

First Sport Stamps

Ice Hockey

by Peter Laimins



Olympic ice hockey debuted at the 1920 Antwerp Olympic (summer) Games along with figure skating. A hockey tournament has been a much-anticipated Olympic Winter Games event ever since, beginning at Chamonix, France in 1924.

In the five Olympic contests prior to 1948, Canada won four golds, settling for a silver in 1936 when Great Britain won the tournament.

The International Ice Hockey Federation recognizes the Victoria Skating Rink in Montréal, Canada as the birthplace of organized ice hockey where the first game was played in March 1875. However, it was not until 15 January 1948, that the sport of ice hockey was philatelically recognized when Switzerland issued a semi-postal stamp (20+10 Swiss centimes) showing an ice hockey goaltender.

This engraved, 21 mm x 25.5 mm, multi-colored stamp (but primarily deep magenta), was perforated 11.75 x 11.75. The print run was about 1,300,000 and today is easily obtained on eBay for under a dollar. The stamp shows a goalie in front of his net poised to make a save. Remarkable to 21st century hockey fans is that the goalie does not have a protective helmet with face mask. Instead, he is just wearing a visored cap.

All the major stamp catalogs recognize the stamp (Scott B172, Michel 494, Zumstein 27w). Zumstein, however, recognizes two minor varieties. The first variety (Zumstein 27w.2.01) is that the “O” in “ST. MORITZ” looks like a “Q” (Figure 1).

The second variety (Zumstein 27w.3.01) is a bit more subtle. The printing plate was retouched around the area of the “I” in “OLYMPIA.” In the set of stamps in Figure 2, the stamp on the left is normal while the one on the right clearly shows smudging where it’s been retouched.

The stamp was issued as one in a set of four stamps for the 1948 Winter Olympics held in St. Moritz, Switzerland which had also hosted the Winter Olympics in 1928. Two of the other stamps feature the Olympic rings while the fourth portrays an Alpine skier.

Canada got revenge on Great Britain at the 1948 Games by beating them 12 to 3. Winning the gold proved more of a challenge, however. Both Canada and Czechoslovakia finished the competition with identical records of 7 wins, 0 losses and 1 tie, the tie being in the Canada-Czechoslovakia game (0-0). The gold medal winner was decided by each team’s goal average. Canada outscored their opponents 69 to 5 (goal average 13.8); Czechoslovakia outscored their opponents 80 to 18 (goal average 4.44).

One other anomaly of the 1948 tournament is that although the United States ice hockey team finished with a record good enough to win 4th place, they were effectively disqualified from the moment the American team’s skates hit the ice.

A major tempest had been brewing prior to the start of the 1948 Olympics as two U.S. ice hockey teams showed up in St. Moritz. Ice hockey’s international federation, the Ligue Internationale de Hockey sur Glace (LIHG), recognized the Amateur Hockey Association (AHA) team as the official entrant. Avery Brundage, who was both president of the U.S. Olympic Committee (precursor of the USOPC) and vice president of the IOC, claimed the AHA team was “tainted with professionalism,” instead designating the Amateur Athletic Union’s ice hockey team as the true entrant. When the LIHG, with the support of the Swiss Olympic Organizing Committee, threatened an ice hockey boycott, the IOC relented, allowing the AHA team to play. However, their record was erased at the conclusion of the Games! And for good measure, the IOC expelled the LIHG from its list of recognized federations, and removed ice hockey from the Olympic schedule – that is until the next Games.



Figure 1 (left). “O” with tail resembling a “Q”.

Figure 2 (right). Left stamp normal; fuzziness around “I” on right stamp where it has been retouched.

