

# LONG-TERM GROWTH



text by Miki Johnson  
photographs by Brian Smith

*What is the secret to Brian Smith's overwhelming success as an editorial portrait photographer? His insatiable desire to evolve.*

The summer after his sophomore year at University of Missouri, photographer Brian Smith was working as a stringer for United Press International in Cincinnati, Ohio. When New York Yankees catcher Thurman Munson died in a plane crash near Canton, Ohio, four hours away, Smith volunteered to make the trek and join the crowds of photographers covering the funeral—the hassle more than paid off.

At the service, Yankees manager Billy Martin broke down in tears for a moment, just long enough for Smith to raise his 180mm lens to his eye and snap a single picture (below left). The next day his photo was picked up by the *New York Times* and ran huge on the front of its sports section.

A few weeks later when Smith was back at school, he received a package from his boss at UPI. In it was a *LIFE* magazine with his Martin image in it. “The next day I showed up for my Basic Photojournalism class and one of the professors had tacked a [*LIFE*] magazine up on the bulletin board,” Smith remembers. “So that was a pretty good way to start.”

It is tempting to see this moment as portentous when considering the 25-year career that has followed it: A Pulitzer-prize winning newspaper photographer for a decade, Smith, 48, has now transitioned to editorial portraiture for publications such as *Time* and *Forbes* and has served as the president of Editorial Photographers since 2004. But in Smith's eyes, getting published in *LIFE* was just the first step in a long, hard trip.

“I’m not certain there is such a thing as ‘big’ breaks—just a lot of little ones,” he says. “Everything just kind of builds to the next thing.” The Martin photo won a National Press Photographers Association award, which helped Smith get an internship the next summer at *The*

*Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. Additional awards for his work there convinced the paper to offer him a job when he got out of school, from which he quickly moved to a “dream job” at the *Orange County Register*.

More important than the breaks were the chops Smith learned at publications like the *Register*, where Ron Mann, the director of photography, and Dennis Copeland, a photo editor, “encouraged us to swing for the fences, and backed us up if we swung big and missed rather than play it safe,” says Smith. Those same rules applied during the paper’s coverage of the 1984 Olympic games in Los Angeles, for which the team won a Pulitzer in spot news photography (when Smith was only 25).

Smith worked as a newspaper photographer for 10 years, renowned especially for his image of Greg Louganis hitting his head on the diving board during the 1988 Seoul Olympics, which won first place in both the World Press Photo and Pictures of the Year competitions.

Conscious of his own need to grow, however, Smith recognized there was a downside to the thrill of newspaper work. “Working as a newspaper photographer, you learn to work fast and you work a lot, but that can become a trap,” he says. “If you’re not careful, you never really grow or evolve in your work, you just get to be really ‘efficient.’”

For his last six years at newspapers, Smith was also freelancing for magazines, and he soon discovered that he liked spending quality time with his subjects (most often sports stars), rather than shooting them from the sidelines. And when shooting celebrities for newspapers, he often got only five minutes to make a photo at the end of an interview, which increasingly became a problem as Smith’s style migrated toward



Richard Branson for *Time* (left); Smith's breakthrough photo of New York Yankees manager Billy Martin (above); and Tampa Bay Lightning's Vincent Lecavalier for *L'Actualite* magazine (right).



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Musical artist Gloria Estefan for *People en Español* (top left); a triathlon fashion shoot for *Rodale* (bottom left); and tennis star Serena Williams for *Time* (above).

“  
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”

big lighting set ups and grandiose locations. But he was determined not to let the circumstances bring down his game.

“I think you should shoot everything the way that you'd shoot it if you were working for your dream client,” Smith says. “Too many photographers make the mistake of thinking they can raise their game *after* they get their dream gig. The truth is that unless you change the way you shoot, you'll never land that gig.” Since making the move to magazines full time, Smith has gotten his fair share of dream gigs, with top magazines like *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN The Magazine*, *Time*, *Forbes*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Parade*. Throughout his career, Smith has been careful to retain the rights to re-license his photos, and now as president of Editorial Photographers, he stresses the financial potential of syndication.

“When you shoot celebrities [whose photos are] in demand, but who have limited time to do shoots, syndication will often far exceed the shoot fee,” he explains. Take, for example the photo he made for *Time* of billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson (pg. 8), which has become a “signature image” for Smith and has paid big dividends as it has been reproduced in publications around the world. “It drives home why you never give up your rights for an editorial day rate,” he says.

As usual, even now at the top of his game, Smith refuses to rest on his laurels. He is still evolving and is forever willing to try something

new—like when he picked up Sony's Carl Zeiss® Sonnar® T\* 135mm f/1.8 lens at a trade show recently. “I thought, holy crap, now *that's* what a lens should feel like,” Smith says. Later he shot New York Yankees player Hideki Matsui (opposite top) with the Sony α700. Dragged away from his intricate light set up, Smith took along two Sony Carl Zeiss® lenses, the 85mm f/1.4 and the 135mm f/1.8, which allowed him to shoot wide open in the shade under the stadium, handheld at ISO 100. “For the best quality, I always try to shoot at ISO 100. With the camera's image stabilization it was easy to keep every shot razor sharp,” he says.

Now Smith is eager to see what developments Sony has in store, especially its 24.6MP camera scheduled for release this year. “[Sony is] already on the right track with great Zeiss lenses; that's actually what first attracted me to Sony's cameras,” Smith says. “Once I got to shoot with [the Carl Zeiss® 135mm f/1.8], I realized it was a great lens that had a medium-format look. That same is true of the [Carl Zeiss®] 85mm f/1.4 and 24-70mm f/2.8 lenses. Coupling those with a 24.6MP camera should make Sony a real player in the 35mm market, so I'm very interested to see how this all evolves.”



Smith shot this triptych of New York Yankees smash star Hideki Matsui with Sony's Carl Zeiss® Sonnar® T\* 135mm f/1.8 lens on its α700.

## Sony's Latest Innovation: The 10.2MP α200

It's a measure of the break-neck speed of DSLR development that the Sony α100 went from league-leading consumer model to “entry-level” status in not quite two years—in good part because Sony itself launched the significantly higher-end α700 in the meantime.

And so the original α(alpha) gets a makeover as the α200, which bears a slightly greater outward resemblance to the α700. Inside it uses the same 10.2MP CCD imager of the α100, and claims **improvement to the Super SteadyShot sensor-based image stabilization to a half-stop more handholdability**. Autofocusing, metering, flash, viewfinder, and image adjustments are all carried over from the α100, and Sony states that AF speeds have been boosted by 70 percent. The camera gets an **increase in ISO range, to 3200 from the previous high of ISO 1600**.

The most noticeable external changes are a modestly bigger LCD monitor—now 2.7 inches, up from 2.5 on the α100—and the elimination of the Function dial on top, which used to give access to settings for ISO, white balance, Dynamic Range Optimizer (DRO), color profiles, flash modes, focus modes, and meter pattern. Instead, the α200 has an α700-style Function (Fn) button within easy reach of the thumb on the back of the camera. This provides **quick access to camera controls via the rear LCD panel**, whose interface more closely resembles that of the α700. Most of our testers find this arrangement fast and easy to understand. A vertical grip, VG-B30AM (\$250, estimated street), will be available.

At \$599 with an 18–70mm f/3.5–5.6 Sony DT lens, **the α200 is quite a deal** (sold only with a kit lens, not body only). You get a camera capable of Excellent image quality (with resolution around 2,000 lines), useful image controls like DRO, a fine-performing lens, and **sensor-based image stabilization that will work with virtually any lens that fits**.

