



# Twelve Top Tips for Sports Photography

*Tipping Point*

By Donna Judd

What makes sports photography so compelling? For starters, your subject matter involves the sheer grace and beauty of athletic movement, often in a tense, competitive atmosphere evoking dramatic emotions. Sports answer a basic human need: the drive for excellence. We admire and identify with that excellence.

As photographers we try to capture all the above, without knowing exactly what is going to happen in any split-second of action. Will the quarterback run, lateral the ball, be sacked, fumble, throw an interception or a touchdown pass, what? Will some random body part suddenly intrude into our frame, ruining an otherwise “perfect” shot? To truly enjoy sports photography, it helps to embrace its randomness, its sheer unpredictability, and the importance of luck.

Action photography obviously offers different challenges than landscape, still-life, or portrait work, but has strong parallels with wildlife photography. For starters, in neither genre do you have control over what the subject is going to do or when they will do it, nor can you control the

light, or, frequently, how close you can get to your subject.

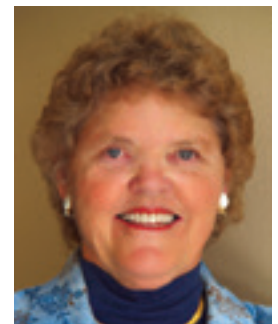
We tend to forget how much more difficult sports and wildlife photography were in the film days. As a minor example, decades ago capturing the tennis ball not just in the frame but hitting the strings of the racquet was rare. Now it is relatively commonplace. Digital cameras make shooting action easier and offer photographers a greater variety of shots to choose from.

Consequently, digital-age sports photographers are not just capturing the “decisive moment,” but are taking the “decisive burst mode approach.” Action shots now tend to be taken of three different stages:

- A) Pre—just before the peak moment, bringing anticipation and the excitement of what might happen next.
- B) At the dramatic peak of the action.
- C) Post—just after the peak moment, often showing emotion.

Often the pre or post shots are more interesting than the peak shot. In addition, an athlete





Donna Judd

*Battle of Wills*

scrambling in “emergency mode” is likely more interesting photographically than one with perfect, proper form.

### **Equipment and Settings**

A large part of success as a sports photographer depends on the quality of your equipment, how close can you get to your subject, and how good the light is. Obviously shooting in a dimly-lit high school gym presents more difficulties than shooting on a bright sunny tennis court. You can’t always control the lighting situations and you can’t usually use a flash or tripod, so a good camera and

especially, a fast lens is crucial. Light is critical. You need a fast shutter speed to stop action in focus. A fast lens allows enough light in so you can do this, while avoiding excessively high ISOs and noise.

Most professional sports photographers reportedly shoot with two high-end Canon or Nikon DSLRs, using a set-up based around 16-35mm, 24-70mm, and 70-200mm—all f/2.8 lenses, plus a 400 mm (or longer) lens. The quick answer to the equipment question for the nonprofessional is as follows: one or two good cameras, two to four f/2.8 or faster lenses, lens





*On the Attack*

hoods, monopod, hat, and water. Note that most venues allow monopods but not tripods. Some, such as Dodger stadium, do not allow telephotos over six inches in length. Check online for possible restrictions.

My normal settings for action photography, shooting in RAW or RAW plus jpeg: manual mode, ISO auto, Continuous Auto Focus, Burst mode, F stop varied depending on desired blur in the background, and speed 1/1000 or faster.

In reality, you often will not have time to incorporate all dozen guidelines. Focus on capturing that split-second of action, and address some of these issues in post-production.

- 1) Arrive early to scout the location and get set up. Settle in with the lens cap off and the camera on. Arriving early also allows you to shoot during the warm up, where it is easier to get good shots because the athlete repeats the same movement several times.
- 2) Know your sport. Obviously, it's helpful to be able to anticipate what will likely happen next, to know where to position yourself, etc. For example, tennis players hit the ball closer to their bodies when hitting backhands, as opposed to forehands, so improve your odds of getting both the ball and face in the shot by shooting the backhand side.
- 3) Position yourself so you can see the athlete's face. The eyes must be tack sharp. It can obviously be difficult to get a good face shot when the athlete wears a visor, hat or helmet.



*Perfect Form*



*Graceful at 6 foot 9*





*Polo in the Desert*

(Watch for the head tilting up, or shoot on overcast days if you can, or go to work in post-production.)

- 4) Don't zoom in too close. Leave room for movement within your frame when the action starts and, for example, the server jumps up or the receiver steps forward.
- 5) Try to include the ball in your shot. That helps tell the story.
- 6) Stay focused on your subject after an important moment to potentially catch emotional reactions.
- 7) Strive for variety in your framing. Tight shots are best for showing emotion or power and a full-frame view better for capturing the grace or physicality of your subject.
- 8) Vary your position, shooting from both low and higher vantages. Tension is increased if subject seems headed straight toward the camera.
- 9) Watch for details that bring something extra, or unusual, to your shot.



*Concentration*





Rough Landing

- 10) Work to draw an emotional response. Find humor if you can.
- 11) Tell a story. This is not always easy to do in a single shot. You do that by your choice of subject and by including story-telling elements in your photo, such as setting, protagonist, opponent, or conflict.
- 12) Scan your frame. Try to omit anything from your shot that does not contribute to the story.

Capturing split-second action and emotion, that's the essence of sports photography. Ideally you are capturing both, telling a story of what it is like to be there and to experience the moment. Go for the gold! ■

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**Donna Judd** became fascinated with photography when, in 2008, having recently retired, she took an adult education class in digital photography, taught by PSA member Roy Borman. Roy was most encouraging, talking her into buying an SLR and joining his Anaheim Camera Enthusiasts (ACES) in California. Visiting judge **Joanne Stolte, HonPSA, MPSA**, recruited her into PSA, where **Elena McTighe, HonPSA, MPSA**, eventually encouraged her to write for the *PSA Journal*. Donna has written a number of articles for the *PSA Journal* and continues to share her knowledge through writing.



Fine Effort





Defense, Defense



Sharp Turn