Capturing a "Sports" Image for Camera Club Competition

Introduction

- Taking images since 1978, and sports since 2003, mainly for local newspaper. Paper stopped paying in 2019

- ~3 months as a "pro" shooting football at League Two

- Retired from Siemens in 2022 and recruited by a photo agency

- I shoot sports for fun and the challenge of applying my skills across different disciplines and environments

- I do not shoot Premier League or the Olympics !

- **I do not** carry £40,000 worth of kit 😏

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Paid sports photography work

- Team photographer for **Biggleswade FC**
- Freelance for **Splaat Media** agency as the sports photography specialist
  - Sports at independent schools. Inter-house & inter-school sports. Children aged between 5-18
  - Mainly individual child images for family and the schools to buy
    - Fun & sports days and track & field events
    - Cricket
    - Cross country & triathlon
    - Football
    - Hockey
    - Netball
    - Rugby
    - Tennis
    - Lacrosse
  - Independent Schools Association (ISA) sport finals
- Football academy tournaments
- Bedfordshire FA & Cycling clubs

Biggleswade in 'dreamland' with York FA Cup tie

GUY WILLS/BIGGLESWADE FC

Lawrie Marsh scored Biggleswade's winner in the previous round against Canvey Island

Paul Grunill

BBC Sport England

—

9 October 2024

For a town which has a population of about 23,000, Biggleswade had not one, not two, but three football teams in this year's FA Cup.

Biggleswade hope Cup run will speed return home

GUY WILLS/BIGGLESWADE FC

Amir Hadi brought Biggleswade level with a brilliant finish

14 October 2024

Biggleswade FC hope their FA Cup run will speed up their bid for a new ground in their home town.

The eighth-tier non-league outfit were beaten 3-1 by York City of the National League - but not before Amir Hadi scored one of the best goals of the final qualifying round.

CC & Judges

- Experience from BDCC open & sports competitions
- Open competition
  - Judges strange opinions and biases
  - *"I don't like American football & prefer rugby"*
  - One sports shot is "*amazing*" and gets 20, and the next is also "*amazing*" and gets 15
- Sports image competition
  - Judges need to be carefully briefed as to what your club defines as a sport image

Elements of a "Sports Image" for Club Competitions

- **IM-ever-so-HO** this is what I would define a Sports image:
  - Contain a competitive element in the image. Without this, it's just people doing stuff
  - Tell a story indicating what just happened and/or what might happen next
  - Does not require your memory of the event to understand the story
  - Be a recognisable sport, don't leave the judge guessing
  - Include something happening, ie behaviour, action, reaction etc. Nothing "static"
  - Have a human connection, ie eyes, expression, emotion etc
  - Does **NOT** have to be fast action team sport
    - But I admit most of my images are action

What are you trying to capture in a sports image ?

- Individual athlete or subject
  - Tennis
  - Track & Field
  - Swimming
  - Cricket
  - Car timed events (hill climbs, sprints, drag)
  - Water sports (jet skis, kayaks, skulls, canoes)
  - Equestrian

- Group action
  - Football (soccer & American)
  - Rugby
  - Hockey
  - Racing (car, bike, horse, dogs)

- Emotion, reactions, celebrations

- Fast action shot or something else

Keep your expectations within reason

- Keep in mind the shots you see in the media are taken by experts who do it for a living, often with VERY expensive and specialized kit and from exclusive locations

- One image might have taken years, and 1000's shots, to obtain

4x Web images

How can you be creative and find something different ?

- Remember the image **does not** have to be fast action shot (part of comp definition ?)

- Shoot within your
  - Physical limits - take a lightweight stool or foldable seat
  - Camera & lens limits - borrow or hire a lens, look for different angle

- Think of what you would like to capture

- Inspiration - Have a look online at images from your chosen sport, pick one or two "types/styles" you'd like to capture

- Think about how you can get that image
  - What access will you need
  - What do you want/not want in the background
  - Where to stand/crouch/sit/kneel

Stick to a single sport

- Don't go to single game, match, or race and expect to get an award winning image

- You need to go multiple times to get the image(s) you want to capture

- Doesn't need to be 10 times, but certainly more than twice

- Same as any photography genre, the better you know the subject, the better images you get

Stick to a single sport

- By going to the same sport min 2-3x you will begin to:
  - Predict when and where the action or behaviour occurs
  - Position yourself to capture the action or behaviour
  - Have the camera & lens setup and ready
  - Have a better understanding of your gear and what you can/can't do with it
  - **Improve your "Luck" !**

Stick to a single sport

- If you already know a sport then you'll know when something is likely to happen

- If you go to a sport that you've never seen before (for example Lacrosse)
  - Initially put the camera away and watch
  - Get an understanding of what might happen, and why and where it might happen

Ideas for image content

- Static image of a sports person needs be sharp, well exposed and well composed, but if the athletes are not **competing** it's a "record shot"

- Same for all types of wheeled & motor sports

Competitive element

- Indicators of competition
  - More than one competitor in the image
  - Team colors, competitor numbers, car numbers
  - Tension between competitors
  - Determination shown by the competitors
  - Eyes watching other competitors
  - Crowds

Competitive images ?

Competitive images ?

Elements of a Sports image

- Choose the background
- Isolate subject(s) from background ?
- Reduce clutter
- Composition
- Eye line
- Emotion
- The crowd, officials,etc
- Freezing the action
- Follow the ball
- Panning blur

Sport images, yes. But still pretty "ho-hum" CC sport images

More "ho-hum" sport images

Reduce Clutter

- Isolate the focus of the image
- Avoid/remove partial body parts

Composition

- As with most photography genre, the background of the image is all important

- For sports having the background out of focus is one way to reduce the it's impact

- Position yourself around the event to avoid or reduce the impact of people, adverts, vehicles, bright lights, etc in the background

- Blurring the background using a panning motion can also isolate the subject from a busy background

Poor background

Better background

Ahhhh 😞

Ahhhh 😑

Better background.
But ....

Colour of the clothes &
background are too similar

The light & colour contrasts
"pop" the bike & rider

Composition

- Don't shoot "anything and everything"

- Don't try to capture the story like the MOTD highlights
  - You're shooting for CC Judge !

- Try and stick to the plan

- Normal composition rules still apply, leading lines, lighter vs darker to focus attention, etc

- If you're clever (more likely lucky) you can get some symmetry in the athletes movement

Symmetry of the players location within the image

Symmetry of the athletes limbs

DOF, perspective

Triangles

Backgrounds

The Eyes

- Capturing the eyes gives the viewer a connection to the athlete, seeing their intentions, what they might be thinking about
- The eyes add interest to the image, similar to wildlife photography
- The eyes help to tell the story within the image

The eyes don't have it

Good composition

The eyes show the focus & competition

The eyes tell the story

The eyes have it

The eyes have it

Do we need to see the eyes, or can we infer ?

Below the eye line

- Photographer needs to be below the eye line of the players/athletes

- People naturally look downwards, so you're more likely to catch their eyes and expression

- Background looks more "natural" from below the eye line perspective. The background is also less cluttered

- Next time you look at a media sport image, most will have this perspective

- But not all, as we know photography rules are to be broken

Above the eye line

Below the eye line

Also note the very different backgrounds

Looking "up" makes the athletes look larger

Looking "up"

Emotion

- You're not shooting a sport, you're shooting people **competing** in a sport, for a CC judge !

- By capturing facial expressions in your images you connect your audience with the competitors
  - Glee
  - Joy
  - Excitement
  - Determination
  - Pain
  - Despondency
  - Anger
  - Frustration
  - Surprise
  - Shock

- Body language also expresses emotion

The celebrations - but little story in the images

The disappointments.
Maybe more of a "what-if" story ?

Strange expressions can be good

The Crowd

- The crowd are less inhibited than normal when
  - their team/competitor is doing well
  - something exciting has just happened

- Combining the crowd with some action, or the sport competitors doing something, can make a great image

- Crowd can be a bit out of focus in the background to add atmosphere

Including the crowd as part of the action

Including the crowd to add atmosphere

Out of focus & darkened crowds

Freezing the action

- Predict or anticipate the action

- Start shooting as the players begin to jump for the ball, or charge in for the tackle – this way you have a better chance to catch them as they make contact
  - "Controlled spray and pray"

- Fill the frame as much as possible
  - Wait for players to come closer, zoom in, or move to a position closer to the action
  - Trust the camera to capture the focus

- With hi-res 20-46Mb cameras, post crop images if you don't have enough optical zoom

Both images taken with ~100mm focal length near the goal and cropped in LR

Freezing the action

- A snapshot in time is not interesting unless the viewer can tell, or infer:

  ○ what's just happened before the image was taken

  ○ what's happening at the instance the image was taken

  ○ what will happen after the image was taken

- This is telling a story, and we know the judges love a story 🙂

Telling a story or asking the viewer to guess what's going to happen next

Follow the ball

- What ever is the center of attention for the competitors (ball, puck, etc) try and keep it within image

- Doesn't have to be in focus

- Helps to tell the story of the action, gives a focal point to the image

Follow the ball

Follow the ball

Large DOF to include goalmouth action

Panning blur

- This is another technique to pop the action from the background

- Gives an impression of speed and action. Good for Camera Club comps, and wall prints

- Use when the motion is predictable (generally from side to side) like motor & water sports

- Can work in other sports but more difficult to get a successful shot

- Avoid any bright things in the background (cars, ads, banners or lights) as they add a bright streak to the background when blurred

- … Unless of course, that's the effect you're after

Panning blur

Image from web

Panning blur

ISO & image noise

- **Generally to balance shutter & aperture you'll have to use higher ISO than you're used to**

- Use **Auto-ISO** if your camera has it

- If not, then take a few shots with different ISO's to get something about right. You might need to go to ISO 5000 or higher

- Lightroom Denoise or similar will help reduce the noise for the final image

- But maybe the noise can be part of the creative shot ?

What competitive sport might work best for you ?

- Track & Field
- Bowls
- Cricket
- Croquet
- Cycling
  - Road
  - Grass track
  - Mountain biking
  - Velodrome
- Equestrian
  - Show jumping
  - Flat racing
  - Dressage
  - Polo
- Fishing
- Golf
- Motor racing
  - Cars
  - Bikes
  - Trucks
  - Drag
  - Circuit
  - Off-road

- Hang gliding
- Basketball & Netball
- Rounders
- Running, marathon etc
- Triathlon
- Tough mudder
- Tennis
- On the water
  - Rowing
  - Canoeing & kayaking
  - White water
  - Jet Ski
  - Powerboat
  - Water skiing
  - Sailing
  - Surfing
  - Swimming
  - Diving
  - Water polo
- Volleyball
- Chess
- etc, etc, etc

How do you choose a sport ?

- Perhap you have an idea(s) of your image content
- Perhaps you want a new challenge
- You need something local - ie probably not Caber Tossing in the Highland Games
- You're not interested in fast action sport
- Your camera & lens might limit your options
- You physical capabilities might limit options

Guy's Advice

- Stick to outside sports with daylight being the main light source
- Shooting inside is another level of complexity best avoided
- Try borrowing or if you can afford it, renting a different (longer ?) lens for a weekend

Privacy & Safeguarding

- Privacy
  - Most local sport teams will be OK with you taking images
  - It's polite and professional to ask first
  - Offer to share any good images
  - Explain you are learning and nothing will be used on-line, or money made from the images
- Safeguarding
  - Avoid shooting children younger than 14 years. Technically, if they are in the crowd it's OK. But better to play safe
  - Don't get involved
- Use your common sense

Final thoughts

- Final tip: Get there early and shoot the warms ups. Often teams practise team actions, scrums, tackles, penalties, etc

- Shoot lots and often. Pixels are cheap. Take spare **charged** battery(s) & memory card(s)

- Dress to be comfortable & dry. If you're cold, hot or uncomfortable you won't enjoy it

- Hopefully you'll learn a little more about your camera and a new skill

- Fire away and enjoy the day

Thank you

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