



Gold standard Marcus James tells how Royal Mail scored a world first by issuing next-day stamps of Team GB gold medal winners

AS TEAM GB CELEBRATES an amazing 29 gold medals in the London 2012 Olympic Games, Royal Mail's Stamps and Collectibles department is also feeling jubilant and a little dazed after an unprecedented two-week marathon of round-the-clock production of the Gold Medal Winner stamps. Without a doubt, this was simply the biggest challenge that the team and I had ever faced in our careers.

Delivering next-day stamps was a creative and logistical challenge that demanded a huge amount of planning, clear thinking and rigorous practice. I had been involved in planning the design delivery of this project for about two years. In the last 12 months we had been focusing particularly on a weekly



“As an avid sports fan I thoroughly enjoyed watching 16 days of solid entertainment for professional purposes. It has been a real honour.” **Dean Price, Design Manager**



testing of the process. For this, the team looked at thousands of images from previous Olympic Games, including Sydney, Athens and Beijing, and conducted practice runs, using images of every possible event to ensure that we were ready for the summer. Robust contingency plans also had to be put in place – I had to consider how to deal with internet failure or a major power cut and what would happen if a member of the team was ill. All these potential problems could compromise delivery and demanded tried and tested solutions. We also needed a team rota that covered every minute of the 16 days of events.

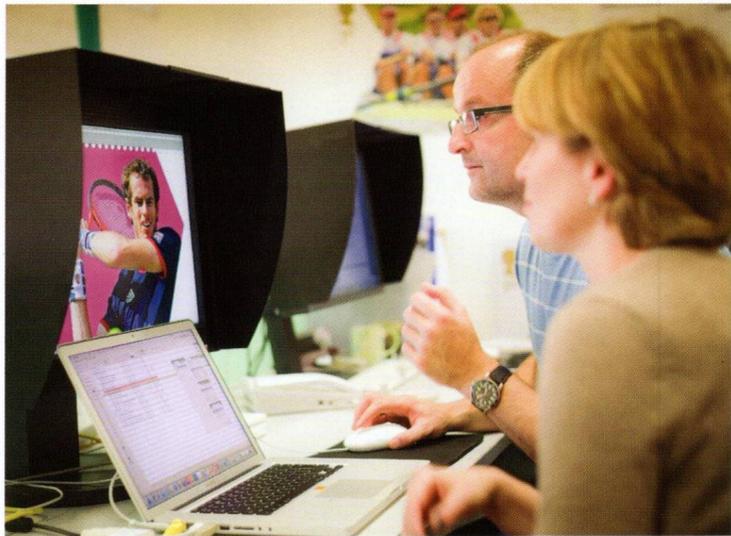
A standard Royal Mail stamp issue takes an average of 18 months from commission to appearing in post offices: eight months is normally devoted to design development, six weeks to approvals from various parties and the rest of the time is taken up with printing and distribution. Clearly, this would not be possible for the Gold Medal Winner stamps. We would have just one hour to design these! For this reason, the process and the stamp design templates were pre-approved and all departments prepared for something ▶

Members of the Royal Mail Stamps and Collectibles department involved in the Gold Medal Winner stamps programme, photographed on 10 August 2012.

Left to right: Clare Shedden, Lisa Breen, Sophie Paynter, Dean Price, Sarah Jones, Helen Cumberbatch, Stewart Tyson, Eliza Marciniak, Lee Ellwood, Julietta Edgar, David Gillespie, Philip Parker, Marcus James, Cat Hill, Catharine Brandy, Andrew Hammond, Kim Cruickshank, Alastair Pether, Julie Murray, Mick Fletcher and Martyn Fry

☞ The medal is what the athletes work for, yet they seemed genuinely excited to see their image on a stamp. That was very motivating – it was a privilege to contribute that something extra to each win ☞

Catharine Brandy, Design Manager, pictured with Marcus James, right



completely different from anything previously undertaken by Royal Mail. We usually art-direct and manage other designers and writers. But many hours of rehearsing meant that the team was well prepared and everyone stepped up to the challenge to ensure they were ready for each day.

The biggest worry was always the quality of photographs. As we were using action photographs taken on the day of the event, we had no idea what we would get until they arrived from the picture agency, Getty Images. When working on

☞ An intense experience! This project is bound to make a contribution to our cultural milieu ☞ **Eliza Marciniak, Editorial Manager**

☞ It has been an absolute privilege to work with such fantastic colleagues; the best two weeks of my career ☞ **Helen Cumberbatch, Editorial Manager**



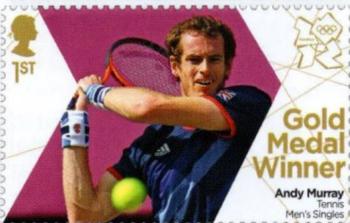
a normal stamp issue, picture researchers have months to find the best images. For the Gold Medal Winner stamps we had a 30-minute window to select the image, crop it, balance the colour and carry out any necessary specialist retouching.

Also critical to our success was a huge amount of scheduling, record-keeping and research. We needed to know which heats Team GB had qualified for, familiarise ourselves with the athletes and understand all the different sports. Part of this task fell to the editorial team, whose meticulous research and planning ensured we were well prepared.

We were making stamp history – this was the first time anyone had issued next-day stamps using photos taken of the actual events the gold medallists had won. So, unsurprisingly, tension began to rise as the Games drew near. There were equal amounts of nervous expectation and excitement. But as we spent more time considering potential images and practising our retouching skills, the mood in our office in Old Street, London, was ►



Above: special postmarks dated according to each of the 29 gold medal wins are available from Tallents House until 10 September



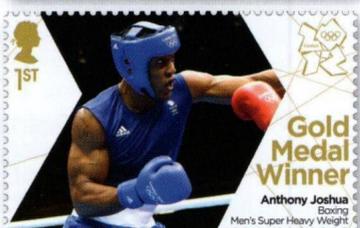
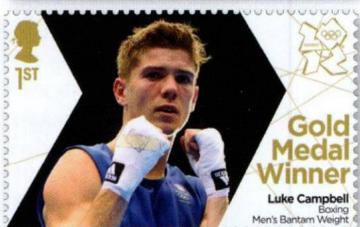
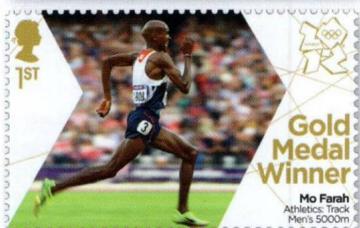
“The highlight for me was watching rower Katherine Copeland yelling with joy at Sophie Hosking in their moment of triumph: “We’ve won... we’re going to be on a stamp”. Minutes later I was putting their photographs on that stamp”
Alastair Pether, Design Manager

This is the first time that next-day stamps have been issued by Royal Mail. Australia Post was the first to achieve this in 2000, followed by Hellenic Post in Greece in 2004. Our world first lies in the fact that these new stamps will make the UK the only host country to have used action shots for gold medal stamps and issued them to such a large network of post offices during the Games within 24 hours of the event



“I’m very proud of everybody involved. Moments of pressure were handled with good humour and the results have been fantastic”

Sarah Jones,
Design Manager,
pictured with Lee Ellwood



very positive. Our vision was always to create Gold Medal Winner stamps that were completely different from what had gone before. I wanted to capture a moment that precisely represented that gold medal being won – the exact moment of crossing the line, a last-second burst of physical and mental endeavour, an expression of jubilation or triumphant determination, an action image that captured both the essence of the sport and the character of the individual athlete.

The first four days were really strange. After the terrific London 2012 opening ceremony, we sat down to watch each and every potential gold GB win on television screens, with a rota of different team members ready and waiting to act on each win. Everyone was cheering on Team GB and raring to go... and we won no golds. It was a really tense time. Then on the first Wednesday, 1 August, a dramatic change of gear came with the first gold medal win.

'We've won gold!' The cry went up across the land. Helen Glover and Heather Stanning had won the women's rowing pairs and a whooping cheer from our whole team kicked off the most nerve-racking stamp of them all – the first one. Our well-rehearsed plans went live and the clock started ticking. Editors prepared the text files listing the athletes' names and other caption information. The designers started watching out for the best image to capture that magic moment. The last year of practice prepared us for finding the photograph that works in the stamp's chevron design and also shows the win in the most engaging way. Once the image was pulled into the stamp design, it was a race against time to select the best crop and do any retouching needed to make the image as strong as possible. Then the stamp was flowed into the miniature sheet format and the A4 stamp sheet, ready for a final editorial check. The image was e-mailed to LOCOG for approval and files handed to the production team, ready for the printers.

Saturday 4 August was the greatest challenge of all. Six wins in one day: Jessica Ennis at around 21.09, Greg Rutherford at around 21.27 and Mo Farah at about 21.55 – all in 45 minutes! The memory of creating those three stamps in such quick succession will stay with me always. Seeing the team react in such a calm and professional way was brilliant! The months of planning had paid off. They swept into action and created six stunning stamps that day, each within an hour of the win; printers were at the ready; the team at Tallents House despatched pre-ordered stamps at an amazing rate; and the Swindon depot swung into action for next-day distribution of six special deliveries to post offices.

The process of design, production, fulfilment and next-day availability has reaffirmed Royal Mail's international reputation for innovation and excellence. The teamwork across all departments has been exceptional, and everyone played an integral part in this success. A universal sense of commitment and good humour has made this a truly rewarding experience. Everyone involved feels extremely proud and honoured to have been part of this once-in-a-lifetime event. We hope you like the stamps! ●

Marcus James is Head of Design and Editorial, Royal Mail Stamps and Collectibles



Above: the chevron used on the stamp templates was inspired by the London 2012 logo. The strong graphic shape suggests movement and helped focus attention on a striking image of the athlete

‘We have been training for this stamp marathon for a long time. I feel proud of the results and proud to be involved in celebrating the amazing achievements of world-class athletes’

Clare Shedden, Design Manager