three winning sets in a row against France (Figure 29). For special effect on a souvenir sheet issued in 2003, the Russian postal service coated the tennis court on the souvenir sheet with powder made from the clay surface used in the final match.

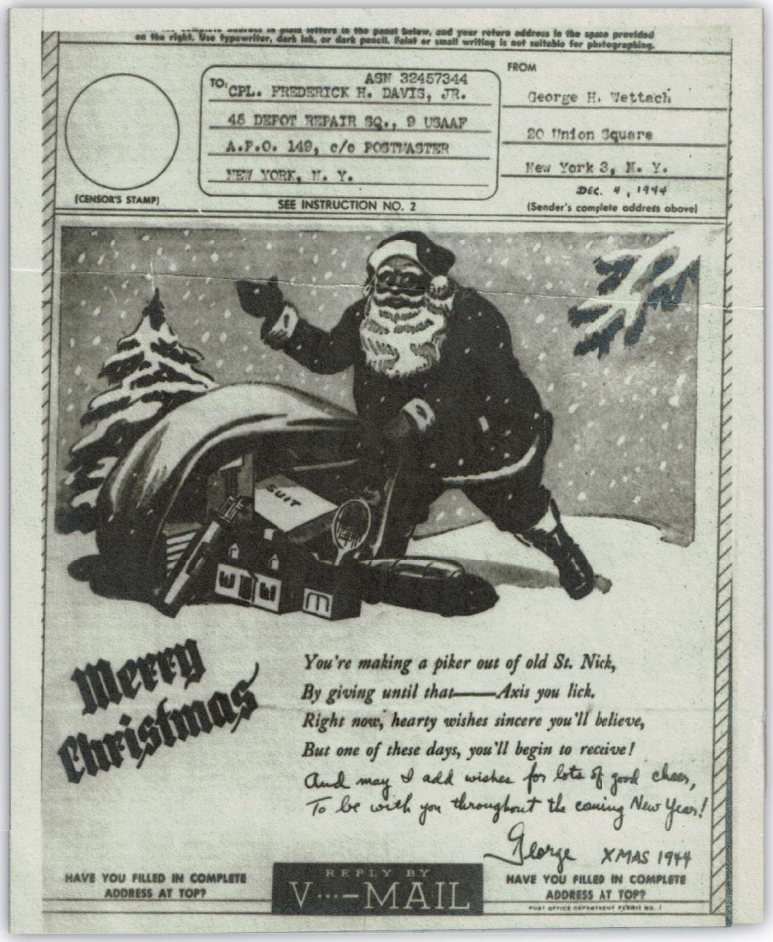


Figure 25. The only known copy of the microfilm of the World War II V-mail illustration showing Santa Claus and his sack, which includes a tennis racket.

First day covers, cachets and autographs provide more opportunities for honoring tennis champions such as Maria Bueno, who won 19 major titles and was featured on a stamp from her native Brazil after she won her second Wimbledon singles title (Figure 30).

The postcard of Maureen Connolly (Figure 31) takes on special importance when you read the message on the reverse side that she wrote to a sportswriter in her hometown of San Diego. The card was postmarked at the Forest Hills Station during the 1950 U. S. championship. This marked her first appearance at the tournament that she won from 1951 to 1953.

Her message jokes that she might fall out of a roller-coaster at Coney Island, a chilling comment, since in real life her tennis career terminated in 1954 when she was thrown from her horse two weeks after winning her third straight Wimbledon title. The U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative for "Little Mo" in 2019.

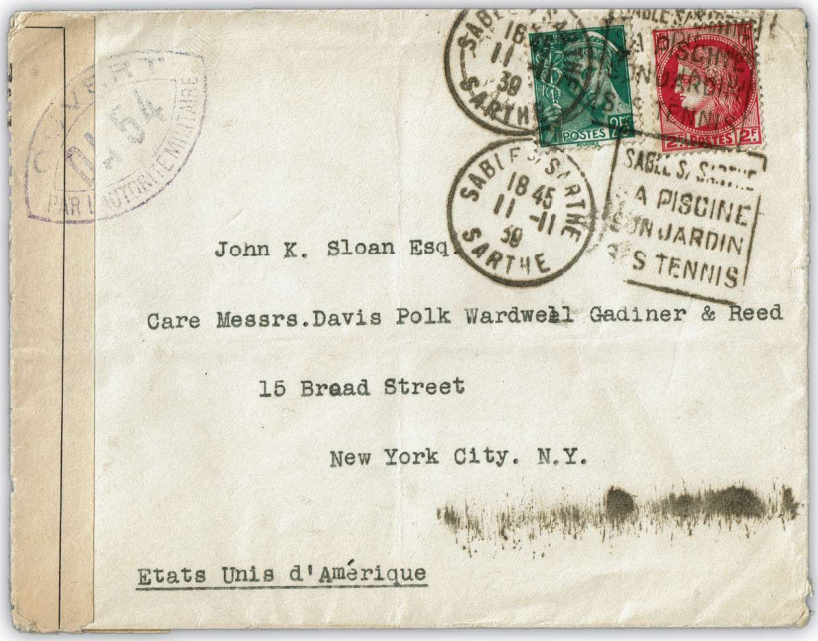


Figure 26. The only recorded tennis Daguin cancellation used after France declared war on Germany in 1939.



Figure 27. Three major tennis stamp errors from U.S. Recreational Sports issue of 1995 (Scott 2961-2965).



Figure 28. Hazel Wightman was honored for her Olympic gold medals on this 1990 U.S. stamp (Scott 2498). A graphite on paper essay using vertical format is the only artist material for the Wightman tennis stamp that exists in private hands.



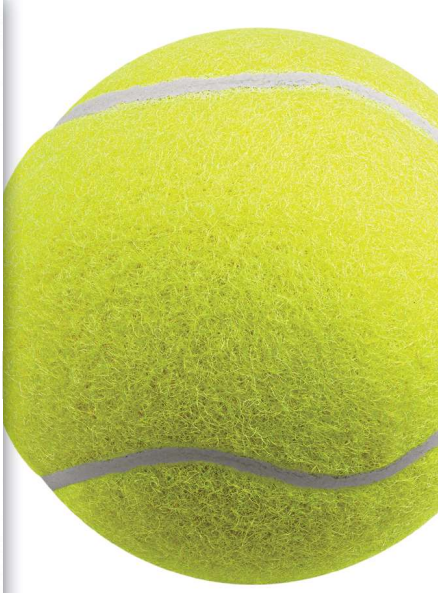




Figure 29. A 2003 Russian souvenir sheet celebrates the 2002 Davis Cup championship (Scott 6751).

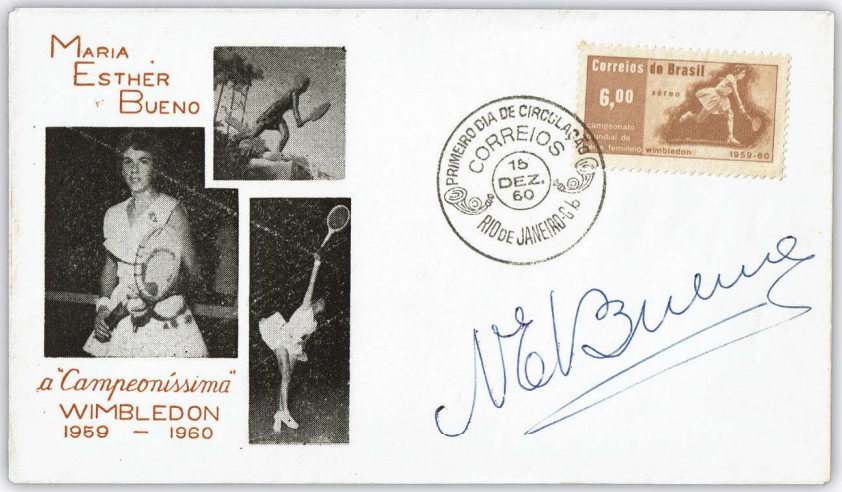


Figure 30. Maria Bueno autographed this cacheted first day cover for an airmail stamp (C103) from Brazil that celebrates her Wimbledon championships in 1959 and 1960. She won there again in 1964.

Although the major tournaments that make up the grand slam of tennis get the most attention, research into other competitions has enriched my collection.

Let's end with one of my favorite tennis images (Figure 32). The strip of four stamps demonstrates a progression from a normal stamp on the left to fully color-missing error on the right. This Australian issue from 1974 depicts Yvonne Goolagong Cawley, the first indigenous woman to win the Australian Championship. In effect, it provides a visual analogy for the lone woman of color competing in a tournament that no indigenous person had ever won. Here, we have a tennis stamp, a major error, and a visual analogy with social commentary all on one image. I couldn't ask for a better way to end the story!

Conclusion

I am grateful that my trip to Ameripex resulted in a new lifelong thematic collecting interest, and that it led me also to take up exhibiting and writing. The many philatelic friends around the world that I've spent time with personally and via electronic means have enriched my collecting and my life. Whether you're exploring thematic sidelines to your main interests, or aiming to expand a more advanced thematic collection, I hope this exploration has offered new perspectives on how to approach and enjoy thematic philately. Stamp errors, scarce older postmarks, analogies, and a wide variety of both philatelic and nonphilatelic items will work together to enhance your thematic collection. The key lies in embracing the joy of unexpected discoveries and finding ways to weave them into your thematic narrative. Happy collecting!

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Figure 31. A postcard with photo of Maureen Connolly, mailed by her from Forest Hills Station during 1950 U. S. Championships, with her poignant message back home. The USPS issued a stamp honoring "Little Mo" Connolly in 2019 (Scott 5377).



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Figure 32. This dramatic color-missing error on a 1974 stamp (Scott 594) pictures Yvonne Goolagong, the first indigenous player to win the Australian Open singles title.

The Author

Norman F. Jacobs is a retired infectious diseases and internal medicine physician who combined full-time clinical care with education and research, hospital epidemiology, and medical informatics. He published over 40 scientific papers. He began collecting stamps at about age 9. His current philatelic interests include tennis, the Olympic Games, snowboarding, Covid-19, HIV, medical postal history, Vermeer, Portugal, and Portuguese colonies. He has written more than 30 articles on the philately of tennis, the Olympics, and Covid-19, mostly for the *Journal of Sports Philately*. He is vice president of Sports Philatelists International (www.sportstamps.org). He was a member of the Organizing Committee for Olymphilex 96. His tennis exhibit has appeared twice in the Champion of Champions competition. This is his first article for *The American Philatelist*.

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