Sports Photography
From Snapshots to Great Shots

Bill Frakes

Get great detail in your subjects!
Sports Photography: From Snapshots to Great Shots

Bill Frakes
DEDICATION

To the athletes and coaches, those kids of all ages, who play the games that fuel my images.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While writing this book I felt like a wrestler trying to make weight. Each chapter could have been a book in itself. To fit so many different sports between the covers of a simple how-to guide, I had to shed a lot of excess tonnage.

I am very lucky to work at Straw Hat Visuals with Laura Heald and Sara Tanner. Laura is there every day splitting the load, making me laugh, and stealing my food. Every project comes through the office we share; I simply couldn’t do it without her. Sara is the most Southern person I know, and I went to school at Ole Miss, so that’s saying something. She’s always there providing strong logistical support and sweetness.

During the eight months I was in the writing process, I was traveling constantly—about 200,000 miles—to some of the best sporting events on the planet. This book came together at the Olympics, at the Kentucky Derby, during March Madness, at the BCS national championship game, and at a prom dress rugby game. Those events provided a lot of inspiration and energy. I can’t say enough about the people I photograph.

My colleagues at Sports Illustrated are incredible. The editors, photographers, and writers are very talented, and I’ve always been surprised to be in their midst.

I owe a big debt of gratitude to my editor on the book, Anne Marie Walker, who skillfully and graciously kept this project on track. I put her through a lot, and her delicate touch saved a lot of what my writer friends would surely call “bad stuff.” Valerie Witte was there for us, too, providing counsel and guidance when we needed it.

For my entire life, I have been surrounded by teachers. My Mom taught me about art, creativity, and just plain hard work. My Dad brought imagination and storytelling to the mix. Now my daughter Havana supplies the fuel. She is constantly in motion, challenging me, pushing the limits of her vision, and making me want to show her the world through my photographs and films.
Contents

INTRODUCTION vii

CHAPTER 1: IN THE BAG 3
Equipment Essentials for Photographing Sports
Poring Over the Picture 4
Gear Isn’t Everything 6
Cameras 7
Lenses 9
Memory Cards 10
Supports, Strobes, and Cases 11
Inside My Bag 14
Chapter 1 Assignments 15

CHAPTER 2: GETTING STARTED 17
The Fundamentals of Sports Photography
Poring Over the Picture 18
Getting Started 20
Camera Basics 21
Sports Photography as a Teaching Tool 26
Sports Photography for Advertising and Promotional Purposes 26
Sports Photography as Journalism 27
Action and Feature Portraits 32
Lighting 32
Chapter 2 Assignments 37

CHAPTER 3: THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE 39
Shooting with Short and Long Lenses
Poring Over the Picture 40
Short Lenses: From Super Wide to Normal 42
Long Lenses 47
Chapter 3 Assignments 51

CHAPTER 4: FINDING THE LIGHT 53
Using the Right Light
Poring Over the Picture 54
Ambient Light 56
Chapter 4 Assignments 63
Introduction

This book has been in the back of my mind for quite a while.

I shoot pictures every day. I’m a storyteller, and this is the best, surest way for me to communicate. I want to share what I am privileged to see, and reveal it to the biggest crowds I can.

The desire to teach is in my blood, and the desire to share knowledge comes as a direct result of having had terrific mentors help me along the way.

WHY I LOVE COVERING SPORTS

I started shooting sports in my 20s, working as a staff photographer for the *Miami Herald*. The craft was different then: The lenses were slower, the cameras had to be focused manually—which is more difficult—and the frames captured were far fewer. Working with film required more light and gave me less latitude, and it took much longer to process the images. Before I pressed the shutter, I had to be sure the photograph would be sharp and depict an important moment.

In the early 90s, I joined the staff of *Sports Illustrated* as a photographer. Since then I’ve travelled around the world covering every sport you can imagine.

At some of the world’s greatest sporting events, I’ve had the best seat in the house. But at the heart of my existence is making meaningful photographs no matter where I am. Shooting a little league game is every bit as important to me as shooting the World Series.

Over the past 25 years, I’ve covered 10 Olympics, 25 Super Bowls, 10 NCAA basketball tournaments, 25 Kentucky Derbies, and all the events in between. Photographing ten-year-old Eli Manning playing catch with his dad in front of their New Orleans home in 1991 was as much fun as picturing him winning his second Super Bowl in 2012.

It’s not just about access. Great shots are everywhere; you just have to look for them.
THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

The ability to make photographs is changing rapidly in the sports photography arena, but the fundamentals are still the same. Newer cameras—because of their larger sensors, faster lenses, and bigger cards—are actually making sports photography more accessible to more people. Finding the action, capturing the personalities of the athletes, and experiencing the ambience of the crowds are the elements that give you the feel of the game. They are the guts of sports photography and they haven’t, and won’t, change.

This book explains how I do what I do. It includes everything from the gear I use to how to gain access to events. I’ll show you how I approach the sports I shoot and discuss how each requires a different mind-set and a different approach. Chapter by chapter I’ll lead you through the process of making great sports photographs of athletes at all levels.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is designed for photographers of all levels who want to raise their game. It takes you through the thought processes of telling the story by capturing penultimate action and salient moments away from the motion. Technique is important too; therefore, I’ll spend time analyzing not only the tools, but the reasoning behind why I stand where I stand—or crouch, or kneel, or sit.

My objective is to teach you, whether you are a novice, amateur, or skilled photographer, how to put the viewers of your photographs into a front-row seat.
SHOOTING SPORTS

Covering sports well means thinking ahead and understanding the athletes’ motivations and reactions. It’s all about anticipating, preparing, and moving.

Understanding the game—knowing the personalities and tendencies of the participants—is very helpful. But the most important part of the equation is knowing yourself, being prepared to respond, and staying in the moment.

The crux of my exploration of athletic competition is the intersection of motion and emotion, the sometimes chance. But more often it is the calculated inclusion of art, commerce, and athleticism into sport, which so heavily influences the functioning of society through participation and observation. I want to capture the peak moment, which will hopefully enlighten and engage the viewer in a way that defines the game.

Sports photography needs to be about motion and emotion, style and scene, and place and purpose. At its best, it is the intersection of art and athleticism.
Finding the Light

USING THE RIGHT LIGHT

Light is the single most important component in a photograph. The amount and texture of light can drastically change the content of the picture in good ways and bad. A large quantity of light does not mean you have good quality light.

This chapter walks you through the many types of light available—ambient light, both daylight and artificial—and how to use them to your advantage.

Future winner of the Belmont Stakes, Union Rags breezes in the early morning sun in Florida in May 2012.
At the Australian Open, I decided to climb to the roof to shoot Venus Williams from an elevated position to capture a different kind of image. The angle combined with the strong directional light allowed me to make a very graphic action photograph that was powerful, yet simple. From the ground, the light would be entirely different, cutting her body in half, and the shadow would be barely visible.

The shadow is a key element in the composition, suggesting motion and depth. She is running out of the dark into the light with the light coming from above and behind her. I exposed for her and let everything else fall into place.

Incorporating Venus’s shadow into the image gives the picture another element and helps balance the light and dark spots of the background.
I knew what time of day the match was and that if the sun was out, a very strong, harsh shadow would appear on the court.

This image is strong not because of the pure action element of it but the way the light shapes Venus and the background, making it a very crisp, clean image.
AMBIENT LIGHT

Ambient light can be sunlight, or it can be artificial light that is provided at a stadium or arena. It is simply light you can’t control that but you have to learn to use.

TIP

Quality, not quantity, is the most important consideration when working with light. When evaluating light, be sure to prioritize direction, color, and texture over the amount if you want your images to be beautiful.

DAYLIGHT

You must learn to use the light that is present at game time. It is what it is. The key consideration to remember is that there is no one correct exposure. You have to look at the situation, decide what part of the subject matter is most important to you, and then expose to amplify that part of the image. You can also help yourself massively by paying attention to where the light is coming from and positioning yourself to take advantage of it.

Often, the light is constantly changing. Therefore, you should monitor the exposure settings each time before you shoot and make sure that you have the camera set to do what you want it to do. You should drive the equipment instead of letting the equipment drive you.

THE GOLDEN HOUR

Ideally, the best time to make dramatically lit images is the hour before sunset. This lighting is often referred to as “liquid light.” Its qualities are rich, full, golden, and very directional. It’s perfect for making front and backlit images, and it normally changes quickly (Figure 4.1).

TIP

When you’re shooting backlit, be sure to calculate the exposure of the subject’s face first. Otherwise, you’ll end up with a significantly underexposed image.
MIDDAY HARSHNESS

Working from an elevated position or getting very low is often the best way to deal with ugly light. Sports equipment the athletes wear—uniforms, hats, or helmets—is particularly difficult to expose for during the middle of the day (Figure 4.2).

FIGURE 4.2
Notre Dame vs. Michigan was a noon game in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Football is very difficult to shoot in midday light, so I decided to shoot from an elevated position and take advantage of shadows and patterns.

FIGURE 4.1
This motorcycle race was shot in the Australian Outback at sunset. I sat facing west so the backlight would amplify the dust being kicked up by the motorcycles.

Nikon D3s
ISO 250
1/2000 sec
f/4
600mm lens

Nikon D2
ISO 250
1/1250 sec
f/5
600mm lens
There is a common misconception that you need bright sunlight to make photographs. The truth is actually quite the opposite. Flat, soft light has the potential to be simply lovely and is by far the easiest light to work with. Overcast light is wonderful when you’re shooting action sports. The tonal range is condensed, and you can expose in a way to capture highlights and shadows well. This is especially important for sports where faces are obscured by helmets, and where hats can cause dark shadows on foreheads and eyes.

I love shooting horse racing in overcast weather (Figure 4.3). When the sun is shining, it is very difficult to expose for the skin tone of the riders, which can mix with the generally dark coats of the horses and the light tan mud.

**TIP**

In overcast situations, you have to be sure that the camera’s color balance is correct and isn’t recording too much blue. The clouds filter the light, and the result is often a blue cast if the camera’s color temperature is not set to cloudy.
ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

Artificial light is usually the ugliest light possible and is frequently the light you will have to deal with. When you’re working under these lights, you will have limited options. To stop action, you’ll need to use the fastest lens you have and work with the highest ISO settings your camera will produce acceptable images with.

Color temperature will be important. Auto normally works fine, but if you can identify the color temperature of the light, set your camera accordingly.

Pay attention to the direction of the lights, and make sure that you note any places on the playing surface where it is brighter or darker. The light might appear to be roughly consistent, but patches of dark and light can make a big exposure difference, as can the angle the light is coming from. For example, the exposure from an elevated position and the exposure at the field of play will be very different. In basketball, the higher you go the brighter it will be, because basketball courts reflect light.

Basketball is one of the many sports that takes place indoors (Figure 4.4). The good thing about shooting inside is that the light never changes. The bad news is that you have no control over what that light is.

FIGURE 4.4
Kobe Bryant wipes his face during a game in 2005. To make this image, I got as low to the floor as I could and shot up to reduce the effect of the ambient light by putting him against the black ceiling.

Digital SLR
ISO 1000
1/500 sec
f/2.8
400mm lens
STROBES

Strobes provide that necessary flash of light when you need it most. One of my favorite ways to use strobes is in combination with natural—or ambient—light. Without a strobe, the subject in Figure 4.5 would have been in silhouette. But by introducing light, I was able to draw him out of the background while still including it.

TIP

When you’re shooting backlit, you can fashion a longer lens hood from cardboard, attaching it to your normal lens hood with gaffer tape or strong rubber bands. This will help eliminate lens flare.

FIGURE 4.5
Placing the sunset in the background gives viewers more information and adds an interesting element to the photo.

Nikon D2
ISO 100
1/250 sec
f/8
27mm lens
On-camera flashes are small, less powerful lights that normally fit in the hot shoe of your camera. They are lightweight and usually work automatically with the camera, allowing the sensors in the camera and the flash to communicate with each other and provide an acceptable amount of light for normal situations.

These flashes put out a small amount of light, which means they cannot sufficiently illuminate a very large area. They have a short flash duration, which means the burst of light is short and therefore has greater stopping power (Figure 4.6).

Big strobes provide significantly more light. They are large, require more power, and normally have slow flash durations. They are not automatic, so they do not communicate with cameras directly.

The advantage of using a big strobe is the size of the area that it can light. Use big powerful strobes that you can place a good distance from the playing surface at angles that will not disturb the competition, or use the artificial light that is in place. Small strobes are not powerful enough to get the job done and will likely not be allowed for security reasons.
TIP
If you can’t get access to big strobes, you’ll have to use the ambient light that already exists. It’s your only other option.

STROBES FOR PORTRAITS

The size of a strobe unit doesn’t matter nearly as much for portraits. The key to good portraiture is controlling the light by shaping it, modifying it, and making it provide the tone and style you want.

I made the portrait of Danny Woodhead in Figure 4.7 after he broke the NCAA all-time rushing record at Chadron State University in Chadron, Nebraska. For the portrait, I wanted to show the small environment he was in, even though he was one of the best college football players ever.

FIGURE 4.7
I used a large strobe—an Elinchrome 1200 watt/second strobe with a Chimera octabox—to illuminate the whole locker room around Danny.

Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II
ISO 200
1/50 sec
f/7.1
16mm lens
Chapter 4 Assignments

Noticing a change in light is a learned skill. Over the course of my career, I have come to think in terms of exposure—quality first and then quantity. When I walk outside and see gorgeous light, I want to find something to photograph; it’s always my initial reaction and it’s a labor of love. Usually, the light becomes such an important part of the content that I can photograph almost anything and be happy.

When I have to make a photo because the assignment or situation calls for that, I take a different approach. I analyze the situation and decide how to use the light to enhance the content I have to use.

The following exercises will help you think in terms of exposure, making the transition from observer to photographer more seamless. Remember that there is no right or wrong exposure, just the exposure you want to make.

**Shooting at Different Times of Day**

Find an object—a silver garbage can or mailbox, for example. Put it in a location where it won’t be disturbed or be in anyone’s way. Photograph it using the same lens from the same angle at noon, at 3:00 p.m., and 30 minutes before sunset. Compare the shadows, the tones, and the textures created by the light. Notice how the light changes the mood of the photograph.

**Shooting at Different Angles**

Go to a high school football or baseball field. Shoot a person standing 15 yards from the sideline. Then climb to the top of the stands and shoot the same person from as high an angle as you can. Compare the shadows, the tones, and the textures created by the light. Decide how you can use the angle to your benefit to take advantage of different lighting conditions.

**Changing Your Perspective**

Find a football game. Shoot half of the game from the end zones and half of the game from the sidelines. Notice how changing your position on the field gives you not only an altered perspective, but also significantly different opportunities to make photographs. Take note of what you capture where and when.

*Share your results with the book’s Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: flickr.com/groups/sportsphotographyfromsnapshotstogreatshots.*
Index

Numbers

14mm lens
Arthur High School
Homecoming Parade, 29
Duke men’s lacrosse team, 192
hockey players, 216
Kansas University vs. UCLA, 43
long jumper, 45
men’s hammer throw, 137
rainbow over field hockey arena, 45
Tebow, Tim, 80
women’s 10,000-meter final, 134

16mm lens
Daytona 500, 143
football players, 73
Kona Skate Park, 31
locker room photo, 62
NASCAR fans, 146
women’s 3000-meter steeple-chase, 133

17mm lens
Noah, Joakim, 96
tattoo and stick ball, 219

18mm lens, football field, 68
19mm lens, cowboys photo, 61
21mm lens, basketball game, 94
22mm lens
Manning, Eli, 220
Manning, Peyton, 220

24mm lens
2010 Women’s NCAA Championship, 91
fans at TCU, 76
pick-up game in Havana, Cuba, 89
shooting from outfield, 109
Spiegilburg, Silke, 139
Tour de France, 158
27mm lens, football player, 60
28mm lens, basketball pick-up game, 210–211

31mm lens, 2010 Kentucky Derby, 123
34mm lens, Parker, Candace, 33
35mm DSLR. See DSLR 35mm
35mm lens
rider in British Eventing team, 163
layups and rebounds, 96

40mm lens
2007 Kentucky Derby, 123
Kearse, Jevon, 35
Schott, Marge, 12

50mm lens
2008 Kentucky Derby, 127
Ali, Muhammad, 156
horse race, 42
Kentucky Derby, 46
Tebow, Tim, 79
Tour de France, 158
U Conn vs., 98
56mm lens, 2008 Beijing Olympics, 134
70-200mm lens, football game, 9
70mm lens
go-kart racing, 22–23
2010 Kentucky Derby, 124
85mm lens, diver, 160
86mm lens, NASCAR fans, 141
96mm lens, Desormeaux, Kent, 122
108mm lens, Borel, Calvin, 126
115mm lens, Tennesee women’s basketball, 93
116mm lens, Borel, Calvin, 122
120mm lens, Symmonds, Nick, 131
135mm lens, tennis player, 49
150mm lens, baseball above field of play, 111
170mm lens, Super Bowl XLVI, 74
180mm lens
gymnastics, 166
little league, Baxter Springs, Kansas, 114
McEnroe, John, 207
Olympic divers, 148–149
Retton, Mary Lou, 167
swimmers, 171
tennis player, 205
women’s beach volleyball, 153

200mm lens
Arthur High School
Homecoming Parade, 28
Cardinals field goal, 76
divers, 161
female weightlifter, 173
gymnastics, 164
Nicklaus, Jack, 200
Russian men’s beach volleyball, 153
table tennis, 168
women’s beach volleyball, 155

280mm lens, field hockey, 186
300mm lens
basketball fans, 99
Bolt, Usain, 128
Diebel, Nelson, 172
Evert, Chris, 204
Farah, Mo, 134
Howard, Dwight, 95
James, LeBron, 90
Marino, Dan, 71
NASCAR subject, 44
Parker, Candace, 97
Richards, Sonya, 130
Rupp, Galen, 134
Wilson, Aarick, 141
women’s 3000-meter steeple-chase, 132
Ybarra, John, 138

400mm lens
2007 Equestrian Games, 162
Agassi, Andre, 203
Arthur High School
Homecoming Parade, 29
baseball outfield, 110
basketball players, 92
Borel, Calvin, 120
boy and watermelon, 31
Clay, Brian, 140
day zone shot, 69
female weightlifter, 173
field hockey, 184
400mm lens (continued)
Fittipaldi, Emerson, 142
girl and frog, 30
golden hour baseball shot, 114
golf, 199
Graf, Steffi, 204
Hernandez, Aaron, 78
high school football, 21
Jones, Lolo, 129
Kemboi Chebi, Ezekiel, 146
Kentucky Derby, 2009, 120
Kids 5k, 214
lacrosse, 188–189
Martínez, Conchita, 208
men’s pole vault, 138
Michigan Wolverines softball, 112
Nebraska women’s soccer team, 191
Nemov, Alexei, 165
Nikon D4 endorsement, 27
Sampras, Pete, 201
soccer, 183
swimmer, 170
table tennis, 169
Twig, Rebecca, 36
Wadkins, Lanny, 206
women’s beach volleyball, 154
wrestling, 175
Wrestling Championships, 11
Yurkovich, Rachel, 137
560mm lens
shooting behind home plate, 108
Williams, Serena, 202
600mm lens
2008 Beijing Olympics, 136
2010 NCAA Lacrosse Championship, 191
2010 SEC Championship Game, 75
Belmont Stakes, 121
biker in 1984 Olympics, 159
dust and sunset light, 215
field hockey team, 192
Fitzgerald, Larry, 70
football motion shot, 71
Georgia Dome game, 75
horse at Churchill Downs, 144–145
horse race, 58
Indy Car race, 116–117
Jacksonville Jaguars, 81
kayaker, 50
Kentucky Derby first turn, 125
lacrosse, 187
linebacker and running back, 217
Manning, Peyton, 72
motorcycle race, 57
Notre Dame vs. Michigan football, 57
Olympic Stadium in London, 7
Persson, Jörgen, 169
Robles, Dayron, 129
soccer, 182
third base, 107
women’s field hockey win, 178–179
women’s flag football, 6
800mm lens, field hockey, 184–185
A
access to athletic events, 6
action
blurring, 22
panning, 23–24
portraits, 32
advertisements, 26–27
Agassi, Andre, 202–203
Ali, Muhammad, 156
ambient light, daylight, 56–58
aperture, using with shutter speed, 24
Arthur High School Homecoming Parade, 28
artificial light
big strobos, 61
on-camera flash, 61
color temperature, 59
direction of, 59
quality, 59
strobos, 60
strobos for portraits, 62
athletic events, access to, 6
backlit shooting, 56–57, 60
baseball
behind home plate, 108
different feeling, 111
first base, 106
golden hour shot, 114
outfield looking in, 109–110
positioning oneself, 106–110
shooting emotion, 112
shooting from elevated positions, 110
special features, 113–114
third base, 107
basketball fans, 99
basketball games
2010 Women’s NCAA Championship, 91
camera position, 92
camera settings, 100
concentrating on hoop, 93
covering action, 90–92
field of play, 90
FlashWizards, 100
handheld cameras, 99
indoor vs. outdoor, 88
ISO settings, 88
James, LeBron, 90
Kansas University vs. UCLA, 43
layups and rebounds, 96
lighting, 88–89, 100
moments after game, 93
pick-up game in Havana, Cuba, 89
PocketWizards, 100
radio transmitters, 100
referring to game clock, 94
remote cameras, 94–100
settings, 100
shooting, 85–87
Stanford vs. UConn, 91
strobos, 100
women’s, 32–33, 98
beach volleyball, 152–155
Begley, Amy, 134
Belmont Stakes photo, 53
blurring action, 22
blurs, using, 76
Bolt, Usain, 128
Borel, Calvin, 120, 122
boxing, 156
Bryant, Kobe, 59
Busby, Steve, 103
business
  expanding, 214–216
  investing in, 215–216
  portfolio, 215

Cameras. See also handheld cameras; remote cameras
  DSLR, 7
  Hasselblad, 12
  Nikon D600, 8
  Nikon D800, 8
  Nikon D7000, 8
  price range, 7–8
  Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II, locker room, 62
  Canon EOS-1D, Kentucky Derby, 46
  Canon 1Ds, Parker, Candace, 33
  Cardinals field goal, 76
  cases, choosing, 12–13
  CF (compact flash) memory cards, 10
  chest camera, 69–70
  Christensen, Rebecca, 3
  Clay, Brian, 140
color temperature meter, 25
cowboys photo, 61
cycling, 157–159

Daylight
  golden hour, 56
  liquid light, 56
  midday harshness, 57
  overcast deception, 58
  Daytona 500, 143
depth of field, 25
Desormeaux, Kent, 122
Diebel, Nelson, 172
Digital SLR, men’s hammer throw, 137
discus thrower, 10
diving, 160–161
dressage, 162–164
DSHC memory cards, 10
DSLR 35mm
  baseball above field of play, 111
  baseball outfield, 110
  basketball games, 94
  basketball players, 92
  behind home plate, 108
  Cardinals field goal, 76
  Florida Field football game, 69
  football players, 73
  James, LeBron, 90
  Michigan Wolverines softball, 112–113
  Noah, Joakim, 96
  Parker, Candace, 97
  Tennessee women’s basketball, 93
  third base line, 107
DSLR cameras
  Bryant, Kobe, 59
cost, 7
features, 7
DSLR photos
  2007 Equestrian Games, 162
  2007 Kentucky Derby, 123
  2008 Kentucky Derby, 127
  Borel, Calvin, 126
  Daytona 500, 143
  Desormeaux, Kent, 122
field hockey, 184
golf, 199
Kids 5k, 214
lacrosse, 188
Manning, Eli, 220
Manning, Peyton, 220
NASCAR fans, 146
Nebraska women’s soccer team, 191
soccer, 182
Williams, Serena, 202
women’s 3000-meter steeplechase, 132
women’s beach volleyball, 154
wrestling, 175

Earnhardt, Dale, 141
eventing, 162–164
events
  capturing scenes around, 176
  settings, 176
Evert, Chris, 204

Fans at TCU, 76
Farah, Mo, 134
feature portraits, 32
field hockey
  camera settings, 190
  covering action, 190
  elevated position, 186
  gear, 189
goal line, 185
moments after game, 192
moments before game, 190
positioning oneself, 184–186
sidelines, 184
Fittipaldi, Emerson, 142
Fitzgerald, Larry, 70
Flanagan, Shalane, 134
flash, on-camera, 61
Florida Gators game, 69
football field, 68

Football games
  camera and lens, 8–9
  capturing emotion, 76
  checking light before play, 79
  chest camera, 69–70
  covering action, 78–79
  covering moments after, 79
  credentialing rules, 68
  high school, 68
  Lyman, Nebraska, 68
  lighting, 75–78
  Notre Dame vs. Michigan, 57
picking field level, 72
positioning oneself, 68
football games (continued)
- pro and college, 68
- securing focus position, 70
- settings, 75–78
- shooting from bleachers, 73
- shooting from catwalks, 74–75
- shooting from end zones, 69
- shooting from grandstands, 73
- shooting from sidelines, 70–72
- showing motion, 71
- shutter speed, 76
- suggestions for shooting, 80, 82
- team’s tendencies, 78
- women’s flag, 6
- football players, 29, 60

G
- gear
  - packing, 13–14
  - transporters, 13
- Georgia Dome game, 75
- go-kart racing, 22–23
- golden hour, 56, 114
- golf
  - gear, 199
  - positioning oneself, 198
  - settings, 200
- Goucher, Kara, 134
- Graf, Steffi, 204
- gymnastics, 164–167

H
- handheld cameras, basketball, 99.
  - See also cameras
- Hasselblad camera
  - Kearse, Jevon, 35
  - Schott, Marge, 12
- Heald, Laura
  - author photo, 7
  - NASCAR subject, 44
- Hernandez, Aaron, 78
- Hicks, Wilson, 27
- horse at Churchill Downs, 144–145
- horse race, 58
- horse racing
  - 2007 Kentucky Derby, 123
  - 2008 Kentucky Derby, 122
  - 2009 Kentucky Derby, 120
  - 2010 Kentucky Derby, 123
  - 2012 Belmont Stakes, 121
  - behind the scenes, 145
  - finish line pan, 126
  - head-on position, 120–121
  - inside rail, 122
  - outside track, 121
  - overhead position, 122–123
  - panning, 126
  - positioning oneself, 120–127
  - Preakness Stakes, 122
  - remote cameras, 127
  - shooting from turns, 124–125
- Howard, Dwight, 95

I
- imaging plane, 24
- Indy Car race, 117

J
- Jacksonville Jaguars, 81
- James, LeBron, 90
- Jeter, Carmelita, 48
- Johnson, Duke, 65
- Jones, Lolo, 129
- journalism
  - finding the story, 28, 30
  - gaining access, 32
  - jumping, 162–164

K
- kayaker, 50
- Kearse, Jevon, 34–35
- Kemboi Cheboi, Ezekiel, 146
- Kentucky Derby, 46, 120
- Kids 5k, 214
- Kirk, Cason, 31
- Kona Skate Park, 31

L
- lacrosse
  - attack/defense area sidelines, 188
  - camera settings, 190
  - center line, 187
  - covering action, 190
  - elevated position, 188
  - gear, 187–188
  - moments after game, 192
  - moments before game, 190
  - positioning oneself, 187–188
- lenses
  - 14mm, 29, 43, 45, 80, 134, 137, 192, 216
  - 16mm, 31, 62, 73, 133, 143, 146
  - 17mm, 96, 219
  - 18mm, 68
  - 19mm, 61
  - 21mm, 94
  - 22mm, 220
  - 24mm, 76, 89, 91, 109, 139, 158
  - 27mm, 60
  - 28mm, 210–211
  - 30mm, 130
  - 31mm, 123
  - 34mm, 33
  - 35mm, 96, 163
  - 40mm, 12, 35, 69, 123
  - 50mm, 42, 46, 79, 98, 127, 156, 158
  - 56mm, 134
  - 60mm, 81
  - 70-200mm, 9
  - 70mm, 22–23, 124
  - 85mm, 160
  - 86mm, 141
  - 96mm, 122
  - 108mm, 126
  - 115mm, 93
  - 116mm, 122
  - 120mm, 131
  - 135mm, 49
  - 150mm, 111
  - 170mm, 74
Manning, Eli, 74
Manning, Peyton, 72, 220
Mantle, Mickey, 114
Marino, Dan, 71
Martínez, Conchita, 206, 208
McElroy, Greg, 75
McEnroe, John, 206–207
memory cards
  CF (compact flash), 10
  choosing, 10–11
  SDHC, 10
  XQD, 10
Michigan Wolverines softball, 112–113
monopods, 11–12, 25–26
motor sports
  behind the scenes, 145
  gear, 143–144
  grandstands, 143
  positioning oneself, 141–143
  turns, 141–142
motorcycle race, 57
NASCAR fans, 145–146
Nemov, Alexei, 165
Nicklaus, Jack, 200
Nikkor 28-300 4/3.4-5.6 lens, 14
Nikon D1X
  9/11 one year anniversary, 219
  shooting from outfield, 109
  tattoo and stick ball, 219
Nikon D2
  football player, 60
  horse race, 58
  kayaker, 50
  Notre Dame vs. Michigan football, 57
Nikon D3
  2008 Beijing Olympics, 134, 136
  2010 Kentucky Derby, 124
  Arthur High School Homecoming Parade, 28–29
  basketball, 43
  basketball fans, 99
Bolt, Usain, 128
Borel, Calvin, 122
Clay, Brian, 140
cowboys, 61
discus thrower, 10
fans at TCU, 76
female weightlifters, 173–174
field hockey, 184, 186
Fitzgerald, Larry, 70
football, 184
football games, 9
long, 47–50
prime, 9
short, 42–46
telephoto, 9
wide-angle, 9–10
wide-angle lenses, 44
zoom, 14
light
  ambient, 56–62
  artificial, 59–62
  quality, 56
lighting, 32–35
liquid light, 14
local events, searching for, 30
locker room photo, 62
long jumper, 45
long lenses
  angle, 49–50
  increasing depth of field, 49
  intimacy, 47
  proximity, 48
  versus short lenses, 46
NASCAR subject, 44
Richards, Sonya, 130
Spiegelburg, Silke, 139
Super Bowl XLVI, 74
Symmonds, Nick, 131
table tennis, 168–169
Tebow, Tim, 80
tennis player, 49
UConn vs. Stanford, 98
women’s 10,000-meter final, 134
women’s flag football, 6
Wrestling Championships, 11
Nikon D3s
  2010 Kentucky Derby, 123
  2010 NCAA Lacrosse Championship, 191
  2010 Women’s NCAA Championship, 91
boy and watermelon, 31
dust and sunset light, 215
Georgia Dome game, 75
girl and frog, 30
hockey players, 216
Nikon D3s (continued)
  horse at Churchill Downs, 144
  Jacksonville Jaguars, 81
  lacrosse, 188–189
  motorcycle race, 57
  NASCAR fans, 141
  Ybarra, John, 138
Nikon D4
  Belmont Stakes photo, 121
  endorsement, 27
  Farah, Mo, 134
  features, 8
  field hockey, 185
  horse competition, 163–164
  Kemboi Cheboi, Ezekiel, 146
  Olympic Stadium in London, 7
  rainbow over field hockey arena, 45
  Robles, Dayron, 129
  Rupp, Galen, 134
  Russian men’s beach volleyball, 153
  speed, 8
  Wilson, Aarick, 141
  women’s 3000-meter steeplechase, 132
  women’s beach volleyball, 153, 155
  XQD memory card, 10
  Yurkovich, Rachel, 137
Nikon D300s, Duke men’s lacrosse team, 192
Nikon D600, 8
Nikon D800, 8
Nikon D7000, 8–9
Nikon F2, 158
  Ali, Muhammad, 156
  biker in 1984 Olympics, 159
  Evert, Chris, 204
  Retton, Mary Lou, 167
  Tour de France, 158
Nikon F3
  Fittipaldi, Emerson, 142
  football field, 68
  gymnastics, 166
Indy Car race, 116–117
  linebacker and running back, 217
  Manning, Peyton, 72
  Marino, Dan, 71
  McEnroe, John, 207
  Nicklaus, Jack, 200
  pick-up game in Havana, Cuba, 89
  soccer, 183
  Tebow, Tim, 79
  tennis player, 205
  Wadkins, Lanny, 206
  women’s field hockey win, 178–179
Nikon F4
  Agassi, Andre, 203
  cycling champion, 36
  Diebel, Nelson, 172
  diver, 160–161
  Kentucky Derby, 125
  little league, Baxter Springs, Kansas, 114
  Martínez, Conchita, 208
  Sampras, Pete, 201
  swimmers, 171
  Twig, Rebecca, 36
Nikon F5
  basketball pick-up game, 210–211
  end zone shot, 69
  field hockey team, 192
  golden hour baseball shot, 114
  gymnastics, 164
  high school football, 21
  Nemov, Alexei, 165
  Olympic divers, 148–149
  swimmer, 170
  Noah, Joakim, 96

P
  packing gear, 14
  panning action, 23–24
  pans, using, 76
  Parker, Candace, 32–34, 97
  Patterson, Kara, 27
  Peek, Colin, 75
  Persson, Jörgen, 169
  portraits
    action, 32
    features, 32
    strobes for, 62
  Preakness Stakes photo, 122
  prime lenses, 9
  promotions, 26–27
Q
  quarterbacks, shooting from sidelines, 71
R
  racing shots, gear for, 143–144
  radio transmitters, using for basketball, 100
  rainbow over field hockey arena, 45
  rear curtain sync, setting camera to, 24
  remote cameras, using for basketball, 94–99. See also cameras
  Retton, Mary Lou, 167
  Richards, Sonya, 130
  Robles, Dayron, 129
  Rupp, Galen, 134
S
  Sampras, Pete, 201
  Schott, Marge, 12
  short lenses
    angle, 44–46
    intimacy, 42
    versus long lenses, 46
    proximity, 43
    wide-angle, 42
O
  Olympic divers, 148–149
  Olympic sports gear, 176. See also summer Olympic sports
  outdoor events, checking settings for, 144
  overcast deception, 58
shutter speed
  blurring action, 22
  explained, 21
  fast, 21–22
  panning action, 23–24
  used with aperture, 24
skills, sharpening, 217–219
soccer
  camera settings, 190
  corner arc, 182
  covering action, 190
  gear, 189
  goal line, 183
  moments after game, 192
  moments before game, 190
  positioning oneself, 182–183
softball, Michigan Wolverines, 112–113
Spiegelburg, Silke, 139
sports photography
  for advertising, 26–27
  blur, 76
  as journalism, 27–32
  pans, 76
  for promotions, 26–27
  as teaching tool, 26
stories, finding, 28, 30
strobes, 12, 60–62
summer Olympic sports. See also Olympic sports gear
beach volleyball, 152–155
lens selection, 152
Super Bowl XLVI, 74
support equipment
  monopods, 11–12
  tripods, 11–12
supports
  monopods, 25–26
  tripods, 25–26
swimming, 170–172
Symmonds, Nick, 131
T
table tennis, 168–169
Tebow, Tim, 79–80
telephoto lenses, 9
Tennessee women’s basketball, 93
tennis
  gear, 206
  positioning oneself, 200–204
  settings, 205
Tour de France, 158
track and field
  100-meter dash, 128–129
  100-meter hurdle, 129
  110-meter hurdle, 129
  200-meter dash, 130
  400-meter dash and hurdles, 130
  800-meter event, 131
  1500-meter race, 131
  3000-meter steeplechase, 132–133
  5000-meter and 10,000-meter, 134
  behind the scenes, 145
  discus, 136–137
  hammer throw, 136
  high jump, 140
  javelin, 136–137
  long jump and triple jump, 140
  marathons, 135–136
  pole vault, 139
  racewalks, 135–136
  shot put, 138
transporters, choosing, 13
tripods, 11–12, 25–26
Twig, Rebecca, 36
V
Veeck, Bill, 106
W
Wadkins, Lanny, 206
weightlifting, 173–174
white balance, 24–25
wide-angle lenses
  angle, 44
  discus thrower, 9–10
  NASCAR subject, 44
  reducing distortion, 42
  using, 44
Williams, Serena, 202
Wilson, Aarick, 141
women’s 10,000-meter final, 134
women’s 3000-meter steeplechase, 132–133
Woodhead, Danny, 62
wrestling, 175
Wrestling Championships, 11
Y
Ybarra, John, 138
Yurkovich, Rachel, 137
Z
zoom lenses, 14
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