

Test Drive II Shooting Wimbledon Action

Concluding his piece on the gear he tested out at this year's Wimbledon tennis tournament, **Duncan Grove** looks at camera choices, bags, accessories and software for the sport and action photographer **WORDS & PICTURES** Duncan Grove

LAST month I looked at the Nikon lenses that I utilised during this year's Wimbledon tennis tournament, and I'm now going to conclude this two-parter by looking at the way I set up my D3s camera to handle the action I was covering and I'll also be reviewing the accessories and software that accompanied me to this most high profile of sporting events.

First of all to the camera I was using for the majority of the time, and suffice to say that the Nikon D3s has now become one of the staple cameras of choice for professional sports photographers around the world. Its pros and cons have been discussed many times in this and other magazines however, and so here all I intend to do is to run through the settings I used to ensure that it was optimised to shoot sport, and these were arrived at through a process of trial and error plus feedback from some of Nikon's technical experts.

I employed two Custom Settings on the D3s: the first of these was A3 - Dynamic Autofocus Area, which gives you several options to choose from. While 51 points with 3D tracking does have its place, most people shooting sport get the best results through using the 21 points setting.

The second Custom Setting I used was A5 - AF Activation. Here I recommend that you try moving away from the default and instead switch this setting to 'Off,' and this will separate the shutter and focus functions. This means that now when you press the shutter release only the shutter will be activated, while the focus will be left unaffected: to activate auto-focus you will need to press and hold either of the two AF-ON buttons.

If you have not previously shot in this way, it will take some getting used to, so why should you try it? The reason is simple: shooting this way helps you to maintain continuous auto-focus tracking. In many situations the tendency is to fire a burst of shots, pause momentarily, then fire another burst. In the default 'focus and fire' mode, lifting the finger off the shutter button for that momentary pause halts focus tracking. Pressing the shutter half way down again re-instates it but the focus acquisition process has to start afresh.

By separating focus from the shutter button, focus tracking continues all the time that the AF button is held in, regardless of what is done with the shutter button. Using this trick can help save the images from that second burst of shots. You should be aware that VR does not operate when the AF-ON button is pressed but, as discussed last month, you are likely not to be using this facility in any case at shutter speeds in excess of 1/500sec.



HASSELBLAD H4D-40



NIKON D3X

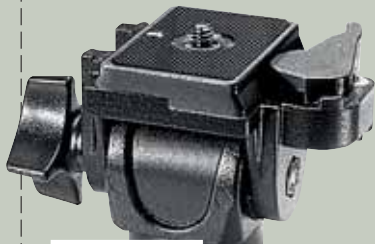
Hasselblad H4D-40, plus 28mm, 210mm 300mm and HTS lenses

Yes, I did get some funny looks from fellow sports photographers when I traipsed onto Centre Court with this kit! Did it prove to be a rival to my Nikon 35mm-style gear? No, of course it didn't because, as we all know, the primary strength of medium format is in slightly less frenetic situations, but still I was intrigued to find out what the undoubted superior resolution that the Hasselblad could offer might bring to the party at a top event such as this.

The chief drawback of the H4D-40 in terms of its suitability for sports scenarios is that there is a discernable shutter lag and it was not easy to get anywhere near the minimum shutter

speed I needed without jacking-up the ISO to levels that are, for the Hasselblad at least, rather uncomfortable.

However, these are things which will not come as any surprise to working pros and the Hasselblad has the potential to more than hold its own when used in situations for which it is designed. In this case I was more interested to see what the camera's formidable resolution could deliver and to this end I took comparative images of the grounds at Wimbledon using both the Hasselblad and the D3X. Here the quality of medium format really shone through, and you can see the results for yourself in the sample images.



MANFROTTO 200USS
UNIVERSAL ANTI TWIST PLATE



MANFROTTO 393 LONG
LENS MONOPOD BRACKET



GITZO GM5561T

Monopods & Heads

I have for several years been using a Gitzo GM2540 carbon fibre monopod and have always been pleased with it – it's light, strong and easy to open and close. For Wimbledon the nice people at Manfrotto/Gitzo kindly loaned me a GM5561T and I have to say that I liked it. It is much thicker than mine and thus presumably sturdier but because it has six sections it is shorter – 41 cm compared with 53 cm – which makes it easier to transport around.

Some photographers do not trouble to use a head on their monopod but I always do, otherwise I find I have to keep moving my body back and forth to track the action. Since Gitzo does not offer anything suitable I have always used the Manfrotto 234RC head and noted that several others at Wimbledon were also using one. However, it can be a bit fiddly and I have never felt confident of its security when walking around with the camera on my shoulder – it seems impossible to keep the head screwed tightly to the lens and I nearly had a major disaster when it

actually came unscrewed.

I mentioned this to the very helpful and knowledgeable Manfrotto guys and they passed on the tip that it was possible to use the head in conjunction with their 200USS Universal Anti Twist Plate. Although designed for spotting scopes, it is very effective in preventing larger lenses twisting off the monopod head, and if you do use this sort of set-up I recommend that you get one.

During this conversation my eyes alighted on the Manfrotto 393 Long Lens Monopod Bracket and of course I just had to have one. I thought it would perhaps be overkill for the 300mm but really useful for the 400mm and 600 mm lenses and that's the way that things worked out.

I liked this bracket – you can slide the lens back and forth before locking it in place, so everything feels nicely balanced. However it is rather bulky and prominent, and from a couple of comments made I suspect Wimbledon officials would not be too happy if all the pros started to use them!



HOODMAN EYECUP

HOODMAN LOUPE

Hoodman Loupe and Hoodman eyecup

The Hoodman Loupe is, quite simply, a brilliant piece of kit: it offers to deliver 'Glare Free LCD screen viewing,' and that's exactly what you get. What's the point of buying top-level cameras sporting 3in LCD screens with a million trillion pixels if you cannot view the screen in sunlight?

So many times at Wimbledon I saw photographers on court trying to view their screens by shading them with their hands but this is never effective. Use the lanyard to hang one of these loupes around your neck and the problem is sorted. It is not just a glare shield but has a proper

German-manufactured lens with focusing and diopter adjustment built in as well, and they really deliver a great performance.

Personally, I think Nikon and Canon should supply one with every camera but until then you will have to cough-up about £70 to get one. Incidentally, I found the Hoodman eyecups to be far better than the Nikon alternative but, at £27 each, they are pricey, especially if you have two bodies. Unusually, at about a tenner, the Nikon part is a lot cheaper but the one I bought tore after only a few weeks.

“In the default ‘focus and fire’ mode, lifting the finger off the D3s’ shutter release halts focus tracking”



CS-15



CS-17

Kata Camera Bags

With so much gear in tow finding bags to carry it to and from was a challenge, but it was one that I relished since I have something of an obsession about finding the perfect camera bag to accompany me on jobs of this kind.

Prior to Wimbledon I thought of myself as a Billingham sort of guy and I've been using their Hadley Pro and 555 models. These are fine bags but I can fit very little in the former and, despite its massive size, the latter is really not all that capacious. I felt that I needed alternatives and when I approached Kata and was told that they had two new models coming, the CS-17 and CS-15, that they thought would fit my needs, I jumped at the opportunity.

I was really disappointed when they arrived. At first sight the CS-17 looked as though it would never hold all my kit, while the CS-15 was even smaller. I nearly didn't even bother taking them with me but I am so glad I did - it is incredible what I can get in them. Looking in my CS-15 as I type I see my D3X, 14-24mm, 24-70mm, 70-200mm, 105mm, 2 x flashes, filters, bag of bits, CF wallet etc etc etc. If I want to add my laptop it would be a tight squeeze so I would switch to the CS-17. It really is extraordinary what these bags can hold whilst still providing good protection.

This brings me on to the best piece of kit I used at Wimbledon. If you take the Hasselblad into the equation I must have had over £55,000 worth of gear to carry around with me, but the one piece of kit I would not have been without was my Kata Insertrolley. The Kata bags have straps at the back which allows them to be slotted on to the trolley and the really good thing is that both the CS-17 and 15 easily fit, one above the other. Another nice feature is that the wheels extend widthways to give stability when pulling the trolley along and, when not in use, the trolley folds-up nice and small for storage.

Expect to pay around £129 for the CS-15 and £149 for the CS-17. Don't even think about the price for the Insertrolley - just get one! (You will need to spend £49.)



Software

Those of you who read my two-part feature in the May and June issues of Photo Pro about Lightroom will not be surprised to learn that this is the package I used to manage my Wimbledon workflow. It is great software and I cannot imagine coping with thousands of images a day without using either Lightroom or Aperture, its Apple equivalent. However, it is this area of sports shooting that is the most challenging, as computer technology does not seem to be keeping up with the massive file sizes that the camera manufacturers are providing us with.

I confess that I probably compound the problem by insisting on shooting in Raw but we all know the benefits of this. However, the downside is that it takes some considerable time to download images from the card and then render good quality previews that can be used for reviewing and selecting and editing the keepers. Even with a good spec laptop, whilst the PC is rendering previews, editing performance is affected.

This was a challenge at Wimbledon but even more so when I was Official Photographer at the recent ROWE British Squash Grand Prix. Because of the game's speed, shooting is of necessity very much 'spray and pray,' and there is a high failure rate. Given that I was required to shoot every match, downloading and rendering several thousand images every day became a real bottleneck.

As with many sporting events, the problem is that you are trying to shoot for two very different media. Immediate uploads from the venue to websites and newspapers are required and JPEGs will be mostly fine for this. However, I want all the detail captured in a Raw file so that my image can also be fine-tuned post-capture and used on the front cover of Sports Illustrated should that unlikely event ever come to pass!

I had to resort to shooting JPEGs to one card and Raw to the other, but only downloading the Raw files overnight. All well and good, but I used the JPEGs for editing, rating and captioning whilst

on-site. Importing the Raw files afterwards meant that none of the editing and information applied to the JPEGs was associated with the equivalent Raw file, as it would have been had they been imported into Lightroom at the same time.

After the event I contacted Lightroom guru John Beardsworth and had a good discussion with him about all of this. His response (within six hours I might add!) was to adapt one of his existing Lightroom plug-ins called Syncomatic to enable me to transfer all of my processing instructions, captioning and keywording from JPEG files to their

Raw equivalents.

This may seem simple, but the availability of this plug-in opens up a whole new potential workflow for sports shooters. We can now shoot medium quality JPEGs and for speed use these exclusively whilst at the venue but replace them with Raw files after the event, without losing any of the time-consuming selecting, developing and captioning work that we have already applied to the JPEG versions. Ground-breaking stuff! Learn more at www.beardsworth.co.uk/lightroom/syncomatic/.



Summary

The lesson I learned from this whole exercise is to be selective. At a fast-moving sports event you need to travel as light as possible, without leaving yourself vulnerable should a specialist lens be called for. For Wimbledon 2011 I shall restrict myself to two x D3S bodies, 24-70mm, 70-200mm, 300mm and 400mm lenses, possibly replacing the last two with the new and as yet un-tested 200-400mm VR II. I shall also add a 1.4 and 2.0 TC.

Having said this, using the appropriate kit is obviously vital and my recent squash assignment really brought this home. Low-levels of strangely-coloured artificial light, very fast action sometimes only three feet away and the requirement to shoot through a thick pane of glass all combined to make shooting this sport a real challenge. Good as they are, my normal Nikon f/2.8 zooms were not ideal

in these circumstances, so I used exclusively Nikon's 50mm f/1.4, 85mm f/1.4 (the new model -superb!) and 200mm f/2.0.

The final conclusion has to be that anyone utilising Nikon's current system of sports pro equipment has never had it so good. I would like eventually to have slightly higher resolution to enable even more aggressive cropping post-capture, but this itself would introduce its own downsides due to the resultant larger file sizes.

However, while we may never have had it so good in terms of the technology and IQ available to us, this comes at a price. Whilst equipment costs seem to be shooting upwards at an alarming rate, the fees that the market is prepared to pay for the images we produce seem to be plummeting downwards even faster! More and more sports images are being purchased for web rather than print use and whilst we

photographers may be thrilled with the detail we are able to capture and revel in our ability to retain shadow and highlight detail, I sometimes wonder how many of our customers really care and are prepared to pay for this level of quality. ✕

● Don't forget, you are welcome to view and download images for equipment comparison purposes at www.duncangrove.com/photopro.

Many thanks for the help from:

- Bob Martin and his Photographers' Liaison team at The All England Lawn Tennis Club.
- Jenny Grace and James Banfield at Nikon UK.
- Andy Bennett, Vic Solomon and their teams at Manfrotto Distribution Ltd.
- Paul Walters and his teams at International SPORT Group Ltd (publishers of International Tennis and International Squash magazines).