



Ski jumper #33, taken from point A (see Figure 1)

Skispringen

Photography of the Ski Jump

“Skispringen,” (*ski jump*), is the ultimate winter sport. The urge (obsession!) to shoot a ski jump was not an overnight wonder; it was born in my Photojournalism-soul sometime in 1986, shortly after starting to compete in PSA-recognized exhibitions. Many of the exhibition catalogues were (and still are) resplendent with wonderful images of all kinds, and among the Photojournalism winners were the most striking images of ski jumpers in full flight. Little did I know in 1986 that it would be another 20 years before an opportunity came along to shoot a ski jump in action. There are no ski jump facilities in Canada east of Calgary, Alberta, which is 3759km (2,335 miles) away from home. The Calgary facility was built for the 1988 winter Olympics, and there is a new facility even further afield at Whistler, B.C., which has been built for the 2010

winter Olympics. Frankly, it is more feasible to go to Europe and drive to the location of winter sports activity. Ski jump facilities are a familiar sight in most mountain regions of Europe.

The opportunity presented itself when an academic assignment took me to Germany. Searching the Internet, a ski jump event in the Continental Cup series was found at a small town in Brotterode, which is in the Thüringen Alps of East Germany. The existence of the ski jump at Brotterode is a legacy of the money that was pumped into sports at all levels by the previous communist government. Brotterode was not easy to find; it is somewhere just off the line that joins Frankfurt and Jena, about half way between, but far from a major autobahn. The location and timing were convenient and the competition was scheduled to occupy three days of jumping, Friday

Keith Vaughan,
FPSA, EPSA
Halifax, Nova Scotia,
Canada

Figure 1
The ski hill at
Brotterode, showing
the locations (*) of
shooting positions
A and B



Ski jumper #43, taken from point B (see Figure 1)

to Sunday. The first day would be spent getting acquainted with the hill and the shooting options. However, Mother Nature was cruel; the winds were so extreme that both Friday and Saturday's events were cancelled. The weather was still not good on Sunday, but the wind subsided enough to allow one practice run and two competition runs.

The ski jump is one of the most challenging photo subjects ever attempted. A common approach in sports action photography is to find a position that enables the photographer to shoot the subject on the same level from a side-on orientation, using a panning motion with the camera. The degree of difficulty is determined by the 2D direction of motion, horizontally and or vertically. The initial tactic at the ski jump was to be positioned somewhere on the mountainside at a point where the lens would be approximately level with the ski jumper at a certain point in his trajectory. An added degree of difficulty is the speed of the ski jumper coming off the ramp at around 90km/h (56 mph). The judge's tower was explored but it was not high enough—even on the roof. An alternate position was higher up the mountain, using the metal stairway to get to point A (Figure 1), which was still below the potential trajectory of the ski jumper but potentially a useful location. The early practice session on Friday and the preliminary competition on Saturday were meant to be an opportunity to try lots of different shooting options, but the inclement weather ruled out both days.

When the action eventually got going on Sunday, I began photographing from point A: shooting with 100 ISO slide film, a Canon EOS 3 with the 70-200mm f2.8 zoom lens plus a 1.4x teleconverter. This combination gave close to frame-filling images with 1/250 or 1/500sec. wide open in diffuse light. The image of *Ski jumper #33* (see page 31) was taken from this vantage point. Fortunately, there were a healthy number of competitors, so there was an opportunity to try out different shutter speed/aperture combinations. Bracketing to get the perfect exposure in a situation like this is impossible; trusting my handheld incident light meter over my in-camera meter, the exposure was set manually for each situation.

Before the final competitive jump, I relocated my position to point B, which was right up against the fence at the edge of the landing zone. This area had not been cleared of snow, but several pairs of feet had packed the snow down sufficiently for a foothold, although a step in the wrong direction might result in a leg disappearing into the deep snow. The objective of choosing point B was to look up at the ski jumper from a 45° angle, which might give a more dynamic composition. However, this presented a number of problems. Firstly, I could not see the jump itself (unlike at position A) so I had little or no warning that the jumper was approaching. A faint whistle in the air was detected as the approaching jumper displaced air at close to 90km/h. Another serious problem is that the motion of the skier is parabolic to the shooting position at point B, i.e. the distance from the subject to the lens is changing along three different axes at once—he is moving horizontally, and vertically, and also moving towards me at the same time!

Setting the EOS body at A1 servo mode, I held the viewfinder to my eye, aiming at the point on the edge of the horizon where I *thought* the ski jumper would appear. When the jumper did appear, I attempted to catch the moving body with a sensor



Keith Vaughan,
FPSA, EPSA



Ski jumper #31, taken from point B (see Figure 1)

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point so that autofocus would lock on while I moved the camera with the jumper as he flashed in and out of my viewfinder literally *in a flash*. Of course, at some point in that short fraction of time I made an exposure! This experience had to equal some of my worst nightmares—the autofocus was just not quick enough to follow the parabolic motion of the jumper OR my technique was sadly lacking. I was not going to get many sharp images this way. So I switched off the autofocus and switched to the manual focus trap-zone method, i.e. focus on a point in space, manually, and shoot the jumper when moving through the “trap zone.” This method did produce some sharp images, which have been scanned at high resolution and cropped a little to afford images like Ski jumper #31 and #43.

And then it was over! The top jumpers got their medals with snow falling and everyone went home. I left town at about 4 p.m., and drove East for five hours, mostly in the dark of a winter evening, into the Bayerischer Wald (Bavarian Forest) and the town of Langdorf, Germany, where I spent the next three days photographing a European Cup International Biathlon event. Many of the biathletes in Langdorf had competed at the Torino Winter Olympic games just ten days prior to the Langdorf event—but that is a whole other story! ■



The medal awards ceremony in a snow storm