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# Effective Sports Photography

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Photographing sporting events provides an exciting and challenging opportunity for both amateur and professional photographers who wish to try new avenues of photographic expression and technical challenge. As the American photojournalist and National Geographic photographer Jim Richardson has been quoted as saying, *“if you want to be a better photographer, stand in front of more interesting stuff”*. The exciting and fast moving action, colorful uniforms, the range of emotions and facial expressions running from sheer joy to heartbreaking disappointment, and the drama inherent in winning and losing all work to qualify sports as “interesting stuff”.

For those looking to challenge their photographic skills, to try something a little different and outside of their normal comfort zone, sports photography is good place to look. While landscapes, portraits, still life and street photography are common subjects for many photographers, sports photography is a little different for most people and poses some unique technical and artistic challenges for photographers.

### Determining What to Shoot

Most sporting events are characterized by fast moving plays that require the photographer to constantly be on the ready and able to anticipate action as it develops. On the field, court, track or other venue, there is frequently lots of action to choose from and you’ve got to be able to determine where you set your sights which camera settings to select to capture the best images. It is always helpful to know something about the sport you are shooting: what the important plays are that make the most compelling photographs, who the important players are, the rules of competition and any history between the competing teams to be able to focus on any long-standing rivalries between competitors.

Taking pictures of the venue and crowds can help you document the event from a more photojournalistic perspective. You’re also certain to find interesting and colorful subjects, both architectural and human, when you scan the venue and crowds. Sports fans are a passionate and sometimes eccentric group and you don’t want to miss some wonderful photo opportunities that take place outside the boundaries of the game. Take, for example, these fans, below, at NASCAR race and Syracuse University basketball game.



You should also pay attention to the sidelines and benches where some wonderful photo opportunities can be found of players cheering on their teammates, or coaches sharing private moments with their players. Be sure also to look for photo opportunities during the pre-game and post-game periods.

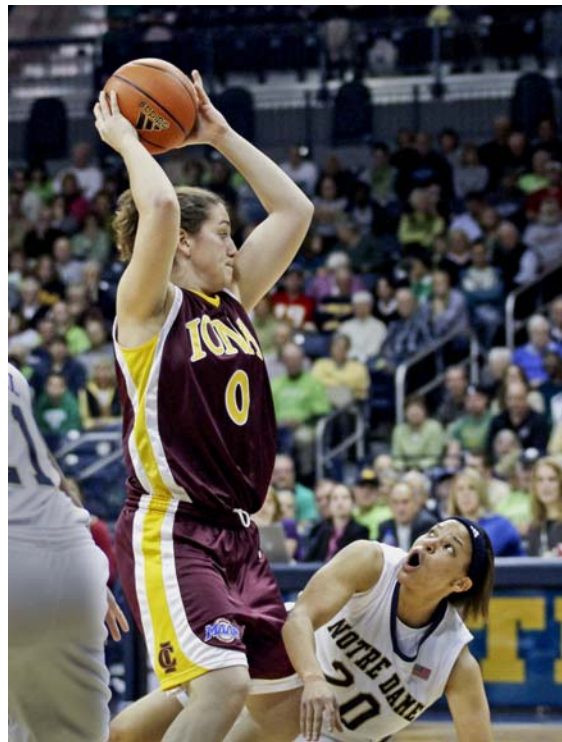


The pictures above and below, respectively, capture NASCAR drivers Casey Mears and Jimmy Johnson in private moments with their daughters before a race at Phoenix International Raceway.



But realize that what is most important is capturing the competition of the event and what follows is some advice on how to get the best pictures. It is rarely helpful to shoot players from the back and photo editors for sports publications often reject images that don't contain the players' faces. As Rod Mar, team photographer for the NFL Seattle Seahawks and staff photographer for the Seattle Times writes in his instructive article on how to photograph football, *"The essence of all sports photography can be captured in the old adage, often repeated by crusty old wire service editors to young wannabees: 'two faces and a ball, kid, two faces and a ball' "*.

Not only does the adage, *"two faces and a ball"* help make for great photographs but it is even better when those faces show human emotions such as intensity, anger or fear as is shown in the following images from a Syracuse University men's' and Notre Dame University women's' basketball game demonstrate the power of *"two faces and a ball"*.



### **Determining Shooting Location**

When shooting events like football, soccer, lacrosse and rugby which are played on fields 100 yards in length you need to determine and gain access to a suitable shooting position and then determine if the action will occur close to you or on a distant part of the field. This will affect your choice of lens. Wide-angle lenses can provide photographs that span large sections of the playing field and allow you to catch action near your shooting position. Telephoto prime lenses such as the 400mm, 500mm and 600mm lenses are well-suited for shooting across the field and for getting those all important tight shots of faces, hands and

player interactions. If shooting with a single camera, the 70 – 200mm or 100 – 400mm lenses will give you a good degree of latitude. If possible, bring two camera bodies with you, setting up one to cover action close by and one to provide reach to the far ends of the venue.

The perspective that you can achieve in games such as football and basketball are vastly different depending on whether you are shooting from the sidelines or the end zone. For example, when shooting basketball, the most common and sought after position is the photographers “pit” at the baseline either to the immediate right or left of the basket (below).



This position allows you to capture the offensive players, head on, as they drive in towards the basket and to photograph the all important dunks while shooting up from under the basket.



Not only is this a great angle to capture the offensive and defensive player’s faces during the dunk but the angle of shooting up towards the basket from below adds to the sense of height. Sometimes it is all right to break the rules in photography and, although the next two pictures are shot from the player’s back, the images still effectively capture the game action.

I also like to wander, occasionally, to the sidelines where you can capture action from the side that includes a background of the stands and shoot across the court to photograph activity on the team benches. One particular position I like to shoot from is within the spectator seating, at the level of the basket where, with a telephoto lens, you can capture the action of a dunk at player eye level.



### Photographic Composition

The elements of good composition, applicable to areas of general photography, hold true for sports photography as well. The most compelling sports photographs are those that highlight an element of action with a minimum of confusing background clutter. As photographer, author and Canon Explorer of Light Rick Sammon is fond of saying, “*The name of the game is to fill the frame*”. Your final image should comprise mostly your main subject, not lots of empty space or background. While some of this can be achieved by cropping in post-processing, cropping down too much can reduce the resolution of your final image and result in less than optimal

results. It is better to try and fill the frame with your main subject while composing the image in your camera. Another common way to achieve separation of your main subject from the background by using a large aperture (small f/stop number), creating a shallow depth of field that will help throw the background out of focus. Both techniques were used to make the image below, shot from the end zone at a Notre Dame football game.



The placement of the main subject within the frame of your photograph can also enhance the look of your final image. Placement of your main subject in accordance with the rule of thirds can help contribute to an aesthetically pleasing photograph.



The use of diagonals in a photograph help to convey a sense of action or dynamic tension which can be lost in an otherwise sharply focused picture. When going through the hundreds of images you capture during a single game, try and select those in which the players or parts of their bodies lie along diagonal lines within the frame of the photograph.



### Technical Considerations

In addition to selecting what to shoot, where to shoot from, and how to compose your photographs, the technical considerations of actually using your camera are of paramount importance and include your selection of

shutter speed, aperture, ISO and shooting mode.

### ***Shutter Speed and Aperture***

Fast lenses, characterized by low f/stops such as 1.4, 1.8 and 2.8, are ideal for sports photography because they allow you to maximize shutter speed using the lowest possible ISO settings. A fast lens will also allow you to shoot with a wide-open aperture to minimize the depth of field and ensure that your photographs will capture sharp detail against a blurred background. In some circumstances, you'll want to select a high f/stop (small aperture) so that you can capture several players in sharp detail even if they are not all in the same plane of focus. The picture below was photographed with a shutter speed of 1/1000 to freeze the action and with an aperture set to f/4, slightly stopped down from the lens' maximum f/2.8, to ensure that the majority of players would be in reasonable focus yet allowing for some blurring of the background stands.



Shooting in the manual mode gives you the greatest level of control. Many guides to sports photography recommend that you shoot in the aperture priority mode with your camera dialed into the widest aperture (smallest f/stop number) available on the lens you are using. This recommendation is targeted toward ensuring that your camera will select the fastest possible shutter speed to obtain proper exposure. In low light situations however, you run the risk of your camera selecting a shutter speed that may be too slow to freeze the action. Conversely, selecting shutter priority mode allows you to lock in the ideal shutter speed for the action you wish to capture and

letting the camera choose the best aperture to achieve proper exposure. The downside of this setting is that you may not be shooting with the ideal aperture to either fully blur the background or to achieve focus through out the depth of the photograph, whichever may be your preference.

When I first enter a venue, I'll move around to each of the shooting positions that I might be using and, with the camera's built in exposure meter, determine the ideal settings for shutter speed, aperture and ISO at each location. I'll write these down on a small note card that I keep with me throughout the event. If your camera allows, you might wish to program these various settings into the camera's custom function selections. Be sure to try and do this while players are warming up before the game, being sure to meter off their uniforms and/or faces with center-weighted metering selected. It's best not to leave this to chance as, once the game starts, you'll want nothing to distract you from following the action and shooting away.

### ***Shooting Mode***

Manual mode allows you to select both the shutter speed and aperture ideal for the image you want to create. Depending on the low light sensitivity of your particular camera body and the effectiveness with which your camera's built in processor handles noise, you can select a higher ISO setting necessary to achieve your desired shutter speed and aperture settings. With the improved noise reduction capability of Adobe's Photoshop CS5 and Lightroom 3, and with several other noise reduction software solutions available, high ISO pictures can still yield reasonable results in low light situations.

### ***Autofocus Settings***

Since you'll be photographing action that moves quickly across the frame of your camera's sensor as well as moving closer and farther away from you, it is best to set your autofocus tracking to AI-Servo (Canon) or AF-Continuous (Nikon). This will allow your camera's autofocus system to lock on to a specific player when you initially compose and press the shutter release half-way and to continue tracking that specific player as he or she moves around the field of play. In order to

ensure that your camera's focus remains locked on this particular player and does not recompose focus on another player who may cross in front of the original player you've locked on to, be sure to set your autofocus tracking sensitivity to a low setting. In Canon cameras this would be *autofocus tracking sensitivity* set to "low" and in Nikons, *focus tracking with lock on* set to "long".

It is usually best to select a single focus point rather than a zone or evaluative and to use the center focus point as the one you select. In most digital SLR cameras the center focus point will be the most sensitive as it typically consists of a cross-point type sensor where the focus points towards the periphery might not. Since you will most likely be shooting a moving subject, be sure to engage the focus point expansion setting which will allow your camera to engage surrounding focus points, as necessary, to keep your main subject in focus if it is temporarily lost by the center focus point.

### ***Metering Mode***

Since your primary subject may be wearing either a dark or a light uniform which differs greatly from the illumination of the other team's uniform, from the playing surface, and from the background, you'll want to set your exposure meter to evaluate the scene from the area immediately surrounding your main subject and to de-emphasize readings from other regions within the frame. To do this, select the center-weighted metering (assuming you are using the center focus point and initially composing your shot with the main subject in the center) and not spot, evaluative or matrix metering.

### ***Frame Advance Rate***

It will be incredibly difficult to anticipate and time the live game action to capture the perfect image with a single exposure so why not take advantage of your camera's rapid shooting and focus tracking capability if you have it. Selected as the "frame advance" or "drive" mode, you'll do no harm in selecting your camera's highest rate.

The picture below is a composite of the individual frames shot with a Canon 7D at 8 frames per second.



### ***Image Quality***

I recommend that you always shoot in your RAW mode since you'll most likely be facing frequent low light, bright light or variable light source conditions. RAW image capture will allow you to extract the most data from the shadows when shooting in low light conditions, from the highlights when shooting in harsh lighting conditions and to adjust the white balance in post-processing. Since shooting at a high frame rate and capturing RAW images will quickly fill up camera memory, be sure to bring plenty of high capacity memory cards and, preferably, those with a high writing speed.

No go out and shoot.

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