

Donald Miralle's 2006 shot of Olympian Scott Shipley training in Charlotte, North Carolina, was triggered by a PocketWizard transmitter attached to the kayaker's chest. "This was a photo I spent much time conceptualizing and preparing for," Miralle recalls, "but sometimes it's better to be lucky than good."





IN THE MOMENT

Few genres of photography offer as many challenges and require as specialized a skill set as the fast-moving world of action sports. Meet the masters of the split-second frame

By Jack Crager

IN CERTAIN WAYS, sports are unreal: crafted diversions from the hardships of life, grand spectacles in which grown-up performers earn plaudits and paychecks for playing games designed for kids. In other ways, sports represent the height of authenticity: They push athletes to the limits of human endeavor, break hearts in the blink of an eye, and unfurl true drama in which the ending remains unknown until the moment the contest concludes. Whatever the predictions and plans of players, pundits or fans, nobody goes into a sports competition knowing what will happen.

That very unpredictability creates the challenge, and the thrill, of the sports photographer's job. At its best, it is one that requires forethought, pinpoint timing, competitive tenacity, photographic mastery, thorough knowledge of the sport at hand and often a healthy dollop of luck—luck, that is, in the sense of preparation colliding with opportunity.

On these pages, we present 26 great moments in recent sports photography. Each of these pictures tells a story in a split-second frame—and illustrates the crucial skill set of its creator. By and large, they were shot by pros who excel in the gritty but rarefied world of sports coverage, where photographers frequently operate at a level as exalted as that of their subjects. Many of these shots have earned honors from photographic peers; others have rarely been seen before. All are revelatory: timeless reflections of athletic theater, visual skill and the unique ability of the still image to freeze time.

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FLEETING BEAUTY. Speed is the essence of sports photography; keen instincts and sharp reflexes are the sports shooter's best friends. Yet standard aesthetic concerns such as composition, balance, lighting, movement, texture and mood are what separate the great pictures from the good ones—even when they're shot in a fraction of a second.

1. Scott Serfas's 2010 silhouette of snowboarder Mikkel Bang, near Whistler, British Columbia. 2. "These paddlers are midstroke, backlit and underexposed with a 500mm lens," Donald Miralle says of this view of women rowers at the 2006 San Diego Crew Classic. 3. Quinn Rooney's 2009 underwater portrait of Australian swimmer Tarren Otte in Melbourne, Australia. 4. Chris McGrath's image of a volleyball match at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. 5. Mike Powell's sunset shot during Roger Federer's victory over Andy Murray in the 2010 Australian Open Men's Singles Finals, in Melbourne.



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BLURRED POSSIBILITIES. Part of the sports photographer's task is to capture the spectacle of an event; another is to reflect its energy. Technical experiments with exposure and equipment can make for moody yet dynamic images that put the viewer in the thick of the action. In skilled hands, such techniques transform athletic explosiveness into impressionistic studies of motion.

1. Mike Powell's shot of New Zealand bicycle racers at the 2008 Olympics. "I felt a slow shutter speed would blend everything and still keep the form of the curve," he says. **2.** Tyrone Siu's study of East Asian Games table-tennis qualifiers in Hong Kong. "I sneaked into a VIP area to find a simple background," Siu says. **3.** Bill Frakes and David Callow captured Marion Jones winning the Olympic 100-meter finals in Sydney, Australia, with a "slit" camera. "There is no shutter," Frakes says. "The film is moved with an external mechanism to match the speed of the subjects."

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WHA' HAPPENED? The sports arena is typically a den of controlled chaos. Most of the photographer's time, attention and data-drive space is devoted to relatively mundane moments of frenzied action punctuated by ho-hum rest. But occasionally something spectacular erupts, and the prepared shooter is ready. The most spontaneous shots stem from patience; the luckiest views, from determined planning.

1. Alberto Simon shot Spanish bullfighter Julio Aparicio getting gored by a bull in Madrid, in May. **2.** Jerry Lampen shot the Netherlands' Rafael Van der Vaart kicking between the legs of Cameroon's Aurelien Chedjou during a FIFA World Cup soccer match in South Africa in June. **3.** Warren Little captured jockey Marcus Foley escaping injury after falling at a steeplechase in Liverpool, England. **4.** Mike Cassese shot then-Toronto Blue Jays batter Alex Gonzalez as he was hit by a pitch that went in and out of his jersey. **5.** Rick Rickman's picture of wrestler Cheney Haight getting an eyeful during the team trials for the 2008 Olympics. **6.** Robert Beck caught an exchange of clubs between Tiger Woods and caddy Steve Williams in 2009.

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BEING THERE. How does the photographer get to the right place at the right time? Carefully and cleverly. With skilled use of tools such as remotes, tripods, telephotos and underwater housings, the photographer can scope out a unique vantage point ahead of time. But what makes the shot—the face framed by the net, the curve of the wave, the speeding ball frozen in midair—happens in a microsecond that defies anticipation.



1. John W. McDonough used a pre-mounted camera and remote to capture an aerial view of the Los Angeles Lakers' Pau Gasol (left) and the Houston Rockets' Ron Artest in Game 2 of the 2009 NBA Playoffs. **2.** Patrick Stacy used a 10mm Nikon fisheye lens to shoot a surfer in the Backdoor Pipeline at the North Shore of Oahu, Hawaii, in 2008. "At first I thought I was going to get mowed," Stacy recalls, "but then I realized I was in the perfect spot."

3. Isaac Brekken shot at 1/2,700 second to freeze the ball as Chicago White Sox pitcher Scott Linebrink fired a pitch against the Chicago Cubs during a 2009 spring training game in Las Vegas. "I focused between the mound and the plate," Brekken says, "and tried to time where the ball would hit the preset focal plane." **4.** Christophe Launay used an underwater housing to shoot the Flying Fish sailing school in Sydney in 2006.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ©JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; ©PATRICK STACY; ©ISAAC BREKKEN/ASSOCIATED PRESS; ©CHRISTOPHE LAUNAY/AURORA PHOTOS

34 THE DECISIVE MOMENT



TURNING POINTS. In his landmark 1952 book, Henri Cartier-Bresson quoted the seventeenth-century French writer Cardinal de Retz: “There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment.” Arguably every sports event has one: a juncture at which the contest takes a new direction, a pivot toward the final outcome. The photographer’s challenge is to be attuned to the action at that exact instant.

1. Heinz Kluetmeier, with an assistant’s help, had an underwater camera set up to capture Michael Phelps’s .01-second victory over Serbia’s Milorad Čavić at the 2008 Olympics. “I thanked Michael for making it exciting,” Kluetmeier says.

2. Damian Strohmeyer’s 2009 shot of Baltimore Raven Derrick Mason catching a touchdown pass against the New England Patriots in Foxborough, Massachusetts. “It was more like a diving maneuver than a play,” Strohmeyer recalls.

3. Paul Beaty caught Chicago Cubs outfielders Sam Fuld and Micah Hoffpauir colliding in pursuit of a fly ball in 2009.





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FOUR SIDES. Athleticism and grace go hand in hand. Sports contests and their arenas are designed to be alluring; the camera can intensify a scene by confining it in a well-conceived frame. As with photographing sunsets, the resulting images rarely match the real thing. When they do, they're the product of planning, imagination and unfolding natural beauty. **AP**

1. In the 2009 American League Championship Series between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Angels, Robert Gauthier focused on the crowd as an Angel left-fielder snagged a long fly ball. **2.** Donald Miralle's underwater view of the Canadian team entering the water during the synchronized-swimming final at the 2008 Olympics. **3.** David J. Phillip used a remote to shoot Portugal's Nelson Évora during the Men's Triple Jump at the 2009 World Championships in Athletics, in Berlin. **4.** Jamie Squire shot an aerial from the MetLife blimp during the second round of the 2010 Players Championship, in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.



