

Shooting the Gold Rush

By Peter Kolonia

This month, the greatest athletes of our day descend on London for the 30th Olympiad. Along with them come some of the world's most accomplished sports photographers, who will fly in mountains of the best and most expensive cameras and lenses, their planners stuffed with schedules and notes, and their nerves steeled for a marathon of shooting across three relentless weeks. We interviewed five of these tested pros, and their insights should help all shooters of organized sports—Olympic or not—go for the gold.

UP AND OUT
Chinese triathlete Zhang Yi exits the water during the Women's Triathlon at the Beijing 2008 Olympics. To get a watery foreground, Don Miralle mounted his Canon EOS 5D and 14mm EF on a boom and extended it over the water.

Getty Images photographer Streeter Lecka puts it best: “The Olympics are unlike anything you will ever shoot in sports,” he says. “For professional shooters, it’s our Super Bowl. The competitive spirit that the athletes feel, we feel. We’re all going for that iconic picture that will forever go down in Olympic history. We’re there to capture it in real time, under nerve-racking pressure, because in competitive sports shooting, there’s never a ‘do over.’” Preach it, brother.

With the Olympics, as with all organized sports, photographers fight two battles. One has to do with the logistics of covering such a massive event, with its crowds of people and unending stream of forms, schedules, and permissions. Chances are, you’ll never face that particular fight.

But the other is entirely photographic—and it’s one that anyone who shoots any sport, at any level of competition, faces. You have to bring the right gear for each event, find a great vantage point for capturing it, and figure out just how to add your own visual twist that will lift your pictures above all others.

Planning Matters

Photographically preparing for the Olympics begins months

OLYMPIC INSIGHT

Mark Rebilas, freelance

“I would say that shooting the Beijing Games, I considered myself very lucky if I got six hours of sleep a night. My friends think that when I fly off to cover the Olympics, I must be having the time of my life. Guess again! Between the nonstop stress and the lack of sleep, it’s murder.”

before the opening ceremonies. Every day and every event you cover must be carefully scheduled in order to make the most of the opportunities. “There are some days when you’re scheduled to be at three different venues, each in different light, with different shooting positions that can require completely different gear,” says Donald Miralle, who has covered the Olympics for *Newsweek* (www.donaldmiralle.com). “In advance, you need to figure out what access you will need, where the venues are located in relation to each other, and how much time it takes to get from point A to B to C.”

Ron Wyatt, a New Jersey-based pro who has covered the past two summer Olympics for Kodak (www.ronwyattphotos.com), speaks bluntly of the logistical challenges. “Traveling between venues is probably the single hardest thing about covering the Olympics,” he says. “Buses leave every half-hour between venues. My goal was to shoot three to seven events per day, and often, to fit them all in, I had only 20 minutes for each sport.”

So whether you’re covering a high school or college athletic meet or trying to cram in as much Olympic action as a spectator can, always have a plan B. If you decide (or were assigned) to shoot weightlifting, for example, and the backgrounds there are a disaster, or, for whatever reason, the event is off schedule, cut your losses: Fire off a few shots, pack up, and head off to your preplanned B event.

During the preparation stage, one of your first responsibilities is learning the Olympic planning committee’s guidelines for photographers. In London, for example, visitors are prohibited

HAIL MARY
For his 2008 Beijing shot of a celebrating women’s water polo team, Mark Rebilas had to hoist his Nikon D3 over the heads of a gaggle of other photographers. Even with unimpeded views, however, he always shoots a Hail Mary (or two) just to offer his editors a variety of vantage points.

TELE TRICK
This image of Michael Phelps, taken seconds before a gold medal finish in Athens, 2004, shows the power of the supertele. Dave Black got the shot with a Nikon 600mm f/4 by climbing up into the stands to gain a direct line-of-sight into the athlete’s face.



from bringing lenses longer than 11.8 inches (30cm) in length, nor can they bring tripods or monopods. Professional photographers with media credentials are allowed monopods, but not tripods. Some venues will have flexibility in how thoroughly they enforce these limits, though, depending on the crowds and space availability.

Familiarize yourself beforehand with the venues that you will be working. Wyatt suggests that you consider the context: “Do you need a high angle from the stands or a ground-level

vantage point? Would shooting straight into the competitors’ eyes or capturing them in profile work best? Especially if you’re new to the sport, find out what vantage points will and won’t work by researching on Google and Flickr.”

If you can’t get permission to shoot from the best vantage points, find another event.

Know Your Sports

After you’ve got logistics and scheduling down, Lecka says that the next step is to research the sports and athletes you will



be covering. “It’s important to know who is who, and what physical tendencies they may have,” he says. “You can score great images by knowing the athletes and how they react to winning or losing. Some athletes are physically demonstrative, striking iconic poses that can make a great photograph. You need to learn in advance who will produce these poses and make sure you’re in posi-

tion to capture them.”

The great sports shooter Dave Black (www.daveblackphotography.com), for example, knows all of Michael Phelps’ moves, which helped Black get the image on the previous spread during the 2004 Olympics in Athens. “I had memorized Michael’s freestyle stroke pattern and knew that he would take a breath two strokes after the 50-meter

VANTAGE ADVANTAGE
Ron Wyatt chose this low camera angle for Misty May-Treanor of the U.S. because, “when shooting volleyball, it’s a great way to crop out the net.”

mark,” he recalls. “Knowing this, I picked an appropriate upper-level camera position so that I could shoot slightly above the splashing water and capture a single image of Michael’s face. It was his last breath before sprinting to win a gold medal.”

In planning and plotting your schedule, try packing it with the most photogenic sports. Ron Wyatt likes gymnastics. “Finding a clean background can be dif-

ficult with gymnastics, but the uniforms are colorful and tastefully designed, and the actual movements are so graceful that it’s almost a challenge to do it justice in your pictures,” he says. “It’s as close to working with professional fashion models as you get in sports.”

Lecka responds to the aquatic events. “First, they’re great because those of us with media credentials have so many

PAN MAN
Streeter Lecka says, “Panning is a uniquely effective way to convey movement in a photo.” Here, he captured Sweden’s Susanna Kallur sharply in the Beijing hurdles, while rendering all else a smear of motion blur. His shutter speed? A sluggish 1/32 sec.



unusual vantage points at our disposal. Most times you can shoot directly above the pool, at pool level, from the stands, and even underwater. The speed and grace as the athletes glide through the water makes it all the more interesting.”

Al Bello (albello.com), also with Getty, agrees. “Adding water into the photographic mix gives you beautiful blue backgrounds, shimmering reflections of light, and sometimes, a sparkling quality. You can also add a nice graphic punch by carefully placing the black lane lines in your compositions,” he adds.

Conversely, some sports make it hard to get iconic images. For

Bello, these include rifle shooting and archery—all the competitors use identical, static poses and body language. “And your choices for camera angles and compositions are limited. You can’t get in front of your subjects, for one thing,” he laughs.

Olympic photographers must also prepare themselves on a physical level. Covering the games is exhausting. Before arriving, you must be thoroughly rested, healthy, and ready to hit the ground running—literally.

Black says, “Covering the Olympics is like photographing three Super Bowls per day for 16 consecutive days. It can be very tiring and sleep is an absolute premium. [Pro] photographers might get four hours a night—if they’re lucky. They eat on the run, download and transmit images to their editors directly from the events, endure long hours of concentrating through their viewfinders, and carry up to four camera bodies with a 14–24mm, 24–70mm, 70–200mm, 200–400mm zoom, a 400mm f/2.8, and a 600mm f/4, along for the ride, plus two

OLYMPIC INSIGHT

Streeter Lecka, Getty Images

“What might surprise readers about covering the Games? The fact that the actual photography is often the easy part. Between the difficulties of dealing with the crowds, the transportation system, the scheduling, and more, when the shooting actually starts, I’m in my comfort zone, and can almost relax.”



Speedlights, a monopod, and a laptop up and down stairs, to and from shuttle busses to each venue, as they try to cover three or more events per day.”

Lecka suggests bringing as many healthy snacks as you can cram in your luggage.

Shooting Skills

Once preparations are behind you and you’ve arrived at the games, it’s time to start photographing. “Don’t wait until an event starts to begin shooting. Get out early and shoot the warmups. You need to get used to photographing the action,” says Wyatt.

“A photographer may shoot a thousand pictures at an event, and almost always the first 100 have the lowest percentage of sharp, well-composed pictures, and the last 100 have the highest. That’s because it takes time to get into the rhythm of a sport, and for each sport it’s different. So I say, shoot warmups, and warm yourself up along with the athletes.”

One of the best techniques for bringing home the gold, photographically speaking, is panning with moving subjects as Lecka did with his shot of Sweden’s Susanna Kallur competing in the hurdles in Beijing on the previous spread. “Panning is a high-risk, high-reward technique, but is well worth the challenge. It opens the doors to a whole other artistic side of photography” he says.

“The two key ingredients are shutter speed and background. The slower the shutter speed and more graphic the background, the better the pan will look. However, the slower you go, the less likely you will get the subject sharp.”

Lecka’s tips for great pans:



LEAP OF FAITH
“For this show-jumping shot made during the Athens summer Games,” says Al Bello, “I had to convince the site manager that the EOS-1D Mark II that I was firing remotely wouldn’t bother the horses. He refused at first, but ultimately relented, and I got my shot.”

WHEN B&W RULES
“I usually like color,” says Don Miralle of the Canadian swimmers in Beijing here, “but when color isn’t pertinent, and the scene is heavy on graphic elements, b&w can be best.”

Stand as still as possible and follow through with the subject while opening the shutter. Keep moving until after you hear the shutter close, and make that movement as smooth as possible. “Don’t get frustrated if your subject is blurred, because panning isn’t as easy as it may look. It’s a skill that takes time and practice to master.”

For sharper photographs, says Wyatt, “I don’t use the shutter button to focus—I use the back button. Both Nikon and Canon systems allow you to focus by pushing one of the rear body buttons, and the advantage is that, by keeping this button depressed, your shot is already in focus when you hit the shutter release. The result is a lot more in-focus pictures.” On DSLRs that lack dedicated AF buttons, you can often assign this function to a custom control instead.

Lens selection is also a paramount concern. “Outdoors, I use a 200–400mm f/4 Nikkor Vibration Reduction zoom. I had a 300mm and a 400mm f/2.8, but I fell in love with the 200–400mm,” says Wyatt

OLYMPIC INSIGHT

Don Miralle, freelance

“My parents took my sisters and me to the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, and I immediately knew then, while waving my American flag cheering for our athletes, that the Olympics would always be part of my life. Little did I know that I would cover seven Games.”

For him, this 7.45-pound zoom is worth the nearly \$7,000 price tag because it lets him handhold the camera (the 400mm f/2.8, at 10.2 pounds, requires a monopod), and the benefits of zooming are impossible to overstate. “The guy shooting a super tele has to set the lens down when the action gets too close to him, and during those moments, he’s losing precious images,” he says. “My zoom helps me avoid that.”

He adds, “For anyone on a budget, though, I recommend the Sigma 120–300mm f/2.8, because it’s light enough to handhold and is about \$3,500 cheaper. It’s my second-favorite lens for sports.”

For more on equipment, see

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“Gear Run” (page 68). And you can gaze in wonder at the massive amount of stuff that Wyatt hauled to Beijing the last time around at www.ronwyattphotos.com/#about-me/rons-gear-box.

Prepare to Compromise

After focusing and lens selection, the most important photographic consideration for capturing action is obviously exposure. It comes down to two factors: You want the fastest

LONG SHOT
Decathletes don't land with much finesse after long jumps, says Al Bello of this award-winning shot of Victor Covalenco in Beijing, “so I positioned myself for the landing, not the leap.”

STAR TURN
Often, indoor lighting can be dim, flat, and without character. To add a bit of life, Mark Rebilas turns to his trusty star filter.



shutter speed you can use under the given lighting conditions, and you'll need to use the highest ISO that you can without getting too much noise in your images.

If you're covering indoor gymnastics, and the lighting isn't great, you'll have to bump up the ISO. With some cameras, the highest you can go before noise sets in is about ISO 1600. In today's world that's not high enough. “If I'm going into a dimly lit gym, I want at least ISO 2000,” says Wyatt. (Read our camera tests to find out which bodies are best for controlling noise at high ISOs, and rent one if you must.)

Another photographic challenge: backgrounds. “The worst are when you've got bored people standing around, not watching the event you're photographing,” says Wyatt. One solu-

OLYMPIC INSIGHT

Ron Wyatt, freelance

“The most surprising thing to me about the Athens and Beijing summer Games was how the foreign photographers worked. If someone stepped into their picture or blocked their view, they had a fit. Even with judges and referees. The American photographers, in comparison, were perfect ladies and gentlemen.”

tion to problem backgrounds? Find camera angles with *distant* backgrounds and defocus them by shooting wide open.

Another technique: Climb as high into the stands as you can or get permission to mount your camera in the rafters, and use a remote to shoot down on the action. Scout the venues early so you will have time to file for the necessary permissions. Getting low can also be an option.

Converting files from color to b&w can declutter a messy background, too. “Color can be distracting,” says Al Bello. “Bad backgrounds can have poles, empty seats, and random people loitering, but overly vibrant color can also be a problem.”

Going to the London Olympics this year? Mark Rebilas (www.markjrebilas.com), a pro shooter from Phoenix, says the fun part will be shooting a wide variety of sports, many of which you can't regularly cover back at home. Seeing what other photographers are doing will inspire you, and for this American, “the overwhelming feeling you get when the Star Spangled Banner plays after a U.S. athlete takes the gold is like no other feeling in sports.”

LEGENDARY IMAGES from summer Olympics past are in the July/August issue of *American Photo*, available on newsstands, at the iTunes store (for the iPad), or online at www.americanphotomag.com.

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