

DESIGNING SPORTS SHADOWBOXES

By John Raney II, CPF, GCF



● Note that the framer has actually used all three colors of the Broncos jersey in the matting selection. The curved opening at the top helps balance out the added detail at the bottom area of the design.

Whether you are framing a signed professional sports jersey or a collection of World War II memorabilia in a shadowbox, the core design and mounting challenges are the same; you want to produce an interesting design that has a certain “wow” element for the customer, but you also need to protect and preserve the objects being framed. In my framing seminars on this subject, I have often told fellow framers who may be overwhelmed by this task that it can be simplified by focusing on those two main goals—creating a framing presentation that is both aesthetically pleasing and mechanically sound.

As most of us know, framing sports memorabilia can be profitable. In this day and age, many consumers—even those who might typically order framing online or visit a big-box craft store—will venture into an independent custom frame shop with a sports jersey in hand. They come to you because they want it done right. The jersey (or other piece of sports memorabilia) is an emotional keepsake, whether it came from their favorite NFL player or their daughter’s soccer team, so they feel the need to see a professional framer to come up with the design.

Before we explore some design ideas for framing sports memorabilia in shadowboxes, there is an import-



● Note that the framer has embraced the capability of his CMC by reproducing the team logo in gold pen upon the centered panel design. The anniversary dates have also been drawn onto the matting, which is a bit subtler than had they been cut into the mat.

ant note I'd like to make about the sales side of the process. As many of you already know, customers who don't typically frequent frame shops may be unprepared for the cost of framing a sports jersey. Jerseys are complex, and framing them correctly is labor-intensive, with multiple components involved. They also require a larger-than-average frame most of the time. All of this contributes to the final price tag.

It's a good idea to have that discussion with your customer up front. Using proper terminology and speaking to the honestly right from the start will help dispel any price shock that might have come later. Doing this also makes it easier for you to start pulling out great, creative design ideas to get your customer excited about the project.

THE SPORTS JERSEY: WHAT MAKES A DESIGN GREAT?

This is subjective to some degree, but generally speaking, less is more, and we want to work with harmonic, complementary colors when designing around a sports jersey. We want the accent colors of the jersey to stand out and not have to compete with the framing.

However, due to the dramatic nature of the beast, sometimes these rules of design do get thrown out the window.

Sometimes a customer will ask for an "over-the-top" design—I get that. In those cases, we as framers need to find a comfortable balance. The other area where framers wrestle with design is the incorporation of matting, as the matting is much narrower than one would suggest for, say, a piece of fine art of the same size. A framer who would propose a 4" to 5" mat on a watercolor of 40" x 32" will often only use a 2" mat or less on a sports jersey of similar proportions. I think it's important to recognize that one of the basic functions of matting is to create some breathing space between the artwork and the frame and environment. Introducing a solution like matting—in other words, letting the background create this breathing space—gives us a bit more area around the subject, as seen in the Green Bay Packers shadowbox illustrated here (page 16).

TELLING A STORY

In the Packers example, you will also see multiple other elements added to the frame design, such as Super Bowl medallion coins and collectible rookie cards. The idea with shadowbox presentations is that any stranger can put together why the item is framed and what it is all about without hearing an explanation. This is true with any shadowbox framing challenge, whether it be military memorabilia from a family member or a wedding memory box.

It is always better to have a few too many items to add and decide with the customer which ones to include and keep in the presentation. This almost always comes down to a combination of emotion (what's important to the owner) and which items truly complement the main subject.

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY: CMCS AND ALTERNATIVES

There is no question that the computerized mat cutter has given custom framers the ability to do amazing things with sophisticated, intricate cuts. It's knowing when and how to wield this power that is sometimes tricky.

Here (top left), Tim Frates of MegaPixel in Montrose, CO, has incorporated the Denver Broncos logo into his matting presentation, which helps tell the whole story. He utilized both a Valiani CMC and a Trotec Speedy 300 laser cutting machine to create these intricate designs.

This blue and black Inter Milan jersey has also been matted, but with a different concept of hugging the outline of the jersey. One advantage of a design of this style is that it can maximize the amount of matting. Created by Italian framer Massimiliano Cincinelli, what really sets this design



● Please note the walled sides with solid green backing rather than matting, which creates a bit more breathing space. Also, the color choice of complementary green allows the gold accent colors of the jersey to stand out.

apart is his use of incorporating the team logo and 100th anniversary details within a band of matting across the waist of the jersey. All the cutting was executed on a Valiani CMC, which allowed the framer to take on such challenges. The football club's logo has also been duplicated with a gold stylus writing head on his CMC.

MOUNTING CONSIDERATIONS

When talking about framing sports jerseys, it's important to address the techniques used to mount them and keep them



● The white-on-white presentation works wonders with the multi-colored lanyards, ribbons, and photographs incorporated in this display. The design to conceal the medal lanyard under the document is simple genius!

stable. Reversibility is an obvious key consideration, as is using preservation-grade materials and techniques. While some framers still sew mount the entire jersey into position, others use a tagging gun such as those from Attach-EZ.

A third option is to use a combination of both these solutions when mounting a jersey, first creating a custom form within the jersey made of Coroplast (fluted polyester corrugated board). This combination technique may allow for greater efficiency and accuracy. Most framers already know that the use of adhesives, glues, and staples of any sort are not appropriate when mounting a jersey.

Another key to success is creating a substrate that is strong enough to support the jersey and collateral material while also remaining lightweight. We have found that mat-board mounted to 5mm foam core creates a great substrate that can be penetrated by a pin or small Dremel drill, allowing for polyester tags or sewing.

Let's examine memorabilia from an AAU Swimming—Junior Olympics performance by Peyton Robertson. Framed by Barb Pelton of Artfully Framed in Poplar Bluff, MO, this design has the challenge of framing five different objects, including a document poster and medal with lanyard.

Sports medals with lanyards often challenge framers during the design process; it's a lot of loose material to work with. What to do with it? Pelton's solution was to hide the length of the material underneath the document, revealing just enough that viewer sees the continuity.

When we talk about frame design, one prevailing theory is when the mat cutting becomes complex, a good framer minimizes color so the presentation doesn't overpower the focus on the art. In this case, the white matting and white frame works beautifully and allows each component to stand out. It's clean, balanced, and creative.

All shadowboxes present unique challenges. How we utilize basic elements of good design and sound mounting techniques will assure that the project not only pleases the customer, but also that it passes the test of time. **PFM**



John Ranes

John is an instructor of framing workshops and seminars worldwide. John teaches for the Professional Picture Framers Association and consults for The Fletcher-Terry Company and Tru Vue. John was awarded the PPFA Lifetime Achievement Award at the Las Vegas Convention in January 2015. John, with his wife, Sarah, own The Frame Workshop of Appleton, a frame shop and gallery in Appleton, WI, which has won over 100 framing awards, including two successive awards from the Fine Art Trade Guild in the UK as well as a National Australian Framing Competition award. His shop opened in 1978 expanded in 2009, and has diversified into Gifts, Christmas Collectibles and Home Décor. Their business celebrated 40 years in September 2018.