

Sports Photography Tips

By Peter Skinner

At some time or other most photographers want to capture the action of a sporting event, perhaps a school sports day where their children are participating or at a tournament or match in which they have a special interest. The subject of sports photography is extensive and as with playing sports, the more you practice the better you will be. However, there are relatively simple techniques you can use to make your images more interesting and even add the “wow” factor to them.

First, you have to plan what you want to photograph and this depends to a large extent on the sport. Photographing a tennis match, or any other game that is defined by boundaries—such as football, soccer, rugby, hockey—will dictate where you position yourself. An event over a long course—such a road cycling race or a triathlon—offers the opportunity to shoot from several different locations so it is up to you to determine what those locations are, and how to access them.



Put simply, there is no right or wrong way to shoot sports. It’s an individual choice determined by you own vision, creativity, your visual goals, and access to the action. Knowing the sport is critical—not necessarily the finer points of the rules, but the likely flow of action and what the athletes are likely to do in any given situation. Will the quarterback run or throw? Who is the intended receiver? Your chances of getting a good shot are enhanced if you know what’s likely

to happen and you plan accordingly. Top pro sports shooters also get to know the athletes and their style of play so they can plan accordingly.

Before going any further, it's worth mentioning one of the potential problems when shooting sports with point-and-shoot digital cameras—shutter lag or delay, the time the electronics of the camera take to activate the shutter and for the image to be written to the memory card. This can be frustrating, to say the least. So, if you intend to photograph sports quite often, investing in a digital single lens reflex camera and lens system would be wise. Regardless, inquire about the shutter lag of any camera before you buy. Shutter lag is less of an issue with film cameras but as more and more people are using digital equipment it's advisable to ask about this first. Technology is improving all the time, so it's possible that eventually shutter lag will be a thing of the past. But for now, be aware of it.

Peak of action images: Anticipate the action and shoot before the peak of that action. If you shoot exactly as it happens by the time you react and the shutter clicks, you will have missed the peak moment. You might get a good shot, but perhaps not the great one. Knowing the sport will help you plan to capture the peak of action.



Speed and motion: Sports involve motion and speed and an excellent way to portray that is to use a slow shutter speed and blur parts of the subject. There are several ways to achieve this blurring effect. One is to simply use a slow shutter speed, of about 1/60 sec. or slower and photograph the subject. As with any technique like this, results will vary and might not be consistent but after some practice you will get an idea of what to expect. Another way to infuse

that feeling of speed is to pan the camera with the subject. The background will be blurred and the subject will stand out.



To get predictable results with panning shots do the following: 1. Pre-focus on the spot the athletes will pass. 2. As they approach compose on your subject and follow them in the viewfinder. 3. Shoot just before the subject reaches the pre-focused location (i.e. anticipate the action). 4. As you press the shutter, keep panning with the subject. In sports parlance, follow through. If you have a rapid film advance and can shoot several frames in succession, using that feature will increase your chances of getting a good shot. The best way to pan with the action is to rotate your body with the movement of the subject, press the shutter, and keep panning. Using a slow shutter speed—as slow as 1/15 sec.—and a smaller aperture will give you a greater depth of field, i.e. more of the area will be focus from near to far. Depending on your ISO—speed of film—and lighting conditions, a typical aperture with ISO 100 would be in the vicinity of 1/30sec. @ f32.

Practice your focusing technique: Even with auto focus, getting sharp images of fast moving sports subjects takes practice and auto focus is not infallible. The best way to increase your chances is to practice, whether you are manually focusing—and yes, sports pros still do use manual focus under certain situations—or relying on the camera's inbuilt auto focusing capabilities. And one of the best ways of photographing fast moving subjects is to shoot vehicles in everyday traffic. Set yourself up where you can photograph cars coming down a road towards you; pan as they go by; and even shoot as they move away from you. It's all good practice. You might get some strange looks but you'll quickly find out how good you—or your camera's auto focus—are.

Tripods and monopods: Camera movement is one of the main contributors to ruined images. And while most photographers can hand hold cameras fairly well, there's a reason that most pros who shoot sports use a monopod—to ensure consistent results they need to keep that camera steady, especially if using longer lenses. If you need mobility, a good monopod is an excellent tool. On the other hand, if you are going to be in the one spot for a long time—such as when photographing a surfing event—a sturdy tripod is a good thing to have.

Other topics I will cover in future will include using different lenses for different looks, shooting in artificial light, and the best ways to shoot individual sports.

(Peter Skinner's latest book *Sports Photography: How to Capture Action and Emotion* will be published by Allworth Press www.allworth.com in mid-2007.)