

Tutorial Five

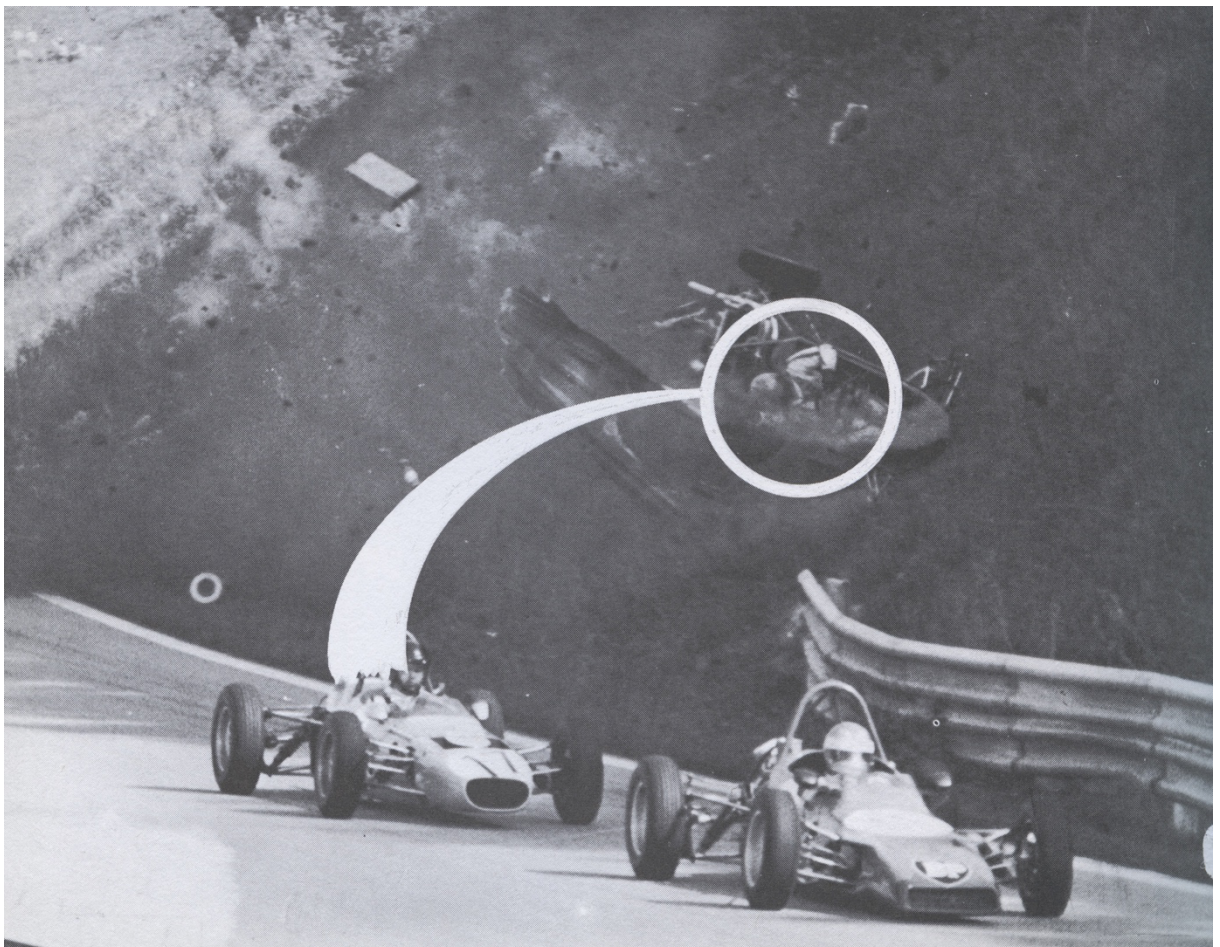
Shooting Action Pictures

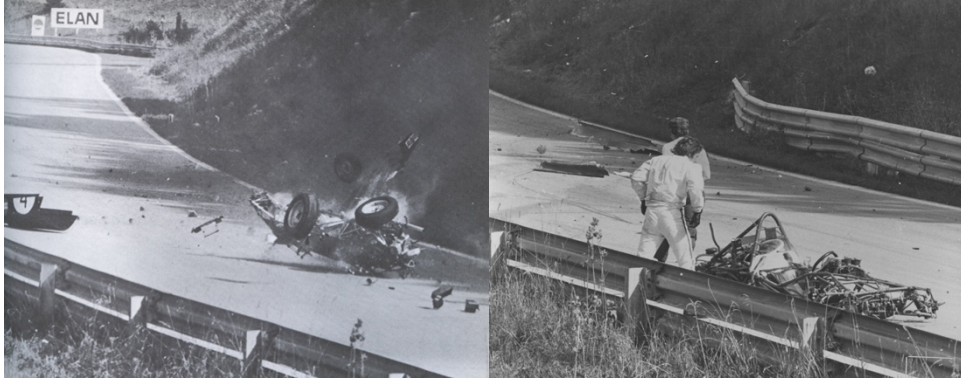
By

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[www.photojournalism.uk](http://www.photojournalism.uk)

While the studio, portrait or landscape photographer can determine their viewpoint, adjust their composition, and focus accordingly, the action photographer has to snatch pictures on the run, sometimes literally.





As these race track photographs demonstrate, when the action starts, there is usually no time to worry about exposures, viewpoints, or precise focus, all of which should have been established well beforehand. In this sequence, the action is completed in less than thirty seconds, from the driver running off the track to emerging unhurt from his wrecked car. A video on this tutorial is available on the website.

On one occasion, I was photographing a girl stunt cyclist attempting a record-breaking ride through the longest-ever fire tunnel. She broke the record, emerging from the blazing straw tunnel just as it collapsed.



With a scream, the girl jumped for the bike, which had burst into flames. She started to run across the field, smoke and flames billowing from her pants. Stunt organiser Joe Weston Webb grabbed a bucket of water and flung it over her, quenching the fire but making her yell even louder.



As I saw her abandon the flaming bike and run, I knew I was too close to capture the image of my long lens. So I snatched a 24 mm wide-angle lens from my pocket, changed lenses, and readjusted the f-stop for the correct exposure to capture the scene.

Which brings me to my first lesson.

You must become familiar with your camera to shoot action successfully and never miss a shot. Just as their instrument becomes a part of the mind and body of a great musician, your camera must become an extension of your senses.

One of the most important skills you can acquire when manually focusing your camera is, in my view, always the best option; you must become good at estimating the distance.

Practice this skill until you can estimate distances with an error of less than 10%.

Old-time newspaper photographers were incredibly skilled at this task. They often worked with cumbersome press cameras that took a single picture before changing slides. They could obtain pin-sharp shots under the trickiest circumstances.

As with this 1924 photograph, entitled 'Limbs and the Law', by Fleet Street photographer James Jarché, shown here by courtesy of the Royal Photographic Society Collection.



'This brings us to a technical term that may need clarification: the lens's hyperfocal distance. This is the distance from the lens to an acceptably sharp object when the lens is focused at infinity.

Hyperfocal distance varies according to the aperture and the lens's focal length. It can be instrumental in action work as it enables zone focus, which means focusing not on the fast-moving subject itself but on the region or zone in which it will be sharply focused.

Because focusing on the object itself may be difficult when covering fast-moving action, you set your lens at the appropriate hyperfocal distance, and everything between half that distance and infinity will be sharp. If, for example, the hyperfocal length of a lens is 16 feet at f11, by setting that f-stop and adjusting your focus to infinity, everything between 8 feet and infinity will be sharp.

The depth of field scale on the lens can be used to determine the hyperfocal distance. It would be best to memorise the hyperfocal distance of your most frequently used lenses at various stops, such as f5.6, f8, and f11.

All action pictures can be divided into three elements:

The action itself, such as a man sprinting, an aircraft crashing, or a racing car screaming around the tight corner.

The technique used to capture the action includes your camera angle and shutter speed to capture the movement and the lens's focal length.

The background against which the action takes place.

There are three types of action.

Side-to-side action includes car racing, horses galloping, and athletes sprinting.

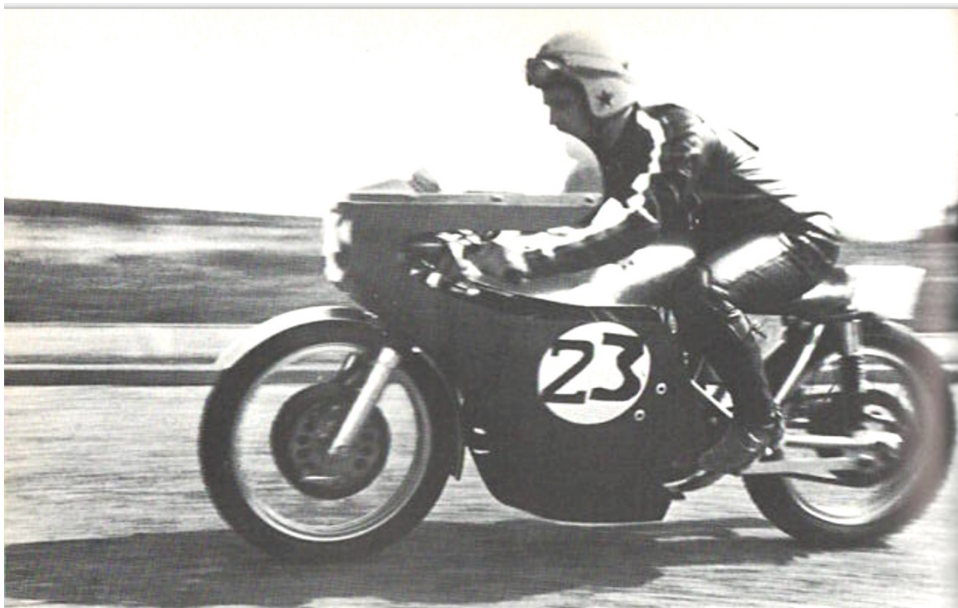
Up and down the action, for example, rugby players leaping, football basketball players jumping for the net.

A combination of both types—for example, a footballer, while hitting a ball, may also move forward or sideways by placing action.

Let's suppose we want to freeze some split second of action so that the moving object is pin-sharp, although this is not always possible or desirable. If the object travels at right angles to the camera, whether or not we freeze it will depend on two variables.

When should you blur and which to try to get everything sharp?

When photographing side-to-side action, the subject should be sharp, but panning can help blur the background and convey a sense of speed.



When photographing this motorcycle champion, I was told he could not start his engine due to noise restrictions. Panning my shot as he coasted his silent bike down a slight incline enabled me to convey a sense of speed far higher than the five mph he was travelling.

In up-and-down action, the subject defies gravity, conveying a sense of movement. Up-and-down activity can be divided into three stages: It goes up, stops at its peak, and then comes down.

When going up and coming down, the subject often travels so fast that a high shutter speed is needed to freeze the action. However, at the peak, there is no actual movement in the central part of the subject, so you can freeze it using a relatively slow shutter speed. Moreover, because the upward movement's peak represents the ultimate second of supreme effort, capturing it will result in a far more impressive shot.



There are three essential points about action picture composition.

Horizontal and vertical lines are static and restful.

Diagonal lines suggest movement and drama.

Balance in a composition is dull, while imbalance, providing it is balanced, conveys movement, excitement and action.

In my sixth and final tutorial in this series, we'll examine one of the most important steps: ensuring your camera is in the right place at the right time to take universally appealing pictures of worldwide publishing interest.



For details about my various assignments, how they were conducted, and what they reveal regarding the fundamentals of photojournalism, read *People I Shot*. It is available on Amazon or from [www. photojournalism.uk](http://www.photojournalism.uk) in an edition autographed by the author and with FREE UK postage at the same price.

