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Sports photography is about sharing a moment, an instant in time. It captures the intensity of sports competition, and freezes a fleeting moment. It relies on the talent and creativity of the photographers, as well as on the technical advances that make it possible to capture those ephemeral events and depict them as accurately as possible.

This sheet focuses on:

- The close links between sports photography and the history of photographic techniques.
- The documentary and artistic aspects of sports photography.
- The unique challenges of being a sports photographer.
- The variety of messages conveyed by images of sport.
- The different ways sports photographs are used.

The activity sheet gives children aged 9 to 15 the opportunity to learn more about sports photography in a way that brings the topic to life.

→ Download from: www.olympic.org/education
  > Teaching materials

An educational video explains how to shoot with short exposures, and provides the tools for conducting a practical in-class workshop on the visual image.

→ Available in french from: www.olympic.org/pedagogie
Introduction

Sports photography captures an instant of sport, and the people watching it, by conveying a strong image. The photographer is the key person in charge of this task, and has many challenges to overcome. It's by no means an easy job!

As sports photographer Franck Seguin says:

“Sports photography is the most difficult field [of photography] because it requires physical ability, technical ability (e.g. using different lenses, studio work and working outdoors), the ability to adapt to different locations: sea, stadium, mountains, desert, boats, helicopters, etc. That’s the job of a sports photographer: to produce the best image despite the rules you have to follow, and the many obstacles.”


This expert sports photographer started out photographing skiers because he thought it would be a fun way to earn a living!

Sports photography has a history all its own. This information sheet gives a brief overview. After an introduction to the history of sports photography and some of its special features, the second half of the document focuses on the connections between the discipline and the history of the techniques it relies on. The third part looks at the traditions and messages of sports photography, focusing its main actors: the photographers. Finally, there is a glossary of the keywords used when analysing an image.
Sports photography, a unique discipline and a mirror of its time.
The rise of Sports photography has evolved incredibly throughout the 20th century.

Sports photography, a reflection of the leisured classes

By the end of the 19th century, the industrial revolution had fundamentally changed western society. These more liberal societies began to turn their attention to leisure, and devoted more time to recreation and sport. It was around that time, in 1894, that Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games, and global sporting events were now scheduled every four years. This context, which combined technical advances with social liberalisation, contributed to the rise of sports photography, which continued to develop at an incredible rate throughout the 20th century.

The American delegation posing at the Panathenaic Stadium, during the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896.
The unique features of sports photography

Sports photography features a number of highly specific aspects, which form a sort of user’s guide that all good sports photographers follow to ensure they take photos that will make an impression.

Spotting the decisive moment
Photographers must use all their intuition to capture the most powerful instant.

Choosing original viewpoints
The viewpoint is what gives the photo its depth.

Taking striking portraits
It gives the photographer an opportunity to identify a more private aspect of the athlete.
The “decisive moment” is a key concept of sports photography.

The concept was articulated by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, who identified it as the moment the photographer chooses to capture his image:

“Photography implies the recognition of a rhythm in the world of real things. What the eye does is to find and focus on the particular subject within the mass of reality; what the camera does is simply to register upon film the decision made by the eye. (...) In photography there is a new kind of plasticity, the product of instantaneous lines made by the movements of the subject. We work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.”


This moment is not necessarily the moment when something happens. It could be just before, for example. Photographers use their intuition to capture the most powerful instant, the most graceful or the most striking moment, of a situation. They must be able to see how an event is going to proceed, and choose the most appropriate moment to capture it in a photograph. That’s not easy!

Crossing the finish line, or scoring a goal, are not necessarily the decisive moments that photographers choose to immortalise. A photographer is looking for something transcendental. The best sports photographers are looking to produce images that are aesthetically powerful, which at the same time transcend the sporting action.
The viewpoint is the place where the photographer chooses to put his or her camera, and this a crucial element of sports photography. The viewpoint is what gives the photo its depth. It can also show a scene from an unusual perspective, which a spectator would not have the opportunity to experience.

Thanks to technical progress, photographers no longer have to be with their camera to take advantage of the most unusual viewpoints. Cameras can be controlled remotely, mounted on drones, or controlled by computer.

They are many different viewpoints:
- high angle
- low angle
- aerial view
- frontal view

Those three pictures illustrate a same moment captured from three different vantage points.
Portraits as sports photography

Portraits focus on the face and its expressions. They are completely different from the kinds of sports photographs that try to capture the body in motion.

They also provide a way for the general public to identify with athletes they admire. Portraits are often published in the form of items that can be collected and kept (stickers, posters, etc.).

Whether or not the athlete concerned is famous, a portrait gives the photographer an opportunity to identify a more private aspect of the athlete, and show another side of their personality.

A portrait gives the photographer an opportunity to identify a more private aspect of the athlete.
Sports photography and the Olympic Games

The Olympic Games are just as important for photographers as they are for the athletes. They come together for two weeks every four years, and they need to perform at the highest level, just like the athletes do. Photographers also have to prepare carefully for the Games to keep up with the pace of competition.

The Olympic Games provide an opportunity to try out new, sometimes experimental techniques. Some camera manufacturers will lend the photographers new cameras and lenses to try out before they are released onto the market. It’s a good opportunity to ensure that the professionals use them, and are seen using them on the television! Not a bad marketing strategy.

At the Olympic Games, the photographers also direct their lenses towards the athletes’ entourage. They may focus on the emotions expressed on the faces of the many people involved in a sports competition – doctors, coaches and referees – or more generally on the spectators.

Sports photographers have privileged access behind the scenes of the competition, and they provide a glimpse into a world that is generally closed to spectators. Athletes are seen in a different, more personal light.

Photographer John Huet catches the Australian women’s rugby team moments before they go onto the field for the final. Their faces are a picture of concentration.

This American coach, surrounded by his team, is talking strategy with his players, who are seen as blurred silhouettes in the foreground.

By using focus and centering the two photographers chose to emphasize on one point, which gives a intimist setting to those pictures.
Sports photography and its connection with advances in photographic techniques

Etienne-Jules Marey
Untitled, ca. 1890. © Collection Musée Marey, Beaune, France
The history of sports imagery owes a great deal to the progress made in photographic techniques. It is also important to note that sometimes it is the photographers themselves who pioneered these innovations!

This process perfected in the late 19th century by Louis Daguerre was a way of creating high-definition images without a negative, on copper plates coated with silver. Daguerreotypes were usually displayed in a glass case, and the reflections this caused meant they had to be tilted slightly to be seen properly. They were protected from light by a wooden lid. This was the beginning of photography!
The calotype was used for the first known sports photograph, taken by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. Patented in 1841 by Henry Fox Talbot, it produced a paper negative, which made it possible to reproduce images by contact. This was the first photographic development process.

The first sports photograph shows Mr Laing posing with his tennis racquet, conveying an attitude of strength.
Still at the end of the 19th century, in 1883, *Etienne-Jules Marey* and his assistant *Georges Demenÿ* perfected a way of taking a succession of shots at fixed intervals. This provided a way of deconstructing movements, making it possible to study them scientifically. Initially, the various phases of a single movement were photographed onto a fixed plate. Later, he would use a moving film, with which he could secure up to 50 photos at a rate of 20 images per second.

Eight in one! With chronophotography, it became possible to isolate every phase of a gymnast rotating around a horizontal bar.

By deconstructing and studying the movements chronophotography helped athletes to improve training.

At this time, a film could secure up 50 photos at a rate of 20 images per second.
Another revolution arrived in the 1980s with the invention of digital photography. The time between taking a photo and publishing the shot got shorter and shorter, and at the same time it became possible to freeze dynamic action shots, and work with remote-controlled cameras mounted on robots and drones. Sports photographs have become more graphically effective, capturing the emotion and speed of the moment, in vivid colours.

20th century revolutions

A new procedure using silvered glass plates in conjunction with a rapid gelatin emulsion would revolutionise the world of sports photography. Thanks to a technique perfected by Jules Beau, photographers were finally able to leave their studios and capture images of athletes in action. Nevertheless, the early 20th century would remain essentially a time of studio portraits. The exposure time required by early photographic plates meant lengthy poses.

Then, little by little, photographers gradually began to seek out original viewpoints (even without the benefit of telephoto lenses!) and began to explore concepts of time and motion thanks to innovations including flash photography and shorter exposure times.

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Role and functions of sporting images
Sports photography: customs and messages

The functions of sporting images

Sports photography fulfils a number of different functions. First of all there is the aesthetic dimension, emphasising the beauty of the athlete’s body, and giving an artistic depth to the portrayal of movement.

Sports photography also has a documentary value. It records the events of a competition and conveys information about it to people who were not there, through newspaper reports, for example.

Finally, because it provides the ability to understand and deconstruct movement, or simply because it provides a way of precisely establishing who crossed the finish line first, sports photography can have a scientific value.

Influence on the image of women

Sports photography has also played a role in modernising the image of women. The advent of magazines such as French publication La vie au grand air, which published photographs of women riding bicycles, helped to promote more modern representations of women. Nevertheless, in the early 20th century very few women practised sport, which is why there are far fewer photographs of them.

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The strength of political messages

Sports photography can also convey a political message, and the Olympic Games provide some potent examples. The photos of African-American sprinter Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals at the 1936 Games, provided a powerful counter-argument to Nazi theories about the superiority of the Aryan race.

At the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico, US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gold and bronze medal-winners in the 200 metres, used the Olympic podium as a platform to raise their black-gloved fists in protest against the racism and segregation that continued to divide the United States. This instant was captured through sports photography and published all around the world. The athletes became iconic figures in the African-American community’s struggle for equality.

This instant was captured through sports photography and published all around the world. The athletes became iconic figures in the African-American community’s struggle for equality.

This photo left its mark on history. The now iconic shot reveals nothing of the sanctions the athletes were subjected to as a result of their protest (they were banned from the Games and ostracised by the media).
Sports photography in different contexts

Sports photographs can be seen in a variety of different situations. They can be published in specialised magazines or general-interest publications. They can also be exhibited in art galleries, or used by scientific research laboratories looking into the human body and movement. These are known as different reading contexts.

The birth of the magazine

Accompanying as it did the social changes of the end of the 19th century, sports photography enjoyed greater visibility thanks to the birth of the news magazine. *La vie au grand air*, founded in 1898, was entirely devoted to sports news, and featured the latest in graphic design. In those days, photography consisted mainly of studio photographs, because it remained technically very challenging to create instant shots.

Sports photography, a documentary medium

Sports photography can of course be appreciated for its documentary and informative function. It provides a record of sporting news in the same way as a newspaper article, or a radio or television programme. Photojournalist Nate Fein won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949, the first time this press photography prize had been won by a sports image, for a photo of baseball player Babe Ruth’s last professional appearance.

Photography in an aesthetic context

Sports photography also has an aesthetic dimension. It can be seen as a work of art and presented as such in a gallery or exhibition. Annie Leibovitz, a photographer known for her portraits of famous people, has also worked at several different Olympic Games.
Scientific photography: robotics and unusual viewpoints

Finally, sports photography can provide an opportunity to appreciate technical prowess and discover unique points of view.

For example, working with a camera positioned at a remote location reveals some unexpected perspectives. Since 1992 and the Barcelona Olympic Games, it has become possible to shoot swimmers from the bottom of the swimming pool. It’s an unusual effect!

These two synchronised swimmers don’t let themselves be put off by the many cameras lying on the bottom of the pool where they are performing their programme.
Composition

Composition refers to the way photographers arrange the elements of the image they are about to shoot, in order to draw the focus to where they want it to be.

They have to think about the elements in each of the different levels or planes of the photograph – foreground, midground and background.

Photographers also look at perspective, and the volume and the depth of the photograph in each plane of the image. Finally, they think about how the image is framed.

Photographic genres

There are many different photographic genres, which fulfil different functions.

Artistic photography is the creation of a work of art, to the extent that it aims to provoke an aesthetic response in the person looking at the photo.

Documentary photography provides the most realistic and neutral images possible in order to record an event.

Scientific photographs are, in general, taken by scientists to use in their research.

Plane

A plane is a virtual vertical surface in which people or objects are arranged. Different planes represent different degrees of depth, from the closest (foreground) to the furthest away (background), with a number of intermediate planes in between.

Viewpoint

The viewpoint is the position chosen by the photographer to photograph his or her subject. The viewpoint conveys a meaning.

A high angle shot captures the subject from the top to the bottom. It can give the impression that the subject is smaller than it really is.

A low angle shot is when the subject is captured from the bottom to the top, which makes it look bigger.

When the photograph is taken from an aeroplane, for example, this is called an aerial view.

A frontal view means placing the camera directly in front of the subject. It can feel intrusive, but it also brings the subject closer to the viewer.

Post-production

In photography, post-production means all the operations carried out on a photograph between the time the shutter is released and its final publication. These tasks can include shot selection, photo editing, and working with lighting, contrast, saturation, sharpness and cropping.

Shooting

Shooting is the action of capturing the subject or visual field that the photographer wishes to photograph.

Printing

Producing paper proofs from an original image that can be transferred to film or digital media. At the end of the 19th century, dry plates were coated with negative emulsions made of gelatin or silver chloride, to reveal the images. Cyanotype, another negative monochrome procedure, produced cyan blue or Prussian blue prints.
Credits

COUVERTURE

Jason Evans
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Hockey Men, Final – Argentina (ARG) 1st, Belgium (BEL) 2nd. The team of Argentina (ARG) hug, Manuel BRUNET, Lucas VILA, Juan LOPEZ et Juan GILARDI.
© 2016 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

David Burnett
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Judo women's -70kg (middleweight), training – Yolande BUKASA (ROT).
© 2016 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

John Huet
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Men's volleyball final – United States (USA) 1st, Serbia (SRB) 2nd. Mike Krzyzewski, the US coach.
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Bob Martin
Diving, Tracey MILES (GBR) with Sagrada Familia in the background, Barcelona 1992 Olympic Games.
© Getty Images

PAGE 4

Athens 1896 Olympic Games – The American delegation inside the Panathenaic Stadium.
© 1896 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

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Jason Evans
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, diving – Training session: two divers from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea train on the trampoline.
© 2016 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

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Matthew King
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, athletics, 100m Women finale – Elaine THOMPSON (JAM) 1st, Tori BOWIE (USA) 2nd, Shelly-Ann FRASER-PRYCE (JAM) 3rd.
© 2016 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

Matthew King
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, athletics, 100m Women finale – Elaine THOMPSON (JAM).
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David Burnett
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Judo women's -70kg (middleweight), training – Yolande BUKASA (ROT).
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John Huet
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Men's basketball final – United States (USA) 1st, Serbia (SRB) 2nd. Mike Krzyzewski, the US coach.
© 2016 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

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Etienne-Jules Marey
Untitled, ca. 1890.
© Collection Musée Marey, Beaune, France

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David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson
Mr. Laing or Laine, 1843.
© National Galleries of Scotland

PAGE 13

Georges Demeny
Chronophotograph of an Exercise on the Horizontal Bar, 1906.
© INSEP Iconothèque

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Pawel Kopczynski
London 2012 Olympic Games, Men's Discus Throw finale – Lawrence OKOYE (GBR).
© IOPP Pool / Getty Images

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David Burnett
Rio 2016 Olympic Games, athletics, 200 m men's final – Usain BOLT (JAM) 1st.
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Anonymous
Antwerp 1920 – Suzanne LENGLEN (FRA), gold medallist, singles and mixed doubles.
© Getty Images

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Mexico 1968 Olympic Games, Athletics, men's 200 m medal ceremony – Peter Norman (AUS) 2nd, Tommie Smith (USA) 1st and John Carlos (USA) 3rd.
© 2017 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / United Archives

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Catherine Leutenegger
“OlympicArt” temporary exhibition, Olympic Museum Lausanne, 20/11/2008 – 01/03/2009 – “Modern pentathlon, Michal Gašpářik” (left) and “Athletics, Gwen Torrence” (right), 1996, taken by Annie Leibovitz (1949–), USA.
© 2009 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

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John Huet
London 2012 Olympic Games, Synchronised swimming, duet women's final – Xuechen Huang and Ou Liu (CHN), 3rd.
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