

Shoot for sport

Improve your action-packed portfolio by keeping pace with all the latest camera techniques and speedy-shooting tricks

The London 2012 Olympics are hot on our heels! There's no better time than right here, right now to get out and shoot some of the great sporting events that are going on up and down the country.

Sport is often considered a difficult and expensive genre to shoot. Many shy away from it, with the misconception that in order to photograph sports well, you need pro-access, an extremely long lens and a bumper kit bag full of expensive accessories. What really matters, however, is your skill level as a photographer – it's not what kit you have that counts; it's what you can do with it.

In the action-packed world of sports shooting, there's no instant replay. If you miss a shot, the moment's gone, so the pressure is really on to get it right first time. To help you master all of the key shooting methods, we speak to some of the industry's top sporting photographers, to uncover their secrets of the game... ▶

- Including advice for
- Flash lighting
- Shooting for stock
- Panning methods
- Freezing motion



▲ **HYDRATE**

Just like the athletes you're capturing, prepare and stay focused. Plan out what you want to shoot first, so you can keep your eyes on the action

© John Hicks



Jordan Weeks

It all began with surfing and a storm for this pro

Web: www.jordanweeks.co.uk

"I have been photographing sports ever since I picked up my first SLR at age 18 and I found myself at my local beach, a few days after a storm – the surf was perfect. I grabbed my camera, and started to take pictures. I sent these off to a local surf magazine and, to my surprise, they were published on the magazine's introduction page. I was so proud, and I haven't looked back since. Over the years, my passion for sports photography has grown to include various other sports, including surfing, cycling, running, and triathlon. Essentially, any sport or adventure lifestyle that involves being outdoors and exploring the world."

- 1 Be prepared to stand around for hours, waiting to capture that killer shot – It'll be worth it!
- 2 Understand the sports that you photograph in order to predict when and where the action will take place.
- 3 Don't get caught up thinking that you need better camera equipment. You can get great results with a basic DSLR.
- 4 Make sure you understand your camera in-depth. You'll need to be familiar with every single one of the settings, so that you can quickly adapt to the changing situations.
- 5 Plan your photo shoots. Go out with a good idea of what you want to achieve, and concentrate on capturing that particular photo or series of photos during the session.

You can keep up-to-date with Jordan's latest sports photography by subscribing to his blog at www.jordanweeks.com. You can also follow Jordan's latest endeavours on Twitter and Facebook with details available via his website.

» RUNNER

"Working with the athlete and explaining the type of image that I wanted to capture enabled me to get this cool, low-angle view"

Panning techniques

Sports that involve a level of speed are some of the hardest to shoot. As the photographer, it's up to you to determine the best way to capture the action, whether it's to emphasise motion with a panning technique or simply freeze it as it unfolds. Professional sports photographer Jordan Weeks (www.jordanweeks.com) says, "Sometimes it's great to freeze motion when you're capturing sports. With a surf photo, for example, if you were to capture the action at just the right moment using a fast shutter speed, you can freeze all of the water as it sprays from the bottom of the surf board. The surfer is pin sharp, and the results can be really impressive. However, there are times when capturing movement can really change the mood of your photo. Take the same scene as described, but now shoot it with a slower shutter speed. This time you'll create an image that is smooth and calming, the spray becomes an elegant fan of water, and the motion of the surfer is blurred and ghostly."

A panning technique is often popular when shooting sports that require speed to win, such as cycling, motor racing and even running. It's an ideal way to illustrate motion, as although your moving subject remains sharp, the background will become artistically blurred. As a technique, panning takes patience and plenty of practice so its unlikely that you'll get right first time around.

Top Tip

Visit your local athletics or sports club and find out what activities they offer. Ask if it's okay for you to come down and shoot – this is a great way to get in some practice before you head off to shoot any big sporting events.

Typically, a successful panning shot requires a shutter speed that is slower than 1/60sec. Switching your camera settings over to shutter priority mode is preferable, as this way you can select a suitable shutter speed, while the camera determines the best aperture setting for a balanced exposure. Working in burst mode will also open up a lot more shot opportunities should you miss on your first attempt. To ensure your subject is sharp, you'll also need to work in continuous AF mode, this will enable you to concentrate on your shooting technique while the camera takes care of focus.

To pan effectively, you need to get physically involved with the action, moving your body in-line with your subject while you release the shutter. Jordan says, "It'll usually take a few shots until you get the effect that you want. It's really important that you maintain a smooth panning action, moving your camera with the subject, to make sure that it remains sharp, while blurring the background only. I typically rotate my whole body from the hips when panning. I find that this helps to achieve a smooth panning effect."

It's important to be aware, however, that panning won't always be possible, particularly if your subjects are well-lit indoors or out, as longer shutter speeds in bright conditions will result in overexposed images. Situations such as these lend themselves well to faster shutter speeds that can freeze the motion as a result. »



"There are times when capturing movement can change the mood of your photo"



Where to apply panning

Panning is fantastic for shooting subjects at speed. Try it out on activities such as, cycling, motor racing, horse racing, running ice-skating and football

Shoot for sport



» SPEEDING CYCLIST

"I wanted to capture a simple, minimalist photo of a cyclist, which captured the movement from a unique angle. For this shot, I climbed onto the roof of my car, and photographed the cyclist as they passed underneath me. A slow shutter speed allowed me to capture the motion"

» SILHOUETTE SURFER

"This photo was taken from the cliffs, looking directly into the sunlight. I remember struggling to get the exposure correct, as the glare from the sea was so strong. However, after a few attempts, I managed to capture a true gem"

Put panning into practice Use this technique to incorporate speed into your shots



1 Camera setup Select shutter priority and set your shutter speed to 1/60sec. Keep your ISO low and opt to shoot in continuous burst mode. You will also need to switch your AF settings over to continuous.



2 Get ready Focus on your subject as they come into position. When you're ready, hold down the shutter release and pan. Remember to rotate your whole body and hips to keep the action smooth for the best results.



3 The result There are different degrees of panning to experiment with. Capturing extreme motion is possible with slower shutter speeds but slightly faster settings can still provide great action-infused results.

Freezing motion

Freezing motion is fantastic for action-packed sports. This technique is ideal if you want to capture facial expressions or poignant moments that can determine the winners of a sport.

In the same way that shutter priority mode is great for panning, it's also fantastic for freezing motion as it enables you to set much faster shutter speeds without compromising the exposure. This is particularly important if you're shooting sports handheld, as your shutter speed setting will be directly affected by the focal length of your lens. If, for example, you are photographing your subject with your lens at 300mm, your shutter speed will need to be 1/300sec or higher to counteract shake and prevent motion blur. Investing in a monopod can help. These are great for adding in slight motion blur with slower shutter speeds and without having to pan.

When working with fast shutter speeds in shutter priority mode, your camera will automatically select a wide aperture setting to ensure enough light is let through the lens. This is fantastic for creating a shallow depth-of-field effect, which will help to isolate your subject from any distracting surroundings, just ensure your subject is sharp by working in continuous AF mode too. When selecting a lens for sports photography, always look out for a wide aperture setting, ideally around f2.8, as this will mean it's quick enough to keep up.

Unlike with panning techniques where you can illustrate motion and speed, freezing action shots rely heavily on what's going on in the frame. This not only involves capturing the right moments in the sport but can also affect the composition. In order to keep your images original, shot from unique perspectives or get creative with angles. You'll find that some sporting subjects really benefit from being photographed at slight angles as it can help to infuse energy into the frame.

Visualising what you want to get from a shoot before setting off is a great way to prepare. Adam Pretty (www.adampretty.com) is an award-winning sports photographer who shoots for Getty Images. He says, "I almost always have a plan; however due to the unpredictable nature of sports and photography, usually the plan falls apart and you need to adapt, which can be great because you often get something surprising."

When setting up to shoot, get yourself in the best position around the track or field, ensuring it's somewhere you know a lot of the action might take place. Adam says, "I try to be prepared as much as possible and position myself in the place where I think I might be able to get the best-possible picture. I also try and avoid following the crowd, as if you are stationed next to a bunch of other photographers your chances of getting something different decrease." He adds, "The athlete is not the only one competing – the photographers are also trying to get the best image from the same situation, most of the time with the same equipment."

Sports is all about timing and being in the right place at the right time. Doing your research prior to the event is important – this way you will get to know to sport and be able to predict possible events before they unfold. Jordan Weeks says, "If you're familiar with the subject that you're photographing, then you are better able to predict when and where the action will take place. This in turn will enable you to press the shutter button at the precise moment, which captures the action in all its glory." He adds, "When I am not shooting, I choose to actively participate in the sports that I photograph. This physical involvement enables me to take my understanding of these sports a step further. I can then transfer this knowledge and experience back into my photography. It's a win-win situation... I keep fit, and my photography improves."



▶ DIVING DAY TWO: FOURTEENTH FINA WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

"Vadim Kaptur and Timofei Hordeichik of Belarus compete in the men's synchronised 10m platform preliminary round on 17 July, 2011 in Shanghai, China"

© Adam Pretty/Getty Images

Top Tip

Sports photography doesn't have to just be about capturing the athletes. Turn your camera to the faces in the crowd, or even on the coach, to capture the emotions and passion of everyone involved.

"It's all about timing and being in the right place at the right time. Doing your research is important"

▶ KITE SURFER POV

"This shot shows the importance of POV. I wanted to create the feeling just before the kite surfer steps onto the board, so I placed the camera over his shoulders"



© John Hicks

Where to apply freezing

Sports such as boxing, swimming, gymnastics, athletics, tennis and all kinds of team sports

Put freezing the motion into action

Capture some intricate details to make your shots really stand out



1 Camera setup Adjust your settings so your camera is ready to freeze the action by selecting shutter priority mode. Set your shutter speed upwards of 1/200sec and ensure your AF mode is on continuous to keep your subjects sharp and in focus.

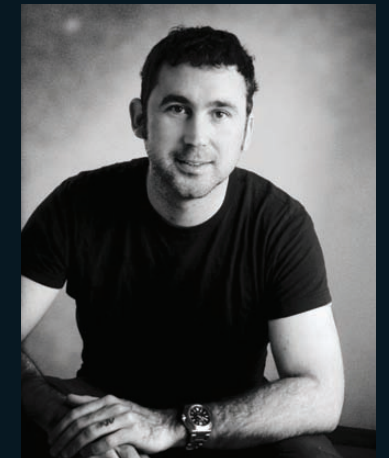


2 Get ready If you're shooting from a distance, extend the focal length of your lens to get in close. Set your camera to burst mode and follow your subject through the viewfinder while keeping your other eye open to see what's coming up ahead.



3 The results Provided you're working with the right shutter speed for the sport, you should be able to capture all of the action effortlessly. Don't be afraid to crop in during post-production – if you have a high-resolution camera, it shouldn't affect the quality or outcome of your images.

Shoot for sport



Adam Pretty

Travelling the world to bring the action home

Web: www.adampretty.com

Adam joined Getty Images in 1998 after working as a news photographer at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, with the desire to work as a sports photographer. Since joining the Getty Images team, Adam has been based in many locations, including Los Angeles, Sydney, Beijing and Tokyo, where he continues to work today.

Having photographed five Olympic Games, he has covered assignments around the globe for high-profile magazines including *Sports Illustrated*, *Life Magazine*, *Time Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Marie Claire*.

Alongside his award-winning sports photography, Adam also shoots advertising for big clients that include, Adidas, Nike, Acer, L'Oréal, BMW, General Motors and Coca Cola.

What advice would you give to someone who is looking to get into sports photography?

Keep taking pictures, making mistakes, and showing your work to other photographers, editors and friends. Look at books, exhibitions and just really have a passion for your work. If you view photography as just a job I don't think you will achieve too much. It is a passion and, in my opinion, to be successful you need to view it this way. It is a competitive industry and you have to want it really badly. Don't stop doing what you love as eventually you will break through, and editors and agencies really respect photographers who never give up. If someone tells you no, ask why? Make sure you learn from mistakes and then go back and try again – be persistent, and keep experimenting.

- 1** Look for a clean background. Always keep an eye out for where to shoot.
- 2** Don't recycle old ideas – look for new, surprising images.
- 3** Arrive early and leave last – for the best shots you need to be dedicated.
- 4** Shoot sports and then shoot more sports – you need loads of practice.
- 5** Don't get hung up on big events, you can take great pictures anywhere.



John Hicks

A seasoned sports pro with 15 years in the biz

Web: <http://johnhicks.co.uk>

How long have you been shooting sports photography?

I've always liked style and moving images and have a natural instinct for 'the decisive moment', so shooting sports photography was a natural progression for me in my commercial career. I started in photojournalism, moved into fashion and got paid to shoot sports advertising so I've been doing it for over 15 years now.

What equipment would you recommend to someone who is looking to get into shooting sport?

A good-quality DSLR and the best fast lenses you can afford. In my camera bag I have a Canon EF 16-35mm, 24-70mm and 70-200mm – all zoom lenses and all at f2.8. Zooms are ideal because there's no fiddling about changing primes when you're tight on time and the action is passing fast in front of you. I like fast lenses because I can shoot wide open at f2.8 without having to bump up my ISO beyond 100 – which is great for quality. If you're shooting watersports you'll also need a waterproof housing such as Liquid Eye or Ewa Marine.

What type of lighting equipment would you recommend for an aspiring sports photographer and why?

It really depends on the type of sports photography you're looking to shoot and the conditions you have to shoot in. I work mostly on location and have a full kit of Profoto battery-operated flash lights and lighting accessories. This setup is designed as a portable lighting studio. For high-end portraits and celebrity sports images it instantly adds that glossy edge to your work.

For a more lightweight option that fits in a rucksack and allows for more spontaneous photography, I also use flash systems like the Canon Speedlite 580EX II and Qflash, both of which are powered by portable Quantum Turbo batteries.

John runs regular photographic workshops and courses throughout the year. For more in-depth expert advice, check out www.avisual.co.uk.

ighting techniques

Using flash is a great way to freeze motion and light your subjects for a more commercial and stylised shot. John Hicks (<http://johnhicks.co.uk>) is an award-winning advertising sports photographer who embraces the use of flash in his work. He says, "Flash is great for freezing movement and can also be used to add a creative edge to your shots too. Personally, I like to shoot sport portraits at twilight, wide open [aperture] and on slow shutter speeds to create blur around the edges. I then use a very small amount of flash to fill in and freeze the motion."

Understanding how light works and what it can do for your images is important, as John points out, "You need to develop a real knowledge of light and learn how to use both natural and artificial light together to enhance your shots. It takes time and practice, but light – like the camera – is a tool that you have to get skilled at using." Knowing what works best for the sport and the environment you're working in is also important. John suggests, "Learn how to master shooting sports at fast and slow sync speeds – depending on the conditions. In high ambient-light levels you'll need a lot of flash in order to overpower the ambient light. You also need high-speed flash syncs to successfully freeze action. However, a little flash combined with slow sync speeds at twilight can create very effective 'flash-and-blur' sports portraits too."

Of course, flash isn't suited to all sports and there are some situations where it can be more of a hindrance than a help. John says, "Although I have photographed horse riders with

flash, it can be tricky if the animals react badly to the flashlights popping off in their faces."

Flash may not always be able to keep up with the pace of the sport either, as John points out, "You need to know how long it takes your flashgun to recycle, particularly if you're shooting fast-paced action. This is the case when photographing water sports without a battery pack for example, in situations like this it's always best to work with the elements rather than against them." Flash will also be restricted by distance so some sports may limit you to work only with the available ambient light.

However, shooting sport for stock or advertising means you can embrace more complicated lighting setups in order to get a high-end commercial finish. John explains, "Flash can create a three-dimensional feel by adding layers of lighting in the front, side and/or back of the image that will help separate your subject from the background and give your shot a high gloss, highly stylised advertising look." He continues, "On commercial jobs, you have to produce on the day – no matter what the weather throws at you. Without good natural light, your pictures may look flat and uninteresting so a basic three-light flash setup, can produce an amazing light that will recreate sunlight and keep your clients happy."

Most importantly, keep your shots uniformed when it comes to adopting a lighting style. As John says, "If you build a signature style within your photography, stay true to it. Ideally you want to get to the point where people can see your shots and recognise that you took them."



▲ SURREAL GOLFER

"I used a wide-angle lens set at 22mm. I was very close to the subject and he fired the balls over my head. All of the flying dust was caught in camera"

© John Hicks

“Flash can create a three-dimensional feel by adding layers of lighting in the front, side and back of the image”



▲ VOLLEYBALL
"I wanted to capture this athlete with a prosthetic leg at a peak moment showing that his disability does not hinder his performance"

Michael's top tips

- Find a good athletic model
- Find an enthusiastic assistant
- Devise a comprehensive shot list
- Research your ideas in detail
- Aim to create a simple and clean composition



© Michael Svoboda

Shooting sport for stock

We speak to Michael Svoboda, an established sports and iStockphoto photographer, to find out the benefits of working for both sport and stock

Web: www.istockphoto.com / www.michaelsvoboda.com

Blog: www.lightpimp.com

How long have you been shooting sports photography?

I have been shooting sports photography for over ten years. The first couple of years were just for fun, getting shots of friends rock climbing in Yosemite National Park, but I soon started submitting images to climbing publications and catalogues and realised that my hobby could make me money.

What encouraged you to join iStockphoto?

I was encouraged by a friend who had already signed up and was starting to sell images. I was always interested in stock photography but it seemed impossible to get involved with stock photo sites, until my friend told me that it was actually a relatively simple process. It seemed like a great opportunity to expand my career and my portfolio.

DP: What are the benefits of joining stock sites?

There is a tremendous benefit in joining stock sites. Firstly, your images are inspected closely, which is a great way to learn quickly how to meet industry standards. Through submitting (and getting rejected!) you start improving your photography and learn what it is that the industry wants to see. I have watched my acceptance percentage increase throughout my



© Michael Svoboda

▲ Shot for stock, I wanted to show the extreme flexibility and mechanical form of a golf swing

years of being an iStockphoto photographer. The submersion into the world of good photographers really started the creative snowball for me. I spent time studying what other photographers were doing and, most importantly, not doing!

Do you create sports-related imagery specifically for stock purpose?

I do create imagery specifically for stock now, but this wasn't my original intention when I got involved in photography. I have always had an interest in sports, from playing college basketball myself to rock climbing, mountain biking and surfing. I found that photographing what I enjoyed was a natural extension of my sporting hobbies. I am an advocate of shooting what you are interested in. The photos I capture are part of what I do in my spare time and I feel it gives me an understanding of photographing it and most importantly knowing the best people and locations to capture.

What advice would you give to someone who is looking to get into stock photography?

I would advise budding stock photographers to be open to improving and be patient. It takes years to grow it, improve it and understand it. Sales can be slow at first when you have a very small portfolio.

Ultimate gear guide for shooting sport

Cameras

What to look out for

- Fast frame rates • Burst mode
- High-resolution image sensor
- Great ISO performance
- Built-in image stabilisation

Canon EOS 5D Mark III

Price: £2,999/\$3,499
Web: www.canon.co.uk

This latest release offers a 22.3MP full-frame image sensor with the capability of shooting up to 6fps. The camera also has an accurate 61-point AF system ensuring incredibly sharp action-based shots.



Lenses

What to look out for

- Vibration reduction technology
- Fast shutters • Wide apertures
- Good focal range • Quality glass

Canon EF 70-200mm f2.8 L USM lens

Price: £1,540/\$1,449
Web: www.canon.co.uk

This fantastic telephoto zoom lens is ideal for getting in closer from a distance. Offering a 70-200mm focal range and a wide f2.8 aperture, you're sure to keep up with all the action.



Flash

What to look out for

- Quick recycling time • Flash coverage /distance range • Portability and flexibility
- Manual control • Long battery life

Canon Speedlite 580EX II Flashgun

Price: £560/\$500
Web: www.canon.co.uk

This dust-proof, water-resistant and ultra-portable speedlight from Canon has a flexible head for bounce and a short recycling time. It also has a flash output with max guide number 58 at 105mm setting.



Accessories

What to look out for

- Extra lenses including wide angles, telephotos and prime
- Fast and large-capacity memory cards
- Protective weather/water gear
- Extra batteries • Monopod

Key considerations



01 High ISO

When shooting sports, the lighting can very often be out of your control. Be prepared to up your camera's ISO settings to ensure that you capture enough light while using fast shutter speeds.

02 Increase your frame rates

Stay on top of the action and ensure you don't miss a shot by switching your camera over to continuous shooting. Set up to shoot in the highest-possible frame rate without reducing image quality or size

03 WIDE-ANGLES

A telephoto lens is great for getting you in close, but don't be put off using wide angles as well – they can also capture great results, particularly in sports where there's a lot going on.

04 NO ON-CAMERA FLASH

Your camera's built-in flash is not powerful enough to illuminate your subject at a distance. Ensure it's turned off to avoid bad exposures.

06 DEPTH OF FIELD

For dramatic results, use a shallow depth of field to isolate your subject and remove distracting elements from the background.

07 CROP IN

If you're shooting high-res RAW images with a good-quality camera and your lens just can't seem to reach, you can crop into your image later on. This won't affect your image quality too much.

08 GET IN POSITION

Seek out the best location that gets you close to your subject. This way you're guaranteed to never miss a moment of the excitement.

09 IF YOU MISS IT, FAKE IT

After your sports shoot, don't be afraid to sharpen up your shots in Photoshop or even add a little motion blur in post-production that will help to enhance the look of speed.

10 STICK TO THE RULES

The rule of thirds isn't just great for landscapes, use it when photographing sports too, it can really help to strengthen your composition.

11 THE RIGHT SPORT

There are so many types of sport out there, don't limit yourself to shooting the popular ones. Consider photographing something a little different for more original results.

05 Pan for speed

There's so much energy in sport; it's a shame to miss it! Set your shutter speed to around 1/60sec or lower, focus on your subject and then release the shutter while you pan for great motion shots

12 CAPTURE DECISIVE MOMENTS

Research and get to know the sport you're shooting, this way you can predict moments that are well worth capturing.

13 FOCUS FAST

It goes without saying that your sport shots need to be sharp. Switch your autofocus setting over to continuous to keep up with your subject in among the action.

14 CAPTURE ENERGY WITH ANGLES

When freezing action, avoid static shot results by shooting at an angle. This will help to add energy into the frame.

15 FIND FACES

Strong sport photography shots feature sharp faces. Remember if you want to sell your images on as stock, your subjects need to be clear.

16 SHOOT THE ENTIRE SCENE

It's easy to get caught up in just the sport, but try to be aware of what else is going on around you. Shots of the crowd or coaches help add a narrative to the event.

17 KEEP IT RAW

Always shoot in RAW for the best results. It'll give you more flexibility when it comes to editing. You can also correct white balance later if you've been shooting indoors under bad lighting.

18 KEEP SHOOTING

Don't get distracted by your back LCD screen, now's not the time to review what you've already taken, keep shooting until the action's over otherwise you might miss a great shot.

19 FREEZING THE ACTION

To get crystal-clear sport shots, you'll need to hike up your shutter speed settings. Switch over to shutter priority mode and work in settings above 1/200sec.

20 Zoom in

For any sports photographer, a long telephoto lens is essential as you never know where you'll be positioned to watch the games unfold. For flexibility, use a zoom that offers you up to around 300-400mm in focal range