

Shooting High School Sports

Being a photographer on a staff, whether it be high school or professional, is a prestigious position, but it is a position that demands a lot of work, stamina, quick thinking and sometimes quick feet. The prestige that comes with the position is that you can control a lot of the situations that come about simply because you are aiming a camera at different places. Because of this, people want to avoid getting in your way because they know you have a job to do. If you abuse that “power” you will cause a loss of credibility not only to yourself, but to your publication. Therefore, don’t use that “power” unless it is absolutely necessary. Coaches, players and others associated with the sports will be more cooperative with you if you cooperate with them.

First and foremost, you have a job to do. Some coaches understand this — others don’t. Many coaches and administrators see school/student photographers and local media representatives as public relations people for the school, and they want you to shoot only “good” things about the game and team. Some coaches in small town have a lot of power. And they, too, think photographers shooting for the local newspaper should only get good pictures “for the good of the town.” Most coaches who have positive, successful programs, though, want to accommodate you the best they can because they know you help them become successful, and they know you can hurt them as fast as help them. The role of the photographer, though, is not to make or break a coach’s career — the photographer is there to record the story of the game in pictures. Remember, you, as a photographer, are not there to take pictures of your girlfriend/boyfriend, your friends, your friends’ friends, or anyone else that does not directly relate to the game. You have a job to do, and even though some people will say part of your job is to appease people that could help with other assignments, your job is to shoot the game (unless, of course, your editor or adviser tells you to shoot something else!).

You are not a fan if you are shooting the game. You don’t shout, scream, encourage, discourage, support, chide, or do anything that may show you are for one team or against another team. As a photographer, you are reporting the game on film.

The first thing you should do to prepare for the game is to talk to the coach. In fact, if you have good rapport with the coach, you should be able to get a scouting report so you can plan where and how to shoot the game.

Check with your coach to make sure what kind of passes, if any, you need to be on the field/court. As a working press member, you will probably need some kind of pass that identifies you as a member of the press. Students, you should not have to pay to get into a game if you are shooting for your school publications. Also, make sure you know what time the game begins (this may sound obvious, but sometimes posted times are not the right times). There are other responsibilities for those shooting for the local media. Try to avoid acting like the game revolves around you. Again, you are there to do a job. Avoid the idea that you can do special things for people by writing about them or putting a picture of them in your publication. This only causes you to lose credibility — and this is about all a good journalist has.

Visit with the coach to find out if he/she has any problems with you being on the field, and where he/she wants you while you are shooting. I have run into one coach who doesn’t want photographers on the field. After the first issue comes out without any coverage of his sport, he changed his attitude tremendously. Most football coaches don’t want you anywhere near their players. If you and your coach have a good working relationship, then he/she may allow you to be with the players to shoot from their vantage point.

Officials have designated certain areas that the press is suppose to be. In addition to talking with the coaches, talk to the officials and let them tell you what they think you can and cannot do. UIL does not regulate where and how pictures are to be made. We make some decisions for the state tournaments, but we do not regulate for other times.

Listed below are some suggestions for shooting different high school sports. If you have had success in other ways, by all means, use those ways. Try these suggestions, also, and share your success stories with others.

One major suggestion with all team sports that involve balls. Your action shots should always have the ball in the picture. I have seen a few “exceptional” shots that do not have the ball in the shot, but remember these are exceptions to the rule, rather than the rule. Also, make sure you get faces. Faces tell stories. Faces are instrumental in reporting the game on film.

Football - Photographers and reporters are to stand between the 25 yard line and the goal line. I have shot behind the end zone and have not been run off - ever. Between the 25 and 25 is the player/coach area. They are not to get closer to the goal line than the 25 and photographers/reporters are not to be outside the 25. Also, you are to stay behind the wide white line. Officials can eject you from the field/stadium if you violate this rule. Most of the time they will give you a warning — and I have received several warnings. When moving from one end of the field to the other, walk behind the players and bench (if possible) so as not to have the opportunity to talk with them. Coaches will think they are being distracted and will not be “thinking about the game.” The key always is to cooperate with the coaches and they will most of the time cooperate with you. If you have something special you want to do, let the coaches know several days or weeks in advance and they can help you get it. One year I was shooting a slide show and had to get some slide images of halftime. The coach kept putting me off until the last game, which was an important game. Since we had been communicating all year, even though it was a tense moment, he allowed me access to the dressing room to get pictures. They did go on and win.

Basketball - There is no set area for photographers in basketball. UIL does not set aside a certain area for photographers on the court. One of the biggest fallacies of beginning photographers is that the best shots are right under the basket. They are not. This is the place to probably get the worst shots. I would suggest the photographer stand at one of the four corners. Remember, there is not any one place to stand where you would get a good shot every time players come down the court. This position will give you a good angle at getting several kinds of shots. If you want to move closer to the basket, get about halfway between the free throw area and the side court. Try to stay at least 3-4 feet away from the in bounds line. In basketball, or any sport, if something you do impedes the action on the court/field, you lose any kind of chance you have with the coach later on. Shoot some at different places on court. All the action on the court doesn't come from the offensive end. Some great shots come from the defensive end - also, look for facial reactions. Avoid the proverbial “arm-pit” shots. These may look good to the photographer, but it doesn't tell much about the game.

Volleyball - As in basketball, UIL has no designated area for photographers, but stay out of the action of the game. I have had success in several places. Using a long lens, get behind the opponent's end and get pictures of your players blocking shots. The long lens will give you a short depth of field which will literally blur out the net at times. The net does not distract from the game in most shots. I have also found that if I position myself behind the referee that stands on the platform at the net, I can get good digs and spikes, as well as some good blocks. Remember that since a volleyball can be returned from almost anywhere, it is important to stay alert as to where the ball is. You might be knocked over by a girl going after an errant pass. Again, don't impede the play of the game.

Baseball/Softball - It seems officials have put the most control over photographers at these games. The officials have designated a certain area at the fence on each side of the field that is behind that base on that side for photographers to be. It is not a good area, even if you have a “cannon” lens. This is not UIL mandated, rather it is mandated by the baseball umpires association. They will tell you it is for your safety, not to impede you from getting a good shot. I don't really believe that, but since they run the game, I have to abide by what they say. I have had success in the past when I talk to the coach and he/she allows me to stay really close to the dugout entrance to shoot and duck back into the dugout when it seems the umpire is watching.

Sometimes the umpires won't complain, sometimes they will move me to the designated area. I have found that with a crucial game, umpires are more stringent concerning outside influences on the game (i.e. - photographers have to stay in certain areas, etc). Try to read the importance of the game. Sometimes if you can get behind the screen directly behind the pitcher, you can get some good shots of the pitcher. Here, though, you might get in fans way, and they are much more dangerous than a mad coach! Again, work with the coaches and officials as to where to stand. The best thing about baseball is that a lot of it is played in the day time and you can get away with using a slow long lens and still get good images.

Soccer - As with volleyball, there is no set area for photographers. Stay at least five yards behind the out-of-bounds area. As with basketball, I have found good spots about halfway between the goal net and the side boundaries. That way I can get good reaction pictures and good faces with concentration pictures. You should be far enough away from the field so if the ball touches you, it is already out of play and you shouldn't be causing problems. Soccer is difficult to shoot. Area focus and be patient. Those photographers who try to run up and down the sidelines for pictures get more exercise than the players.

Track/cross country - There is no designated area for photographers, but don't impede the race/event. You need to keep from getting in the way of the timekeepers, officials, or participants. In running events, either about 3/4 of the way through the race or behind the finish line would be a good place. In relays, at any hand-off point may offer some action. In hurdle events, about halfway down the race where you can get some hurdles in the background and one or two hurdles in the foreground would offer a good, complete picture. In field events, stay as far away from the active field as possible. Always be aware of discuses and shots. They can and do hurt!

Swimming - Although there is no designated area for photographers, there is a designated area for officials to walk up and down the side of the pool, and no one is allowed in that area. Swimming officials also make it even harder by sometimes placing ribbons and other things about 20 yards from the platform which impedes good shots. As with all sports, facial features tell the story best, so a fast, long lens works best, and catch the swimmer as he/she comes up for air between strokes. I have found that most swimmers don't get excited after they break a national record, or even win for that matter. So look for concentration and those famous "S.I." type shots of hitting the water, about to hit the water and when the swimmer comes up for air during the race. There are very few opportunities for vertical shots, except in diving events, so be happy with strong horizontal pictures.

Golf - As with many of the other sports, there is no set place to stand. Golf coaches, though, are extremely particular about people taking pictures of their players when they are in match play, and most will want you to shoot during practice. Try to avoid that. You need pictures of the tournaments themselves. Again, use a long lens and get pictures of putting with the ball in the picture heading toward the hole or lining up a shot. Avoid "cliche" pictures of a player hitting the ball or similar types of things seen as filler pictures. Avoid trying to follow the ball in the camera. A ball is so small that when you try to develop the picture, the ball is going to look more like a pinhole than a ball. Look for reactions.

Powerlifting - Again, no set rules here, and in fact, the coaches will probably be the most lax in these tournaments. Get close and get facial expressions. This is what sells this type of picture. Be sure to stay far enough way not to interfere with the participant's concentration or the chance of getting hit by an errant weight.

Tennis - This is difficult in that most coaches and officials don't like you on the court during a match. Stand as far away from the action as possible. Again, make sure you get the ball in the picture and look for facial expressions. This is not a major sport in Texas and most coaches will be happy with coverage. Some, though, might insist you shoot only practices. Again, games should be shot. Participants are more relaxed at practice and really don't show the same emotions as they would show in a real match. Talk with the coach and officials beforehand and get an idea from him where you can stand or sit and not disturb match play. In this type of shot it is

extremely important to get the ball in the picture with the person about to hit it or just completed hitting it.

Cheerleaders/drill team - Some publications include this in the sports area and since photographers are shooting the game, they can easily get these pictures. These are basically feature pictures. Look for facial expressions, especially from cheerleaders. Few photographers will win awards for "crotch shots" of either cheerleaders or drill team members jumping. With cheerleaders, look for concentration on the game or their cheer. Drill team members spend hours preparing for their a perfect routine. Your job, really, is to shoot the flaw in that routine for a feature picture. Although this is contrary to regular ideas, a perfect routine would be boring to shoot, whereas a flaw would be the story you tell with your pictures.

In most of these sports, you are discouraged from using flash, although there is really no rule that says you cannot use flash. Using flash may cause a poor relationship between you and the coach. The advantages of using flash is that you have ample light. The disadvantages include: the shadow behind the subject, flash burn, wrong sync speed, the flash not hitting what needs to be hit and the flash not being strong enough to reach the subject.

With today's super fast films, the use of flash is almost insignificant in most cases. If you are shooting black and white film, there is nothing better than T-Max 3200 speed film. It can be pushed even to 6400 if necessary. It will cause some grain, but it does have better grain than the old way of pushing 400 film and I have found, especially with newspaper photography, the newsprint won't pick up the grain anyway. If you use color film, both Kodak and Fuji produce fast films. Kodak has Ektrapress 1600 and Fuji has a 1600 speed film. Both can be pushed without much problem for good pictures in low light. A flash can be a good friend in some situations. Be sure you are always aware of the action going on and whether the flash can interfere with the game. I have been accused of losing both football and basketball games because I have used flash.

In all cases, approach your job as a photographer in a business-like professional way. When others see that you are approaching it that way, they will treat you as a professional.