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Who's Who in
Photography 2005



Racing Photography Using Digital Equipment

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As we think about racing and races many things will come to mind. A race is defined as a competition by rivals towards a common goal or result. Ask a number of people and racing will be defined and associated with many activities. For me speed, skill and, in some cases even noise, comes into play. My top racing interests center around cars and bicycles. I will share my ideas and processes for photographing these events. As in any artistic approach these will be just one person's method to reach a successful handling of a subject. We all have favorite ways to work but we should be willing to try new ideas and to experiment. The more we try the better we can be.

First and foremost when you attend a race event you need to scope out the area well in advance. Safety is of utmost importance. In addition to all the standard photographic concerns you might have in regards to lighting, distance



and equipment, you need to understand just how the race takes place, the directions traveled and associated speeds.

Racing events take place on a race track oval or on a road course. The racing surface itself defines the width of the area that you need to concern yourself with during the event. In order to achieve success with your racing images, you will want to understand where the subject matter will be and where you as the photographer will need to be to get the images you want. In almost every case there is a line that the race follows that will narrow down the distances you need to watch. In the case of a track course the racers will drop to the bottom in a corner and come out of that in a line to set up for the next corner. They often will get very close to the outside edges (referred to as “the top”) of the track in the straight-away. In a road race it’s a similar action with an almost straight line that can be drawn from the exit of one turn into the entrance of the next. The line raced, in effect, is the shortest distance that needs to be traveled around the course at the fastest possible speeds.

Within the past thirty years we have experienced huge improvements in how cameras operate. The days are gone that required us to be somewhat of a technologist in our ability to get competition-quality images. In the digital world, cameras are more advanced than ever before: between auto focus and exposure, the built-in computers have taken most of the guesswork out of picture taking. By shooting multiple motor-driven images a photographer is more often than not going to get that *really good image*. He can sort the pictures out later and simply erase what is not wanted. The more frames you can capture,





The ISO used is selected as in any other situation. As an “old-school” photographer I like to use as slow a speed as I can get to do the job. Although it is not as much a big deal today as when I shot film, color saturation and noise (grain) are still better at the slower speeds. As conditions change it is easy in the digital world to correct and change the related sensitivity of the sensor as needed.

Always take plenty of memory with you. I have no problem burning through several memory cards over the course of a race. As mentioned earlier, shoot often and shoot lots: you never know what might end up in the frame. An incident during a race can happen very quickly. If the camera is running, you stand a good chance of getting a great image.

The photographer needs to think about the action and the shutter speeds needed to stop that action. Or, on the other hand, remember that you want the image to convey the feeling of motion. Regardless of the activity being photographed it is important to remember to *pan through the exposure with the subject's motion*. Other factors will also come into play such as the speed of the event and the direction of motion as it relates to the camera's placement. It is easier to stop the action of a moving object as it comes directly to you or away from you than it is to stop the action in a



the better—for you never really know what might happen in the flash of an eye. I have taken some fantastic images with this method and yes, I also get a lot of images that are “junk.” The human mind can't freeze the action fast enough to see many of the details as they take place.

Photographing racing does not require a lot of unique or expensive long optics. I shoot bicycle races with lenses in the 75mm to 200mm range. I shoot car races with up to a 400mm lens. The zoom lens allows the freedom to frame images without the need to physically move from an ideal and safe location.

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side view. As the distance covered by the object increases it becomes harder to stop the action. The result is the need to use faster shutter speeds. Good panning takes practice—it does not just happen. Follow-through is critical. Most bad images are the result of stopping just as you depress the shutter release. The camera stops but the subject keeps on going. The result is a blur and an out-of-focus subject. In the reverse situation, you don't want to use such a fast shutter speed that it looks like the object is simply standing motionless in one spot.

It is also critical to think about the motion(s) you will see in the subject. A car is fairly straightforward in that with the exception of the wheels everything is heading in one direction. In the case of a bicycle, however, the racer's legs are going around while the bike is going forward. Motion takes place on more than one plane and the action is harder to stop. The more variations there are with the need to stop the action, the faster shutter speed you need to select. The resulting images will show different parts of the subject as sharp while others might be blurred. This is sometimes pleasing and helps to impart the motion of the subject. If the blur is a problem, then faster shutter speeds are needed to compensate for that movement.

Digital imaging is ideal for the future in racing photography, with literally hundreds of manipulations that can happen in the digital "darkroom" to improve racing photographs just as any other. Images can be changed into just about any artistic style that hits one's fancy. As with any other subject, however, the end image is only as good as the image with which you begin. A great finished photograph will always start with a quality, properly exposed image. 📷

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