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JOHN NASH INTERVIEW
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POLO TIMES
SINCE 1995
Twenty Seven
FOR THE POLO PURIST

How to
Photograph
POLO

Polo is fast, furious, and full of exciting action to photograph. But what's the secret of taking a 'killer image' that captures the essence of the sport?

Here are my top ten tips for taking a successful polo photograph:

1 FACES

It's really important that players are instantly recognisable and that means that you should be able to see their face in the photo. To achieve this, the best place to position yourself is one side of the goal looking straight down the pitch because the players will normally be coming directly towards you. You need to sit to one side of the goal so that the posts don't get in the way and, obviously, at a safe distance!

2 TIMING

You might think the best time to take a photo is when the player is hitting the ball, but they will be looking down and it is likely that you will just get a photo of the top of their hat. It's therefore better to take the shot when the player is shaping up to hit the ball or just afterwards when they look up to see where the ball is going to land.

Photography by Michael Berkeley

3 WEATHER

For a very similar reason, it's best to avoid very hot and sunny days if possible. As polo is often played in the middle of the day when the summer sun is very high in the sky, the bright light will cast a dark shadow obscuring the player's face. Ideal conditions are therefore a bright but overcast day.

4 BACKGROUNDS

You should avoid any unwanted distractions, such as horse boxes or advertisements, and it's therefore important to position yourself so that the background is as uncluttered and 'clear' as possible. This will vary from location to location, but it's ideal if you can have trees as the backdrop to your photographs.

5 SETTINGS

The technical bit! The other way to manage this issue is to blur the background by using as wide an aperture as your lens will allow, giving you a shallow depth of field and separating the action from the background. I also use a fast shutter speed – of at least 1/1000th second – in order to freeze the action.

6 EQUIPMENT

People often say that equipment is less important than the skill of the photographer and, while very true, sport photography is immeasurably easier if you have good equipment. This means that you need a camera and lens that are very quick to focus and will track the action effectively. I use a 200-600mm telephoto lens in order to photograph the action at the far end of the pitch, but also have the ability to zoom out quickly as the players come down to my end.

7 DRAMA

It's very easy to take a photograph that is static and flat, but a good image should have drama. So, you want photos of action, such as players competing for the ball or in a ride-off, or a number of players coming directly towards you down the ground. Dirt being kicked up and horses with all their hooves off the ground will add to the drama by implying movement and speed.

8 THE BALL

Although this is not essential, it is a good idea to get the ball in the photo and in a position that makes it stand out. This is all part of the story that the photo is telling.
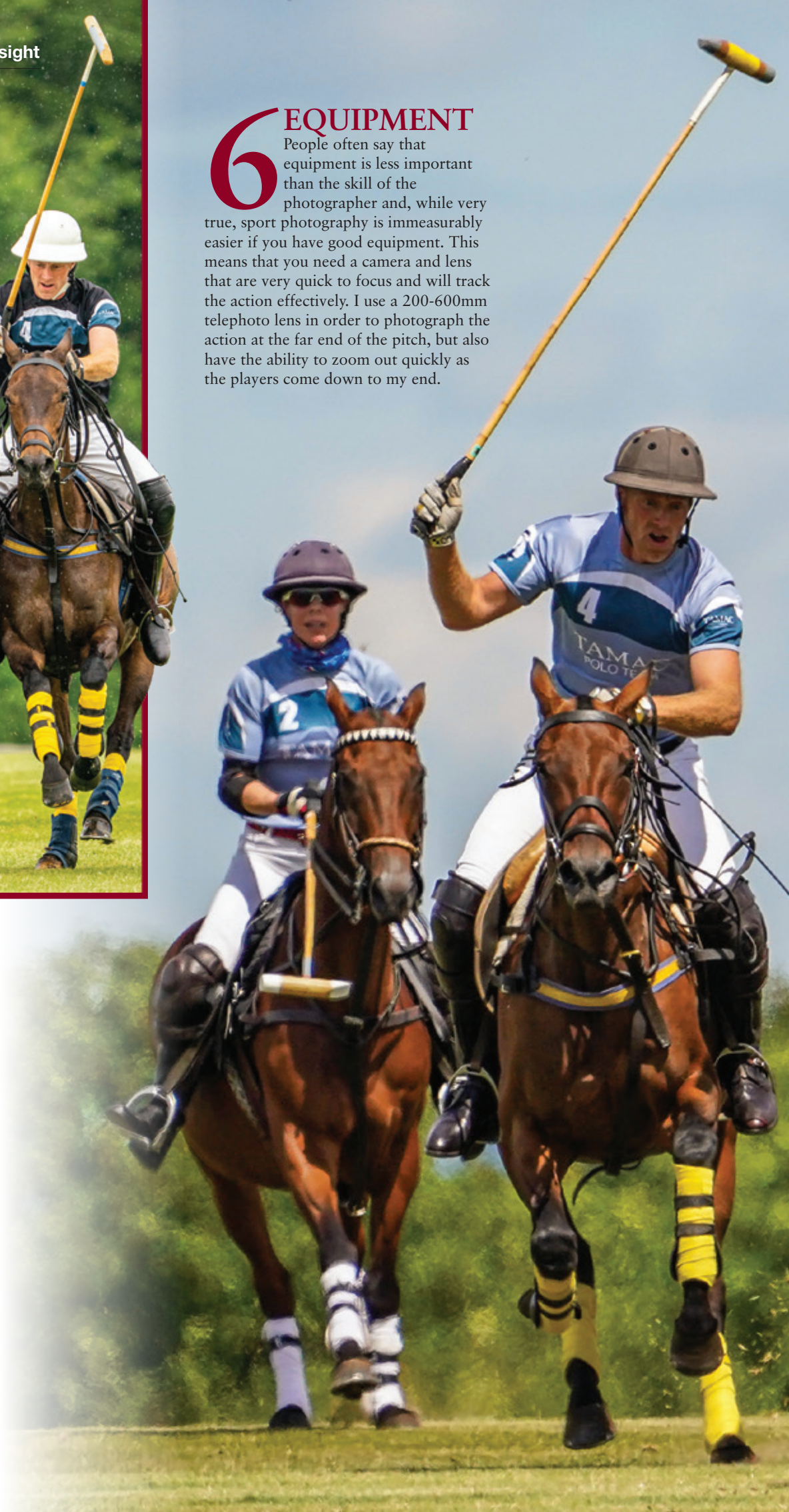
9 PERSPECTIVE

My 'secret' tip – one that isn't so obvious – is to get as low as possible when taking your photographs. I always sit, sometimes on a small camping stool and sometimes even on the ground. This makes a surprising difference, as it makes you look slightly up at the players and it then feels as though you are part of the action.

10 TAKE LOTS OF SHOTS!

My father, Bryan Berkeley, was the Club photographer for Cirencester Park for many years and he operated in the era of film. I use a mirrorless camera, which can take 20 frames a second, making it much easier to capture the precise moment you want, and I will think nothing of taking over a thousand photos at the polo – it doesn't cost anything except the time in reviewing them afterwards. My father had to wait for a couple of days for the film to come back from processing to see whether he had any photos in focus. Love and respect.

There is nothing to beat getting out there and giving it a go...

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