



Running the hurdles

Track & Field Photography Made Simple

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Think about track and field competitions and one of the very first things that comes to the mind is the summer Olympics. *The Games* are

the pinnacle of athletic competition for running, jumping and throwing. Such recorded games date back to the 776 BC and are thought to have existed in the 10th and 9th century BC. Track and field athletics in the United States date from the 1860s. The Intercollegiate Association of Amateur Athletes of America, the nation's first national athletic group, held the first collegiate races in 1873, and in 1888 the Amateur Athletic Union (which governed the sport for nearly a century) held its first championships.

Today the track and field competitions offer the photographer excellent opportunities to capture fast-moving action images. As a photojournalist these events allow us to freeze action, capture the competitive efforts and obtain images from varied event styles to add to a collection of competition quality pictures. Unlike so many activities, a track and field event does not require an array of expensive equipment.

When contemplating a track event, planning is a key part of a successful project. At each event a schedule is published that lists the starting times



High jumper

for each of the activities. It is very common to have many events happening at one time and is thus impossible to photograph all the events in one outing. It is better to concentrate on a few events of interest each time you go.

The events start in an elimination style: for example, consider the *pole vault*. The bar is set at a height and the athletes attempt to make it over. Those that make it move on to a higher setting while those that don't are eliminated. These preliminary jumps take time to complete. Some events such as the *shot put* will allow an athlete a number of individual attempts and the best effort of three will become the distance of record and compared to those of other competitors. The longest throw or toss becomes the winner.

Safety is again a consideration that must be remembered at all times. With so many events happening at one time a photographer can get in the way of one event while trying to position himself to photograph another. It has happened! A story is told of a photographer that backed his way into a *hammer throw* event while shooting in the other direction. The throw went out of control and hit the photographer in the head, costing him his life. Photographers are wise to speak with those in charge when they arrive at any event or better yet, call ahead when there is more time to answer questions. It is a lot like crossing the street: look to the right, look to the left, look in front and behind and if seeing anything, avoid it. Never wonder onto a running surface when runners are heading towards you.



Throwing the discus



With all his strength

Let me share with all those who are considering trying to shoot track and field events what I do! I shoot all my track and field events using digital SLR cameras: the more advanced, faster-shooting cameras are worth their weight in gold. The more frames per second (fps), the better chance of getting that perfect picture. Up-front, it is important to realize you're looking for one or two images out of a sequence of as many as 40 or more pictures. With film that gets to be pretty expensive but with digital, unsatisfactory frames are simply deleted. I may take as many as 600-1000 pictures in a day knowing that I'm going

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Pole vaulter



Running in the field



to only get 10% that are good, and 10% of those that are competition worthy. That means 6 to 10 images per event day that are top quality.

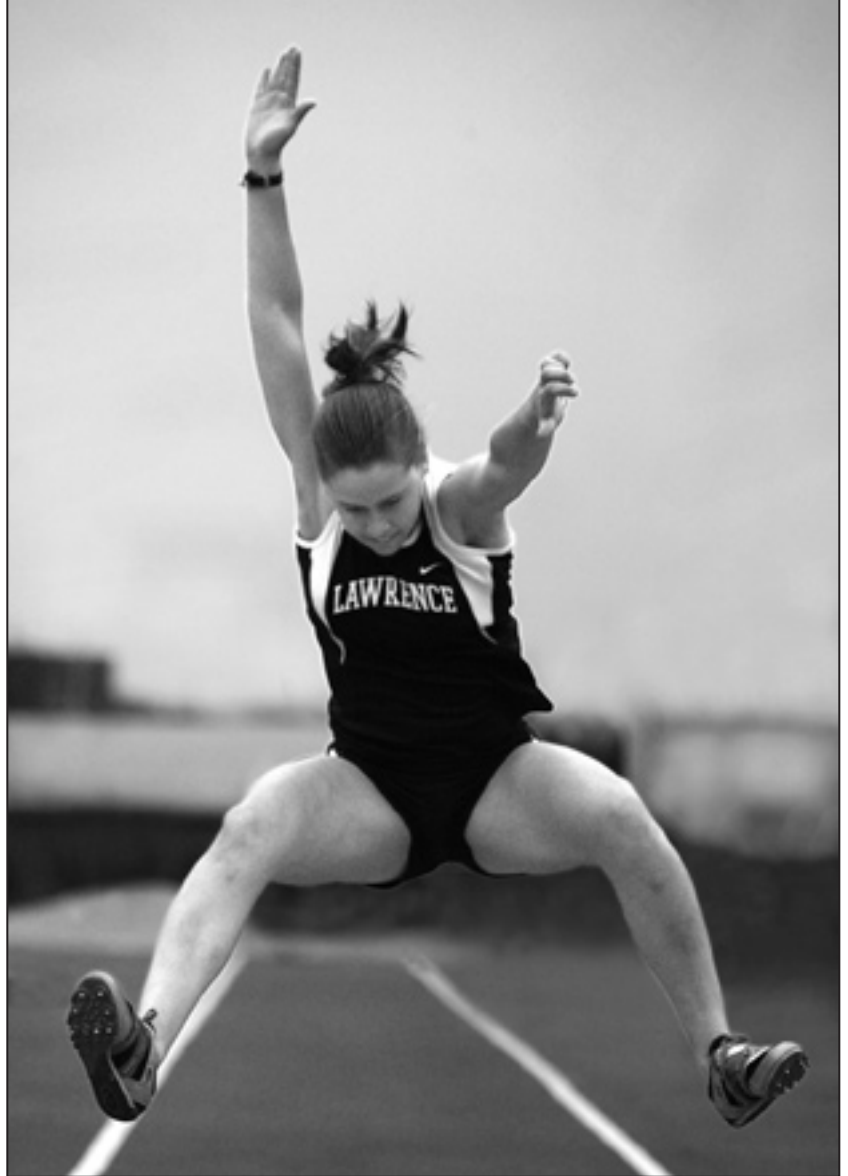
Lens considerations are simple: generally I'll shoot with a 70-200mm range zoom lens for most events. For the more dangerous events like the *hammer*, *discus* and *javelin* I will switch to a longer 100- 400mm lens which most photographers will usually have. I sometimes use a lens with slight wide angle capability. A lens of 28 to 135mm or 24 to 105mm focal length will do the trick. Race starts in running events can show more of the athletes and therefore will tell more of a story.

Some of the events are one at a time competitions such as the *vaulting*, *jumping* and *throwing* events and you can concentrate on the athletes themselves. Look for facial expression and freezing motion. Keep in mind that a single attempt does not take long to happen. The fast

shutter speeds help capture that one “fraction of time.” With running events there will be several competitors in action at once: they race not only the clock but each other. For these events, try and get more than one person in the frame as that helps improve the story-telling ability and will add interest to the image.

Consider also the depth of field. Understand what it is you want to see in the final image. Pre-visualization is one of the most important parts of any art form. If the main subject is a lady *high jumper*, she becomes the point of interest and it is not desirable that everyone behind her is in sharp focus because the center of action would be lost. Increasing the aperture size of the lens will reduce that problem and the shutter speed can be increased to allow the photographer to hand-hold the camera, pan the action and freeze the motion.

The results should be excellent images that any photographer should be proud to own and show. 📷



Long jumper



Over the bar



Hammer