



# ACTION SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY A BRIEF GUIDE WITH TIPS AND TRICKS

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**D**id you ever wonder why your snapshots taken last weekend at the sports event look so different than those pictures published in those glossy magazines? Yes, you are not a professional photographer but by considering some points, you might improve your results at least.

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## INTRO

Who am I (the author of this document) daring to "teach" you (the reader) about photography, sports photography in particular? Don't worry, I do not want to teach anything, I am just writing down the things I have learnt over the last few years exercising my favorite hobby. I learnt by trying, failing, reading, experimenting and so on. To advance you will need exactly that, too. But being familiar with a couple of principles your learning curve might be steeper - that's all! In principle the collection of advice applies to all sports in general. With my preference to Watersports like Wakeboarding or Kite-Boarding, I might often refer to those sports in particular.

## SOME REFLECTION BEFORE SHOOTING

I am talking about sports photography. In sports everything is about action. Ok, I admit that there are some exceptions, but who is considering Chess an action sport? Back again to the subject: action. So action means movement, fast movement most often. That means that things are generally happening pretty fast. That's why I suggest to do some of the thinking before shooting to be quicker and more focused during the event. Think of what are the particular moves or tricks in this sport? What single picture will be able to transmit the emotions of the



sport?

And what do you want to convey with your photos. Based on this you can make the photo in your mind first and then "just" try to take it in real. This will help you to focus on your mission and in getting your photo.

N.B. It is always a good thing to get inspired by other photographers work. Look at some pictures and try to understand why you prefer some of them and more and why you like less some others. From there, develop what you like.

## KNOW YOU KNOW JUST A REMINDER

Photography is taking one single image. A triple loop looks the same as a single loop in a photo. A 720-degree rotation looks the same as a 360. So try



to get some variation in your images. Simple moves often carry the same emotion as difficult tricks and look as good as those many times. Simple moves (e.g. a "grab" in Wakeboarding or Kite-Boarding) can be done much more precisely by the athlete and the duration of the trick is usually longer. That will give you much more time to plan, compose and take the photo.

## BACK TO THE BASICS

I don't want to make this guide an introduction to photography, but let me nevertheless resume some of the basics. Point and shoot vs. SLR. While basically you can be "lucky" to make a great photo with any camera, modern SLRs (single lens reflex camera) will give you a much better chance to do so. Why? SLRs give you much more possibilities to preselect the behavior of the camera. The most important advantage of SLRs is the shutter delay. This is the time between pushing the shutter button and the moment the camera actually takes the

photo. This delay is composed of many things like time for exposure measurement, auto-focus etc. SLRs have so called "shutter lags" of under 60 milliseconds while point and shoot cameras are around some 10th of a second. Both seems pretty quick - but action in your favorite sport might even be quicker and so you click in the decisive moment to take the photo but you might just have missed the action by some 10th of a second.

Another advantage of SLRs is the possibility to interchange lenses. This will allow you to mount anything between super-wide-angle lenses (14-20mm, you can cover a large scene from very close) to super tele-photo lenses of 200mm or more (200 to 800mm, to get close-up shots from action that is very far).



I usually carry 3 lenses with me: a 24-105mm "all-round" lens for wide angle shots, group portraits etc., a 70-200mm for close-up shots catching the action and a 15mm "Fish-eye" for special effects.

## PROGRAM SELECTION

Everything starts with the selection of the camera's Program. Usually all cameras come with an "Auto" Program. This is just fine in many cases - but not for sports. The "Auto" Program is calculating the best average of shutter speed, aperture and ISO sensibility for average situations. As said sport is fast, so we need to help the camera in taking better decisions for the particular needs of photography. You can either choose the "Sport" Program on your camera or go into "shutter priority" mode. The objective is the same: make the duration of the exposure as short as possible. The "shutter priority" mode is usually marked as "T" or "Tv". In this mode you can manually select the shutter speed. The rest of the settings will be automatically adjusted to ensure a proper ex-

posure of the images. Depending on the available light you might chose a shutter speed of 1/1000th of a second or even shorter. This will "freeze" the action and avoid too much blur in the image.

## AUTOFOCUS

Modern cameras have an impressive performance on autofocus. In default mode, the camera is measuring the distance of the subject at the moment you press the shutter button down half-way. In sports photography you frame the subject, press the shutter button down half-way and



you follow the subject until you choose to take the image. During this time the distance of the subject might have been changing. If that was the case your picture will be out of focus. To avoid this there is a autofocus mode that continuously recalculates the distance until you release the shutter fully. If your camera has this option, activate it. It is referenced as "AI Servo" or similar, check your camera's user manual for details.

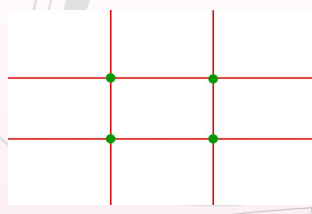
## POSITION

Depending on the sport and the kind of photos you want to take it is important to position yourself correctly. Do you want to get close-ups of the athletes during preparation? You want to capture the start of the competition or the finish? Do you want to freeze details of action or showing the sportive and his environment? From the answers you should determine which spot is the right one to position yourself. (Always think about to avoid disturbing or distracting the athletes or getting yourself in danger) Find a place that gives you a straight view on the action without other spectators in front of you or pre-

venting you to see the action. By the way: Nothing is more annoying than having the head of another spectator in the frame, an arm or anything else which shouldn't be there. Technically, always try to put yourself in between the sun and the object you want to photograph. This will help you to get a good lighting and will avoid too difficult lighting situations. (n.b. there are always exceptions to every rule. For creative reasons you might want to just see a silhouette of the athlete).

## COMPOSITION

Basically it depends on the kind of picture you want to take or the message you would like to express. But there are again some basic principles that will help you to get that one step closer to the professionals. "Fill the frame", means try to get as close as possible to the subject (physically or via a tele-lens) without boring surrounding stuff that is not improving the quality or message of the picture. Choose the angle by trying to avoid the standard view on the



sport. Get up to take pictures from high views, get down very low to take pictures upwards, just get a view that is that little different than the guy's just next to you. Get photos less boring by placing the subject off center. The typical "snapshot" aims the subject in the perfect center of the picture. Try to position the focus slightly off center (horizontally and vertically) - this will bring much more dynamics to the photo and will make it distinguish from the average.

## FLASH

Depending on the conditions of the shooting you may need to de-acti-

vate the flash of your camera. Flashes during a competition may be forbidden as they distract the athletes. In many cases the flash won't help anyway, as the distance to the subject in most cases is too far away for the limited power it can provide. On the other side, while doing a dedicated photo session with permission of the athlete, you may use the flash as "fill-in". This can be very useful when you are close to the sportive and the sun or any other major light-source is behind him. The flash will then help to obtain a decent exposure of the athlete, increase contrast and color intensity.

## SHOOT STANDARDS THEN GET CREATIVE

Once you start to cover events "formally" you need to have at least some standard shots that you can deliver what ever comes. Take some photos on the safe side. Once you have those images on the card, start playing around, get creative. This is the time when the real fun starts and you can try new things or to get those non-usual or exceptional images. As always, sometimes it needs a lucky hand, but as your "standards" are covered, you can take the chance!

## POST PROCESSING

It is almost self-



speaking, that for great photos post processing is a must. Once you have selected your "keepers", you need to work them individually. Post processing is a

discipline for itself. There are many many ways to improve or to individualize your images. I will dedicate an article to this in the near future. Here I want to focus on the 2 most important corrections.

### Crop

Crop your images to the essential, cut out any unnecessary space around the action or athlete. Doing this you should take the rules of thirds into consideration. This means to avoid having the subject in the plain center of the image. Rather place it on one of the crossing points of two virtual vertical and horizontal lines, dividing your image in 9 equal pieces. The athlete should also always have some free space in the direction of his movement to avoid the impression of being constraint.

### Straighten the horizon

At least myself, I always tend to slightly incline my camera when following the action. That leads to horizons that are not straight. It can be easily corrected in rotating the image in the opposite direction in your image software.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Outdoor sports might not always take place in sunny conditions - be prepared to have some protective gear for you and your equipment available in case it starts raining. You know what you need to get protected from rain or cold. A cheap but effective solution to protect your camera is a shower cap that you will find in most of the hotel rooms. Of course, some more sophisticated protection is required if you want to take pictures in the water for instance.

## WRAP UP

So, it's not the material that makes your photos special, it's you. The way you approach the theme,

the subject. Try out things that seem not obvious in the first place, try different angles, positions and mo-

ments and you might get THE shot! There is no better school than shooting, shooting, shooting. With the time you'll gather experience which will make your photos stand out from the crowd. Let me know what you think of this article. To post your feedback, your tips and tricks and your images I have opened a dedicated blog section on my website: <http://www.sportsphoto.ch/wordpress>

If you would like to find out more on shooting sports events have a look on [www.sportsphoto.ch](http://www.sportsphoto.ch) or contact me directly at [contact@sportsphoto.ch](mailto:contact@sportsphoto.ch).

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