



Profile: EJ SIMPSON

you have to be

QUICK ON THE DRAW

to shoot rodeo action

BY PETER SKINNER

Sports photographers who work the sidelines at football games know that keeping an eye on the ball is critical if you don't want to get slammed by a 300-pound giant whose demolition style of tackling can include anybody in the line of fire. So, multiply the size of the tackler by 10 times or more and you have an idea of what rodeo photographers have to side-step from time to time as they go about their business.

In spite of agility, occasionally even the most fleet-footed and very aware photographer can get closer—much closer—to the action than intended. Just ask professional rodeo shooter EJ Simpson of San Ramon, California, who not so long ago was almost skittled by a flying bronco that demolished his Nikon D70 backup camera and snapped his Nikon 80–400mm VR lens in half. EJ, who shoots for *ProRodeo Sports News* magazine, knows how quickly a horse on the move can get around a rodeo ring.

“In another rodeo, after a saddle bronc ride, I turned the other way and didn't realize that the horse was racing around the arena right next to the fencing at about 30 miles an hour,” EJ says. “Another photographer yelled at me just in time, and I jumped up on the fence or I would have been mowed down. You really have to be focused all the time in the arena.”

Intent on capturing the peak action of rodeo events, photographers like EJ get up close and personal with some ornery animals. “As a photographer for the magazine,” he explains, “I get to shoot from inside the arena, and there is always that constant danger of the bulls and the horses. At a rodeo that I shot recently, I was standing opposite the chutes for the bull riding, and I had four bulls come straight for me after bucking off their riders. It was as if I had the red shirt on saying ‘come and get me.’ I shoot as long as I can and then instinctively head for the fence and scramble over it before the bull gets there.” At writing, EJ has

thus far been 100% successful in beating the bulls to the fence.

EJ, who has a Master of Arts degree in photography and taught the subject at Chabot College in Hayward, California, launched his career as a rodeo photographer a few years ago. He sought a challenge that would test and improve the fast action shooting skills he had developed in the great outdoors as a passionate nature and wildlife photographer. While he thrived on the thrill of photographing fast-moving animals and birds, especially when they chose erratic flight paths, he remembered the excitement and action of the rodeos he attended as a kid. Spending a lot of time on his family's 160-acre ranch near Yosemite National Park instilled in him a knowledge and respect for cattle and horses and the people who work with them. “I got to thinking about photographing rodeos, took the idea a step further and made it a reality,” EJ says.

The key ingredients for becoming a successful rodeo photographer are similar to those of sports shooters in general. Such things as knowledge of the event progression, familiarity with the competitors and an ability to anticipate the action are all essential. And when the action does happen, fast focusing and shooting come into play. To put it simply, you have to be very quick on the draw.

As EJ explains: “You really have to know each event and have a good idea of which way and where the animal is likely to go. The peak of the action can happen at any moment, but the most unusual shots usually happen when the rider is thrown off the animal. I am always looking for that once-in-a-lifetime shot that makes people and publishers say, ‘Wow, that is awesome.’ Shots like that can happen at any moment in any event. One of the most difficult things to do is to stay constantly focused all the time throughout every event.”

Because the fortune of rodeo competition can change in the instant a bull twists his body or a horse changes direction while



bucking (when the rider and animal part company), any competitor is a potential winner. “You have to shoot every single rider like he is the winner of the event, and that takes a tremendous amount of focus and energy,” EJ says. “Rodeo shooting is very intense, and I usually feel pretty drained after four or more hours of non-stop action. Then the image-review process begins, and that takes another two or three hours. You sure sleep well after a day like that.”

Fortunately, rodeos are usually held over several days, providing photographers the chance to fill gaps if first-day coverage doesn't meet all requirements.

“The nice thing about shooting rodeo is that I can photograph one day, review and critique all my shots, and then go back the next day and start all over again knowing what to work on to get even better, cleaner, sharper images. A lot of rodeos will go for three or four days,” says EJ. (Any wedding photographers reading this will undoubtedly mutter something like, “If only that were true for me too!”) But then again, what would you rather contend with—a petulant bride or a raging bull? Obviously, EJ would opt for the bull.)

Just as knowing the sport of rodeo is critical, knowledge of the players—riders and animals—offers a great advantage. “There are several bulls that I get excited about shooting because they jump really high



and give the great shots that the magazine loves,” EJ says. “Bulls are amazing animals to watch. Most people are shocked to see those 2500-pound animals—that seem so slow—jump more than four feet off the ground. The horses and the bulls each have their unique style and characteristics, and with lots of practice you can anticipate

what they're likely to do. But it can also be like trying to get a shot of a small bird taking off. It's so fast it's almost impossible to get the shot, and you have no way of knowing which way he is going. It's all about practice. The more you shoot, the better you get.”

EJ continues: “We all get the lucky shots.



“Absolutely! I’m not trying to get the gore or the blood, and we don’t show it or sell it, but I keep shooting. If I stop, I could miss one of those once-in-a-lifetime shots where the cowboy escapes or something really spectacular, heroic or funny happens. I’ve seen serious things happen to the animals and to the cowboys, but for the most part, it can look very bad and end up with everyone okay,” he says.

EJ’s equipment—he’s been a dedicated Nikon user since being given an F2 in 1973—includes a D2X and his favorite all-round lens, a Nikon 70–200mm f/2.8 VR zoom that covers the majority of his action shooting. On occasion, such as when shooting in large arenas or from the spectator stands, he will use his Nikon 80–400mm VR lens. His first choice is the 70–200mm, which is also ideal for photographing people. As you can imagine, a rodeo is a great place for people

I like the definition of luck being ‘when preparation meets opportunity.’ I concentrate on taking single shots and rarely hold down the release button for multiple exposures during the ride. However, at times when the rider is thrown off in an unusual manner, I will shoot five to eight frames per second to catch the incredibly fast action.”

The preferred shooting location is facing the gates from the opposite end of the arena. When more than a ton of bucking, twisting, ferocious animal bursts from the chute with a rider desperately trying to move in unison with the mass of muscle beneath, EJ starts shooting. And when the inevitable happens and the rider is hurled mercilessly to the ground, often being pounded by hoofs or tossed like a rag doll on the horns of a bull, does he keep shooting, even though the hapless human is in imminent danger?

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pictures—cowboys, cowgirls, rodeo queens and spectators. “My main emphasis is on the actual rodeo events,” EJ says, “but when I see a photo op with the rodeo queens, kids or other interesting people, I grab it. I’m always looking for something special, and when I see something, I’m not shy about getting the shot.

“I know that my main emphasis is on the shots the magazine wants, but I’m always thinking about what would add to the story, something that might help me tell the story. You never know what shots might sell, so I go for a broad coverage and shoot lots of people, stagecoaches and other subjects. Also, there’s great potential in close-ups of horses’ faces and cowboy boots and other paraphernalia.”

Apart from the obvious dangers presented by huge animals intent on ridding irksome people from their backs, the elements are also a major concern for rodeo photographers. EJ takes no chances in that regard.

“Dust, dirt, mud and rain are always potential problems, and you don’t want dust on your sensor,” he says. “I never change lenses when I’m in the arena. If I need to change lenses, I will go to an area out of the wind or rain, and I will clean around the



lens connection before I make the change. If you don’t take a lens off a professional camera, you should be okay. I have never had a problem so far. I always clean my gear really well after the day’s shoot and re-check all my settings to ensure I start the next day’s shoot with my usual ISO speeds of 100 or 200. I also review histograms to make sure exposures are accurate.”

Most of the time EJ shoots JPEGs, oc-

asionally capturing in RAW and JPEG for bull-riding events. “After taking more than 300 shots in a day, it’s easier and quicker for me to handle JPEGs, especially when time is critical,” he explains.

Generally, rodeo organizers have no problem with spectators shooting from the stands, as long as the pictures are not for commercial purposes. “Lots of people take pictures at the rodeos,” EJ says. “The ProRodeo Cowboy Association sanctions the rodeos that I cover, and they will not let non-credentialed photographers take photos for commercial purposes. Taking photos for your own personal use or for families in the event is okay.”

After several years of photographing rodeos and the people who compete and support these all-American events, EJ has learned a lot about what makes rodeos so special—it’s the people. “Rodeo people for the most part are into God, country, hard work, kicking back, values, morals, kindness—yes ma’am; yes sir; thank you—and they are very patriotic. They portray more of what our country was all about years ago when people helped their neighbors. I love this about rodeos,” he says.

And of course, EJ also loves the heart-stopping action: a massive bull erupting from the chute, whirling and jumping in a dazzling display of ferocious energy, determined to dislodge the rider clinging like a limpet to its back. All the while, wildly excited spectators around the arena yell and shout a cry recognized and respected around the world: “Ride, ‘em cowboy! Ride, ‘em!”

EJ’s work can be seen in the pages of *ProRodeo Sports News* and online at www.ejsimpsonphotography.com.

Freelance writer/photographer and author Peter Skinner, who relocated to his native Australia in 2003 after living for 23 years in the U.S., has more than 25 years experience in the photo industry in PR, media liaison, corporate communications and workshop production and coordination. His magazine articles and photography have been published internationally and he has co-authored or edited numerous publications including the 5th and 6th editions of the ASMP Professional Business Practices in Photography (Allworth Press). His latest book is Sports Photography: How to Capture Action and Emotion (Allworth Press). He can be reached at prsskinner@bigpond.com.