

Test Drive II

Nikon Sports Lenses

Duncan Grove had the opportunity to try out a wide selection of Nikon telephoto primes and zooms under real life conditions at Wimbledon. This is the first part of his report on what he found **WORDS & PICTURES** Duncan Grove

READING about exotic lenses is all very well, and you can carry out an amazing amount of research on the Internet these days. However, there really is nothing to match actually picking these lenses up and trying them out for yourself in genuine battle conditions, and so when I had the opportunity recently to pick up a much coveted photo pass for Wimbledon no less, I decided that it was the ideal opportunity to put a range of suitable gear under the microscope.

Being a Nikon user it made sense to major primarily on this manufacturer's cameras and lenses, and indeed many of the sporting pros these days

have made the move across from Canon and there were plenty of others around me using similar gear to mine.

My standard kit comprises of Nikon D3X and D3S bodies with lenses that include 14-24mm, 24-70mm, 70-200mm VR II, 105mm micro and 2.0 TC III. I generally hire longer lenses when required from those nice people at Fixation but for the purposes of this review Nikon very kindly provided their new 300mm VR II, 400mm VR and 1.4 TC for the entire fortnight. I also had access to their Wimbledon support stock and made good use of their 200mm and 600mm lenses. Just in case this was not

enough, Hasselblad kindly provided their H4D-40 with 28mm, 210mm and 300mm lenses for me to experiment with. I also bought or blagged some interesting new accessories, which I shall refer to in part two of this feature.

Here then is a run through of some of the optics that I worked with during a very eventful and action-packed Wimbledon fortnight. I had so much equipment with me that I've broken my review down into two parts, and I'll conclude next month with a look at some of the more exotic kit I used while revealing how a medium format Hasselblad, more used to the confines of a studio, coped courtside!

BELOW: Here is the outfit that I took with me to Wimbledon and it was a real privilege to be able to use such an extensive range of kit at what is the UK's largest sporting event. To enable you to see for yourself the technical quality of the images reproduced in this feature and the one next month I've set up a specially created section of my website: www.duncangrove.com/photopro, where you can download full res images to scrutinise fully.





LEFT: Nikon D3S & 300mm VR II. 1/1250sec; f/2.8, ISO 200 **ABOVE:** Nikon D3S & 300mm VR II. 1/800sec; f/4, ISO 400 **BELOW:** Nikon D3S & 300mm VR II. 1/1250sec; f/4, ISO 320, spot metered



300mm f/2.8G ED VR II AF-S NIKKOR

A 300mm prime on a pro body represents the workhorse of many a sports pro, so this lens mounted on a D3S is the very latest incarnation of a tried and tested combination. Particularly with regard to the D3S, we have never had it so good but we have never had it so expensive either. The lens has a street price of some £4,100 and the D3S body £3,600. With, for instance, the UK's largest broadsheet newspaper paying just £90 - £160 per image before any agency takes its cut, you have to sell an awful lot of images to get a return on this £7,700 investment.

What's new about the lens compared to the old VRI version? Well, it is very much an evolution rather than a revolution. It is the same physical size and, at 2,900g, just 50g heavier. It now features a third focus mode: as well as the usual instant manual focus override (M/A) and manual (M) modes, it now also offers instant auto focus override (A/M) mode. This prioritizes autofocus even when the focus ring is in use by lowering sensitivity to manual movement of the focus ring.

More notably, the lens features Nikon's latest Vibration Reduction technology (VR II), which allows up to four stops slower shutter speeds whereas VRI only allowed up to three stops. Apart from these upgrades, the biggest difference seems to be in the price! At the end of last year the old model was selling for £3,700 so the new features

come at an effective premium of £400.

Are they worth it? I have to confess that I always pay the premium for the latest model since I have an emotional problem owning anything that is model A when a model B has been brought out. My personal foibles apart, I can't see any sports pro who already owns a 300mm VRI feeling the need to upgrade.

During Wimbledon, I kept VR almost permanently switched off. VR is both irrelevant and counter-productive at faster shutter speeds and Nikon recommends switching it off at speeds greater than 1/500sec. I can't think of any action sport other than tiddlywinks that I would want to shoot at less than 1/500sec, which kind of proves my point. With regard to the new A/M mode, I have this also on my new 70-200mm VR II and, frankly, I just keep it on the old M/A manual override mode. If I want to manually override I don't want the camera arguing back at me! The only advantage I can see to the new mode is if the focus barrel gets twisted accidentally.

If the above sounds negative, it is not meant to. Nikon now has its superior VR II technology and elected to upgrade their 300mm lens with it. There are occasions when this will save someone's shot and Nikon is thus demonstrating its commitment to continually improve its products. It is just a shame they are equally committed to nudging up the price every time they do so!

● Specifications

Street Price: £4100
Maximum Aperture: f/2.8
Minimum Aperture: f/22
Lens construction: 11 elements in 8 groups (3 ED glass elements, Nano Crystal Coat) 1 protective glass element
Filter size: 52mm
Diameter and length: 124 (dia.) x 267.5 mm
Weight: 2900g



The lens in use

Whinges aside, I absolutely love this lens! It feels well-balanced when fitted to a D3S and whilst I mostly used it on a monopod, it can quite easily be hand-held. For sure it is a big and heavy lens but size-wise it is nowhere near the beast that for, instance, the 400mm is. Now, wasn't there some other minor point I was going to mention? Ah yes - image quality!

This is what you pay your £4k for and it has to be said that the 300mm delivers. I was extremely pleased with the sharpness, contrast and lack of CA that I got from the Nikon 300mm VR II. The shot of the girl player through the racquet strings was captured during my first dozen frames using this lens and when you consider how tight a crop it is, the quality is impressive.

Nikon TC-20E III Teleconverter

I had just bought a Nikon TC-20E III 2x Teleconverter, mainly to use in conjunction with my new 70-200mm VR II, and this also seemed like a perfect piece of kit to try out in the Wimbledon setting. I had doubts about buying it to be honest since I'd previously had a 1.7TC which I used with my old 70-200mm VRI but it rarely came out of my bag. I had never taken even one shot with this combination where I felt really happy with the image quality.

I am however one of those gullible people who actually (sometimes!) believe the marketing blurb they read. In this instance it told me that "as the world's first teleconverter to incorporate an aspherical lens element, [the TC-20E III] offers images with outstanding resolution and contrast". Well, obviously, once I knew about the aspherical element and it being the world's first, I just had to buy one!

I guess I am not the only photographer to have a fetish about aspherical elements, because I ordered the 2.0 TC III in February but only received delivery in June just before Wimbledon, which was my first chance to try it out.

I was shooting courtside on No 2 Court (a long trek from my Media Centre base) with 200mm and 300mm lenses and wanted a close-up of Serena Williams' jewel-encrusted fingernails. I was cursing myself for having been too lazy to carry the 600mm lens with me and was thinking about popping back to get it. I then remembered the 2.0 TC I had in my bag and so stuck it between the 300mm and D3S.

You can see the resultant image here - again it

● Specifications

Street price: £300
Lens Construction: 7 elements in 5 groups (with one aspherical lens element)
Diameter and length: 66x48mm
Weight: 330g



is very tightly cropped. I spot-metered and shot at the max f/5.6 aperture (the 600mm would have allowed me f/4), letting the ISO go up to 1800, which gave a shutter speed of 1/800sec. If I am being ultra-critical I would say that whilst the text on the racquet grip and the skin texture on Serena's hands are all sharp, maybe the fingernails themselves are a tad soft. It prints OK though and, given the circumstances, I think it shows what the equipment combination can do.

I did subsequently wonder if I would have been better using the D3X because of the cropping but I would not have been comfortable using ISO 1800 on this body. With hindsight, the D3S would have coped with an even higher ISO, which would have given me a faster shutter speed or perhaps critically here, a narrower aperture and thus more depth of field.

I found that this TC worked well with the 400mm also. The following shot was taken from 'up in the gods' on Centre Court and whilst I did not take sufficient shots to make a definitive statement, I seem to have got better IQ from the 400mm and 2.0 TC combination than I did from the 600mm by itself.



ABOVE: Nikon D3S & 400mm VR with 2.0 TCIII. 1/1000; f/5.6, ISO 360



ABOVE: Nikon D3S & 300mm VR with 2.0 TCIII. 1/800; f/5.6, ISO 1800

400mm f/2.8D ED-IF AF-S II Nikkor

Some 353mm long (not including its big and fiddly lens hood) and weighing 4,800g, this is a brute of a lens with a hefty £6,159 price tag to match. Whenever I have used it I have concluded that its bulk and weight make it more trouble than it is worth and vow never to use it again. The heat and sometimes cramped conditions at Wimbledon only served to reinforce this view. Then, in the cold light of day sat in my study, I examined the images and realised that I should stop paying all those rental fees and just go out and buy this lens!

I hate lugging it around but the quality it delivers is astounding. There is a 'sheen' to some of the images created with this lens that surpasses anything I have seen from other images I have captured. I have also posted some examples of images taken with the 400mm plus both 1.4 and 2.0 TCs. The 2.0 TC in particular has impressed me.

Obviously this lens is used for getting closer up to the action that is some distance away. However,



● Specifications

Street Price: £6159
Maximum Aperture: f/2.8
Minimum Aperture: f/22
Lens construction: 11 elements in 9 groups (3 ED glass elements)
Diameter and length: 159 x 353mm
Weight: 4800g

RIGHT: Nikon D3S & 400mm VR. 1/1250sec; f/4, ISO 200

I have got my best results when using it to crop-in very tightly on subjects which are quite close. When, as in tennis, the subjects are moving fast you obviously get a high failure rate but when you get it right the results can be stunning.



200mm f/2G ED-IF AF-S VR NIKKOR and AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II



At 203mm long and weighing 2900g, the 200mm f/2.0 is a lovely lens to handle and it produces tack-sharp images with beautiful bokeh. Its max aperture of f/2.0 can be a big bonus in certain conditions too. I find that 200mm is a useful length when shooting tennis from a courtside position - often the 300mm is just too long. However, sometimes the 200mm can also suffer from this problem: for example, in some circumstances you cannot shoot in landscape format and still capture a full-body shot of a player. In such instances a 70-200mm zoom can be incredibly useful, but do you lose out on quality?

These types of judgements can be subjective, especially when there are so many variables involved. I have carefully studied many of my images and would say that compared with my old 70-200mm VR I, the 200mm f/2.0 delivers discernibly superior image quality. However, my new 70-200mm VR II has raised the quality bar a notch (or perhaps half a notch), and certainly enough to narrow the gap between a 70-200mm zoom and a 200mm prime.

I think the prime still has the edge (and of course a stop wider aperture) but not by that much and this has to be off-set against the convenience of the zoom. There is also the price to consider: the 200mm f/2.0 costs some £3,069, while the 70-200mm is almost half the price at around £1,629 and, at 1,540g, is almost half the weight. One of the two Nadal shots shown here was taken with the 200mm prime, the other with the 70-200mm VR II. Feel free to download the original files if you want to decide for yourself whether the premium price of the 200mm is worth it.

I am honestly still undecided. The 200mm probably still has a modest quality advantage but you cannot zoom out. Having said this, the 70-200mm offers a lazy way of shooting that is perhaps not to be recommended. The temptation is always to shoot wide in order to get a full-body shot in the knowledge that you can crop tighter post-capture and, as we all know, this is not the best method to get that 'killer' shot.



● Specifications

200mm
Street Price: £3069
Maximum Aperture: f/2
Minimum Aperture: f/22
Lens construction: 13 elements in 9 groups
Diameter and length: 124 x 203mm
Weight: 2900g



● Specifications

70-200mm
Street Price: £1629
Maximum Aperture: f/2.8
Minimum Aperture: f/22
Lens construction: 21 elements in 16 groups with 7 ED elements, some with nano crystal coating
Diameter and length: 87x205.5mm
Weight: 1540g

TOP LEFT: Nikon D3S & 200mm. 1/1600sec; f/2, ISO 200, -1/3 EV **TOP RIGHT:** Nikon D3S & 70-200mm VR II. 116mm, 1/800sec, f/2.8, ISO 320

600mm f/4D ED-IF AF-S II NIKKOR

At 455mm long and weighing-in at 5,900g this lens will hurt your back and its £6,949 price tag will not do your wallet any favours either! I used this lens when shooting from one of the photography positions 'up in the Gods' on Centre Court. I took the 400mm lens as well so was glad there was a lift! It does the job of getting close to the action and the IQ is reasonable given the distant subject.

I did not capture any shots with this lens that I was really proud of but this is not necessarily a reflection of the lens. I wish now I had compared it with the 300mm fitted with a 2x converter. This combination would only have been a stop slower and I suspect the IQ would have been almost on a par. A 600mm focal length is not often required for tennis, but I am sure that there are other scenarios where this lens would come into its own.



● Specifications

Street Price: £6949
Maximum Aperture: f/4
Minimum Aperture: f/22
Lens construction: 10 elements in 7 groups (3 ED glass elements)
Diameter and length: 166x455 mm
Weight: 5900g

RIGHT: Nikon D3S & 600mm. 1/1250; f/4, ISO 200, -1/3 EV



Next Month: I'll be completing my Wimbledon round-up with a look at the rest of the kit that made up my Wimbledon super test, such as bags, tripods and that Hasselblad H4D-40!