A Controversial Olympic Torch Relay Begins

by Mark Maestrone and Andrew Urushima

A trio of French protesters, members of the media rights group Reporters Without Borders, unfurl a black banner depicting the Olympic rings as handcuffs and calling for a boycott of the Games just as the president of the Beijing Organizing Committee, Liu Qi, begins to speak at the torch lighting ceremony.

A Tibetan woman covered in red paint lays across the path of the torch relay, taunts of “Flame of Shame” emanating from fellow human rights activists.

Peaceful street protesters in Ancient Olympia plead for China to “Free Tibet.”

So began what is certainly the most controversial Olympic Torch Relay ever held.

Figure 2. The Torch Relay through Greece yielded a set of 6 intermediate postmarks (left to right): Mesolongion (24 March), Ioannina (25 March), Veroia (26 March), Thessalonika (27 March), Lamia (28 March), and Athens (29 March).
Greece: 24-30 March 2008

The traditional lighting of the Olympic flame took place on 24 March 2008 at Ancient Olympia in the western portion of the Greek Peloponneseus (see map on previous page). Greek actress Maria Nafpliotou played the role of the high priestess as she kindled the flame from the rays of the sun. The Greek post office commemorated the event with a handsome oval-shaped postmark depicting the Beijing Olympic Games logo above a scene of the complex at Ancient Olympia (Figure 1).

Kicking off the relay was 2004 Greek Olympic silver medalist in taekwondo (80kg) Alexandros Nikolaidis (left). He, in turn, handed the torch off to 2004 Chinese Olympic swimming champion, Luo Xuejuan (100 meters backstroke).

For the next six days, the torch relay wound its way across Greece stopping for the night in the towns of Mesolongion (24 March), Ioannina (25 March), Veroia (26 March), Thessalonika (27 March), Lamia (28 March), and arriving in Athens on 29 March. Postmarks in each town mark the visit of the Olympic flame (Figure 2).

At 3 p.m. on 30 March in a ceremony at the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, the Olympic flame was handed over to the Beijing Olympic organizers to begin its 85,000-mile trip around the world. A final Greek postmark honors the event (right).

Asia & Europe: 31 March - 8 April 2008

Following a brief stop in Beijing, the Torch Relay began its whirlwind tour of 21 cities on six continents.

First stop: Almaty, Kazakhstan on April 2. This was the first time that the torch relay had visited the central Asian nation, occasioning the issuing of a torch relay stamp and special postmark (left).

The relay continued aboard its chartered Air China Airbus A330 to Istanbul, Turkey where it crossed the Bosphorus between Asia and Europe on 3 April. Protests, which were minor in both countries, primarily involved Uighur treatment at home and in China.

A postmark with similar design to the one used in Kazakhstan was applied to mail (above).

Following a stop on 5 April in St. Petersburg, Russia, the Olympic flame arrived in London – host of the 2012 Olympic Games – on 6 April. For the first time on its international tour, the relay met organized protests designed to disrupt the event and embarrass the Chinese. At one point, a protester tried to snatch the torch from a torchbearer. In a separate incident, an activist with a fire extinguisher attempted to douse the Olympic flame. Eventually, the Olympic Torch Relay boarded a bus to skirt protesters in downtown London.

As reported by Bob Farley of the Society of Olympic Collectors, there was a postmark used to commemorate the visit of the torch relay to London, as well as a SmartStamp imprint.

“As far as I am concerned,” Bob writes, “none of the current GB commemorative handstamps are ‘valid’ because they are not available at any post office – only by mail order from a regional centre. They cannot be used for any enhanced service such as recorded (certified) or registered because the date has no meaning. Take the Torch relay cancel (above) – ‘London’ is hardly an indicator of where this was mailed.”

“In this particular instance the only office open on a Sunday [6 April] is Heathrow. It could be that Heathrow is the only valid cancel now nationally on Sunday. All postal collections on Sunday were dropped last year, so with no mail collected, all mail should be cancelled Saturday or Monday even if machine cancelled.”

“The London SmartStamp [shown on a cover reproduced in Figure 3] is significant because of the Heathrow cancel date of 6 April … Heathrow was the only post office open so it represents the only ‘valid’ postmark with that date.
With the arrival of the Olympic Torch Relay in Paris on 7 April, the situation only became worse with pro-Tibet and human rights activists out in force. Multiple attempts were made to extinguish the torch with water or fire extinguishers, causing the relay to be rerouted aboard buses. One disabled torchbearer in a wheelchair, Jin Jing, was assaulted more than once by protesters trying to grab the torch. This low point in the torch relay prompted discussion about altering or even terminating the around-the-world event. A relay postmark depicting an Olympic torch was available (Figure 4).

San Francisco, Calif., USA: 9 April 2008 (Contributed by Andrew Urushima)

As with prior Olympic Games, sport and politics clashed once again, this time in the streets of San Francisco. Mark Maestro and I were on hand to witness the now famous “bait and switch” that redirected the Olympic Torch Relay out of the teeth of thousands of pro-Tibet and pro-China supporters alike at San Francisco’s famed Ferry Building and Justin Herman Plaza, the proposed ending point of the relay.
It was a postcard perfect day in San Francisco. Mark arrived a few minutes behind schedule on a relatively slow day at San Francisco International. With unserviced covers in hand we drove directly to the State of California Office Building near San Francisco’s City Hall rotunda, where California State Assembly Majority Whip, Fiona Ma, organized a special philatelic station in the lobby (Figure 6). [The western portion of downtown San Francisco is Assemblywoman Ma’s district.] It was here that the Olympic Torch Relay postmark was applied (Figure 5).

The cancel was designed by Mark who, working through the U.S. Olympic Committee, obtained the necessary permission to use the official Beijing Olympic Torch Relay logo as an integral part of the design. The artwork also features the logo along with text arranged in a wavy line noting the Olympic Torch Relay Station.

There were actually two distinct cancels, each with a different zip code. As originally planned, there were to be two temporary postal stations: one at the State of California Office Building with zip code 94102, and a second at Justin Herman Plaza, the finish line for the Torch Relay, with zip code 94111. For security and logistical reasons, a postal station at the latter location was unworkable, so both postmarks were offered at the State Office Building.

Upon our arrival shortly after 10 a.m. when the postal station opened, Mark and I were both surprised to see a small crowd of Chinese collectors lined up to buy stamps and have covers cancelled, some with hundreds of covers in hand. After some brief introductions, we met Kelenia Olsen from Fiona Ma’s staff who was instrumental in arranging for the temporary USPS station in the lobby. Once Mark was introduced as the designer of the cancel he was an instant celebrity and was asked to sign many autographs for the collectors and public there to celebrate the event.

Seeing that the line to have covers cancelled was long, Mark and I decided to check out the torch route. Passing through one of the City’s farmers markets we took the BART underground directly to the Embarcadero where the throngs of protesters, both for and against the relay, awaited us.
Though “Team Tibet” was out in force we were also met by a multitude of Chinese flags, both big and small, from Chinese contingents and supporters bussed into town. The protestors were vocal and generally orderly but tensions were high with a heavy presence of San Francisco police officers on foot, motorcycle and horseback.

After a quick lunch, we headed away from the central protest area south along the parade route toward where the opening ceremony was taking place at McCovey Cove adjacent to AT&T Park (home of the San Francisco Giants baseball team). Though crowds continued to line the Embarcadero to gain a glimpse of the controversial torch (Figure 7), the police presence was becoming more sparse the further along the route we ventured. Though shortening the relay was a distinct possibility – even a probability – we thought that at least some of the original route would be kept. Little did we know what was about to happen.

Our adventure soon turned into an information gathering escapade. We would speak to accredited media, protest coordinators, and basically anyone with a radio or a computer with an internet connection to find out in real time where the torch was. Periodically, I phoned my wife Lori at her office where she was monitoring the news sites for any information on what was going on.

With the helicopters now less visible, we knew the gig was up and the route had been changed. But where? With my wife still providing updates via
email, we learned the torch relay had moved to Van Ness Street on a path that was to lead it through San Francisco’s Marina district and toward the Golden Gate Bridge. At this point Mark and I agreed that seeing the torch would be difficult so we hopped in a cab and headed back to the State Office Building to service some covers.

To our surprise, the temporary post office was still doing a brisk business, though somewhat less than in the morning, with a few collectors still engaged in postmarking large lots of covers. When queried about how many covers had been processed so far that day, the USPS manager guessed some 3,600 postmarks had been applied as that was how many 41¢ Chinese New Year stamps had been sold.

After having our lot of covers cancelled and saying our goodbyes to the USPS staff, we decided to once again give chase to the Olympic flame. With my wife, still guiding us via news reports and the internet from her office, we headed off by car toward the Presidio of San Francisco at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was rumored that the torch was going to cross the Golden Gate. While following the lead of helicopters and TV crew vans, we made it to a vantage point at the Presidio where we saw the Torch Relay entourage stopped on an overhead freeway bridge. Unfortunately, by that time it had been decided to extinguish the torch and terminate the relay. While we got close, we never did get to see the Olympic flame.

Our day ended by chasing the flame back to the San Francisco International Airport where we saw the charter plane that carried the Chinese Olympic Torch Relay delegation sitting on the tarmac. In the nearby hangar, a brief closing ceremony was held out of sight of the general public.

All in all, I would say we got an “A” for effort, especially with respect to the special Torch Relay postmark which was a huge success. Though we never got to see the Olympic Torch while chasing the relay around the city of San Francisco, we did experience first hand the anger and pride that will be forever ingrained in the persona of the Beijing Games (Figure 8).

**Buenos Aires, Argentina: 10-11 April 2008**

Arriving in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the late afternoon of 10 April after an overnight flight from San Francisco, the torch was kept under wraps until the next day. The Argentines were ecstatic that they were the only city in South America selected to host the Olympic flame, and they showed their appreciation with a relatively trouble-free relay on 11 April.

In honor of the event, the Argentina postal administration issued a colorful $1 postal stationery card bearing an indicium showing the top of the flaming torch. The card displayed images of Buenos Aires and a torchbearer against a background map of the torch relay (below). A special first day postmark on 10 April reproduces the official relay logo.
Pacific & East Asia: 24-27 April 2008

Following a tour of seven countries in Africa and South/Southeast Asia, the relay visited three more nations that had previously hosted the Olympic Games.

Canberra, the capital city of Australia (Olympic hosts in 1956 at Melbourne and 2000 at Sydney) provided a secure 16 km route for the Olympic Torch Relay 24 April. Thousands of pro-Beijing Chinese turned out to cheer on the torch-bearers. A smaller crowd of pro-Tibet and other human rights activists were on hand to peacefully protest the relay.

Canberra made available a special postmark (above) similar in design to those offered in some of the other countries along the torch relay route.

The relay’s next stop was Japan on 26 April. The city chosen for this honor was Nagano, host of the 1998 Olympic Winter Games.

Original plans were for the relay to begin at the renowned Zenko-ji Buddhist temple built in the 7th century and today one of Japan’s “National Treasures.” The temple withdrew from the relay because, it is speculated, the temple’s monks sided with pro-Tibet and human rights activists. A Torch Relay cacheted cover with stamp and postmark dated 24 April 2008 depict the temple (Figure 9).

Our last stop in this review of the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay is Seoul, South Korea on 27 April. Unfortunately, the torch’s visit was again marred by violence, though this time from pro-Chinese students who gathered in the thousands along the relay route, fighting with pro-Tibet activists and throwing rocks and bottles.

A pair of postmarks in English and Korean honor the relay (right).

Seoul hosted the 1988 Olympic Games which served as the nation’s “coming out party.” The Chinese, expecting a similar result, certainly during the Torch Relay, clearly did not foresee the extensive and widespread condemnation of their record on human rights.

Divorcing sport – and particularly the Olympic Games – from politics is a fine ideal, but sadly easier said than done.

Figure 9. Cacheted Olympic Torch Relay cover with stamp and pictorial (tourist) cancel of 26 April 2008 depicting the Zenko-ji Temple in Nagano. The temple eventually withdrew its participation in the relay.