



Profile: Brian Smith

Years of Being a Photographer of Elite Athletes & Celebrities

By Victoria Vestal

Brian shoots celebrities and sports stars for clients like ESPN, IBM, *Forbes*, *Time* and TNT. He is the current president of Editorial Photographers. After winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1985 for *The Orange County Register* coverage of the Olympics, he took a job with *The Miami Herald* and was immediately on a plane to photograph the fall of Baby Doc in Haiti. Twenty years later, he's still shooting elite assignments. Assignment work has gradually overtaken his newspaper work, stretched his time and turned financially rewarding; Brian has continued to expand his talents, and in the process, has built an impressive body of work. He has shot everybody from DMX to Dwyane Wade to Donald Trump, Antonio Banderas to Alan Greenspan. Following a rapid transition from film to digital, Brian talks about how digital works for him and how he works after capture.

AC: Tell us about your photography career.

BS: I got my start in photography in high school, shooting sports for the *Ames Daily Tribune*; the sports editor asked me to shoot swimming competitions. Within three years, I had my first magazine photograph published in *Life* of Yankees manager Billy Martin breaking down into tears at Thurman Munson's funeral. After attending the University of Missouri, I started out at *The*

Orange County Register and worked with a couple of great photo editors—Ron Mann and Dennis Copeland. The highlight of those years was covering the Los Angeles Olympic Games for the paper. It paid off when, the following spring, we won the Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography. With the possible exception of the Olympics, my favorite sports shoot of all time was one I did for Miriam Marseu of *Sports Illustrated* on nudist golf. We had a couple hours over two days to shoot on a tiny nine-hole pitch-and-putt golf course at one of Florida's oldest naturist resorts, just down the road from Disney World. Of course, the challenge was keeping all the naughty bits hidden so that the photos could actually appear in the magazine.

AC: When did you move from film to digital shooting?

BS: Most photographers know another really annoying photographer who has at some point uttered words along the lines of, "I'll switch to digital when you pull the last roll of film out of my cold dead fingers." Until a year and a half ago, I was that guy. I'd done Photoshop post-production for a couple years from scanning the chromes or negatives with a Creo iQsmart2 scanner, but I was never really sold on digital capture. When I shot film, I'd scan my final 6x7 chromes as 200MB 16-bit files and



ALL PHOTOS COPYRIGHT © BRIAN SMITH

Darius Rice of the Miami Heat

couldn't really imagine settling for anything less.

AC: Why do you favor medium format for your assignment photography?

BS: The first camera I found that approached my expectations was a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II. I thought that sharpness was overrated. One of my favorite lenses is a Dalmeyer Pentac 200/2.9 barrel lens for 4x5 that Frank Ockenfels turned me on to. Shooting a tight portrait with that lens gives you a depth of field of just about 1/4 inch. The biggest misconception is that 35mm digital is "as sharp" as medium format film. The reason this is a misconception is because sharpness is kind of a two-edged sword. Most of the time, I find I want sharpness on the subject and fall-off on the background so the focus stays only where I want it. The thing that I always loved about medium and large format is that, unlike 35mm, it never tried so hard to be too sharp. I love that on 6x7, 4x5 and 8x10, the subjects just pop with the shallower depth of field. I started experimenting with a Leaf Aptus 22 to see if the extra 6 megapixels really made much difference. I am now shooting with both the Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II and a 33-megapixel Leaf Aptus 75 on a Hasselblad H1. I'm more comfortable shooting with a medium format camera with the 4x3 aspect ratio that matches a vertical page.

When it comes to photographing professional athletes, as in sports, fractions of a second are the difference between success and failure. I was assigned by *ESPN The Magazine* to shoot this

"I tell other photographers that the worst days in our lives would be the greatest days in the lives of many people."

year's home-run king, Ryan Howard, before a game against the Florida Marlins. As is often the case, I was told I'd have only 10 minutes to shoot before batting practice, and I had to be packed up and out of there before any other players took the field. I would not have any time to waste. Shooting with a Profoto 7B strobe, the Leaf Aptus 75 outpaced the recycle of the strobes, and I never had to slow down to wait for the back to catch up. So, when my 10 minutes were up, I had everything I needed and more—tight, medium and loose shots of Howard holding his bat and action shots of his home-run swing and follow-through. The quality was incredible. The 33MP back captures even the finest detail—every thread in his uniform. The gloss of the lacquer on his bat looked like glass. Everything the magazine could ask for—priceless.

AC: What is your workflow after capture?

BS: Workflow—not slow. I joke with some clients that I've taken a part-time job working nights and weekends at a photo lab, except it's not really a joke. Shooting up to 10 shoots a week on magazine deadlines leaves very little time to waste in front of a computer. One of the things I like about Leaf Aptus digital backs is that instead of locking you into the manufacturer's proprietary software to process the files, I can simply drop Leaf RAW files along with my Canon RAW files into either Photoshop CS2 or Photoshop Lightroom for my entire workflow. After a rough edit,

I rename the files and add metadata before creating a web gallery for the client to choose their final selects. Finals are processed as 200MB 16-bit ProPhoto PSDs. Every image gets retouched and then burned and dodged using separate curves layers. When I've finished retouching the 16-bit layered file, I duplicate the file, convert to the final color space, and then save as a flattened 8-bit TIFF for delivery to the client, which I then either FTP to them or post to my site.



Richard Branson photographed on his private island, Necker Island, BVI, for a story about Virgin Galactic Space Ship One flights for *Time* on December 24, 2006. (*Time Magazine* Issue Date: March 5, 2007)

AC: What computer equipment do you use, and what is your storage procedure?

BS: I rarely shoot tethered. Shooting to CF cards or the 30GB Leaf digital magazine gives me the same freedom of movement that I was used to with film. Image selection is done on a dual-processor Power Mac G5 with a 30-inch Apple Cinema Display that gets calibrated constantly with Eye-One. Seth Resnick convinced me that the whole once-a-month calibration routine was crap—as if a job you shoot 29 days after calibration is less critical than the one you shoot the day you calibrate. I calibrate all the time. Everything gets saved to redundant Sonnet Fusion 500P five-bay SATA enclosures loaded with

Fashion story featuring Nascar star driver Jeff Gordon at Homestead Racetrack for Ocean Drive Magazine

750GB Seagate SATA drives, which have a 3GB per second transfer speed, so there are no hang-ups when processing or saving huge files. Each working drive is backed up using Retrospect software. For 16MP Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II images, I shoot to 2GB SanDisk Extreme III CompactFlash cards. Because the RAW files from the 33MP Leaf Aptus 75 are twice the size, I get a similar number of images on 4GB SanDisk Extreme III CF cards. Since the Aptus 75 takes advantage of the speed of the Extreme IVs, I just picked up a few of the 8GB Extreme IVs and a SanDisk Extreme Firewire reader; the combination is wicked fast.

AC: What paper are you using? How did you find your favorite paper?

BS: A little over a year ago, I decided to redo my portfolio and get rid of those heavy vinyl pages that hid the quality of the prints, so I decided to try every single double-sided matte paper on the market. I tested each paper with the manufacturer's profile and then I built one using Eye-One. I found that Moab Entrada fine art paper was the hands-down winner, with Moab Kayenta photo matte paper a close second. On top of that, the profiles from Moab were so good that I didn't even bother with building my own because the prints from an Epson 4000 were already a dead-on match from my monitor. Moab has a new paper called "Colorado" coming out that I'm dying to try.

AC: How do you emulate the look of film in your work?

BS: Back when I shot film, I used to really push the look of film in processing. Many clients want me to maintain that look. In the past, I had found a way to adjust color to get that look in Photoshop, but it took three or four adjustment layers, with different adjustments to each RGB channel and about 30 minutes per image to get it right. I knew I wouldn't have that amount of time to do that to an entire shoot. So I decided to see what all those sliders



and tabs in Lightroom could do. I spent about 10 minutes adjusting the hue, saturation and luminance of each color channel, bumped up the contrast and then added some vignetting to darken down the edges. It was just the film look I was after. Then I synced all the images in Lightroom and watched the entire shoot convert to the look! There is so much control that you can get most of the adjustments you want in RAW and batch-apply the look to every image in the shoot. It's great to hear that all of the same adjustments are being added to Adobe Camera Raw 4 so that the two programs can exchange RAW images. Creating Web galleries in Lightroom is incredibly quick when creating directly from the RAW files—no wasting time processing JPEGs. Adobe Photoshop Lightroom is flat out the best RAW processor I've ever used. I'm using Lightroom to process files from both Leaf Aptus 75 digital back and Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II RAWs, and Lightroom absolutely rocks; it offers so much control. It's like a Ferrari—sleek and elegant on the outside, but if you pop the hood, the engine blows the doors off the competition.

Visit Brian's website at <http://www.briansmithphoto.com> and his blog at <http://briansmithphoto.blogspot.com>



Victoria Vestal is a marketing consultant and has recently worked at Adobe and Yahoo. She is on the Photography Advisory Board for the National Geographic All Roads Film Festival. Victoria and her husband, Brad Kupper, own Barndoor Studio, a photo and video studio in San Jose, CA. Victoria is a former stock broker and an avid investor. She is the mother of two.



2006 Home Run King Ryan Howard