

MAVERICK

Making sacrifices for your art is something that is unavoidable for the serious image-maker. But how many are willing to regularly risk their lives in their daily grind? David Spurdens is a man with a wealth of experience in this arena. In order to secure his client-base [and pursue his interests] over the years, he has had to adapt his skill set, which has led to a multitude of near-death experiences. But all done with the sentiment: "Whatever it takes to get the shot"



There really has been a transformation for me through my working life as an image-maker thus far. So much change that the landscape is barely recognisable. Since shooting, say, an F.A. Cup Final in the 1980s using film and manual focus, the films being hand-developed in a tent in the tunnel at [the old] Wembley Stadium, the negatives dried with a hair dryer and the analogue prints being sent through an old drum scanner before being driven to the first Apple Macs in the office. From there to the first digital cameras, Photoshop and the advent of the internet and the moving image, and now we have stabilised 4K super-slow motion and fibre optic broadband that allows video to be sent to any far flung corner of the earth in seconds with the click of a mouse. When I started out in this industry, a mouse was a little brown thing that ate cheese!

The technological changes that have taken place over the last 33 years serve to remind me that some of my memories are from a different century. And I'm still only 51.


I've had to retrain a thousand times to keep up with advances in technology. Since first learning to manually focus a camera as a teenager, sitting beside a motorway pulling focus on cars (a skill incidentally that is now paying dividends with the world of moving image) and developing a film in black bag and creating a print, I've had to learn to use Apple Macs and Photoshop, and capture moving image, FCPX and super-slow motion 4K. There come astounding advances in technology with each new camera, computer and software upgrade, often requiring lengthy re-training.

I have enjoyed the changes that have taken place in the industry and I do enjoy the benefits that advancements in technology have given me. That said, though, I do feel for all those people who have had to leave the industry as their jobs have been superseded. There have been plenty of these over the years. The banter with the darkroom boys at the national newspaper after a football match, as they pass over these beautiful, handmade prints for me to take to the picture and sports editor, followed by

Bracing myself against the old fence inside the first floor of the Eiffel Tower, camera trained out into the middle and Gary Connery [B.A.S.E. jumper] standing on top of the fence. People were shouting 'don't do it', but little did they know he had tied his static line onto the fence and was about to launch himself through the middle of the Eiffel Tower to a B.A.S.E. jump, not a suicide jump.

I've been in hundreds of do-or-die situations like this, and in those moments time slows right down. You concentrate on your breathing, double and treble check everything in your mind, then, confident you have made the right decisions to get the best image, you clear out that clutter and start concentrating on manual focusing and composition.





Liv Rowlands is a Le Parkour exponent, or Free Runner, as it can be termed. I've photographed Liv on many occasions and am always astounded by just how much punishment the human body can endure. That's not to say she's not bloody good at what she does, but to get to those heights you have to take many knocks. Here's Liv in London, a place that is increasingly stifling creativity in its youth by banning skating and Le Parkour in most places. Security guards are all too quick to move these youngsters on and, in doing so, deprive some very poor children of activities that they love. I'm sure they'd all like to ride a pony at the gymkhana or go skiing but, for many, this is a team sport that they can practice in the environment they are born into and live in.

DAVID SPURDENS

“Gary’s chute got taken by the wind and this blew him through the side of the stanchions of the Eiffel Tower and he subsequently shoulder-pounded the curb”

a beer in the office pub, are memories consigned to history.

The skills that a top-flight sports photographer would have had to display then are no longer needed in the same quantity. Manually focusing on a 400mm at F2.8 in poor winter light with such a shallow depth of field, while keeping the players’ eyes in focus, was our bread and butter in those days. And to be able to do that consistently—to get the manual exposure right and capture creative images—meant only another person with that rare set of skills could take your job.

Exposure of the winning goal at a Cup Final had to be spot on, and there was no window to chimp over on the back of the camera. It had to be right on the money, every time. And excuses were never tolerated. All those ‘mates’ at the other sports events that day would be only too happy to step into the Chief Sports Photographer’s shoes. We were all on trial, every week, as were the professional sportsmen and -women we were photographing.

I once photographed Gary Connery (who later jumped out of the helicopter at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, dressed as the Queen), jumping through the middle of the Eiffel Tower. It was back in the days of film (only) and I elected to shoot it on Agfa Scala—a beautiful B&W transparency film stock that had zero latitude for poor exposure.

So there I am, trying to clamp myself to the side of the first floor of the Eiffel Tower as Gary jumps up to the fence, ties on his static line and launches himself out into the middle of the tower. At that moment, my whole career was on the line—not to mention worrying about whether this chap, whom I’d only recently met, was going to live. I was shooting at 500/sec wide open and nobody, including Gary, would forgive me if this photograph was anything other than perfect.



Squash Falconer has been a friend of mine for 20 years. I like doing shoots with Squash because she's a professional first and a great laugh second. Squash is an amazing all-round sportswoman whose disciplines include skiing, snowboarding, climbing, ice climbing and much more. There's no substitute for working with people who know what their doing. You take that for granted when photographing sport at stadiums, etc. The professional sportsmen and -women at great sporting events flatter the photographer with their displays of athletic prowess, bordering on human sporting genius. I always felt I was just there as a recorder of these things and that was never enough. I wanted to be a creator too, and that's why I've searched out the people you see here in this article. When you're on the side of a mountain, standing on a glacier in super-sub-zero temperatures, hauling the kit you need for that shoot with no way of getting back down for something you may have forgotten, you need people you can rely on and I can depend on Squash to look after her side and she can depend on me to look after mine.

Gary's chute got taken by the wind and this blew him through the side of the stanchions of the Eiffel Tower and he subsequently shoulder-pounded the curb. His wife at the time, Viv, was standing next to me screaming and the police were surrounding the lifts and locking the place down, thinking that there was an act of terrorism taking place. I noticed some staff getting into a service lift, made sure Viv was OK and escaped in the same lift, with the film.

I hung around at the bottom of the tower briefly, to see that Gary was OK—he was arrested and spent the rest of the week in hospital with numerous broken bones, lacerations, etc.—then I got on the newly-opened Channel Tunnel back to London and to Joe's Basement to get the film developed, still not knowing if I'd nailed the shot. The relief I felt when the darkroom chap handed me the transparencies and I got them onto the lightbox was indescribable.

Entering the age of digital technology, everything changed. Auto focus, auto exposure, the ability to see a thumbnail of the image on the back of the camera, are all things that we take for granted now. But imagine them being taken away. How would most people deal with that?

The advances in technology have gradually done away with most of the traditional skill set. And sadly, the old adage of national newspapers and picture editors: "I want a smudge today, not a work of art tomorrow," has never been truer than in this moment. Celebrations were all that the picture desk asked for and the areas at stadiums where we could shoot were becoming very restricted. One day, we

were all herded into the same small area, all using the same lenses, shooting the same thing from the same direction. It was then that an average photographer could achieve a 'good' image, and this is clearly reflected in the pay given to sports photographers today. I earned more in 1990 for a football match than any sports photographer does today. As with any job that doesn't require much skill, the money

available dwindles as the number of people offering the service increases.

It was time for me to find other challenges.

As one door closes, though—and if you keep your wits about you—another opens. I, for one, would not still want to be shooting in the way I did 30 years ago, and I have thoroughly enjoyed all the challenges thrown at me by cutting-edge digital technology. I have studied hard, burning the

"My camera was on a Vinten Blue 5, and the solid construction of that head and legs is, really, the only reason I nailed that shot as he sprinted past"



Piaggio are an Italian manufacturer of aircraft and I've shot a few of their International Ad campaigns now. It's all about the team on these shoots, from my brother Sam who arranges them, to the Piaggio people. The shoot relies on everybody knowing their job; there is no room for complacency. The two planes for any given shoot fly in close formation. One mistake and the consequences would be catastrophic. We nearly always use ex-military pilots, who have spent many thousands of hours flying in close formation and can fly like this through thick cloud with wings inches apart.

The briefing room always sets the men apart from the boys, and if someone shows any lack of understanding, a frivolous attitude, an inflated ego or uncalled-for bravado, they are dismissed immediately from the shoot.

Thankfully, we have a 100% safety record after around 300 hours of air-to-air shoots, and clients from Piaggio, Daher Socata, Eclipse Jets, Stemme, Citation and Honda Jet, rely on our professionalism and safety experience. The shot of the Piaggio landing was shot from the open doorway of a plane with me, as usual, in a climbing harness. I'm proud of it because it was shot at 1/80/sec. Any of you who have barreled down a runway at 150mph in a small plane with the door open will know there is considerable turbulence. Keeping things pin sharp with only one pass allowed by the tower kept the client very happy indeed.



I didn't really know about the rule of thirds as I'm not a technical photographer. I just go with what feels right and what looks good to me. But when I did read of it, I looked back at my work and realised I had used it a lot through my career. Whether I had read about it in my youth, I cannot remember, but it works in composition and here is an example. For me, composition is everything. Once again, here's Squash doing what she does best: being a professional in super-sub-zero conditions and slotting nicely into a stunning winter scene.



I love this photograph but it is tinged with sadness. Tom and I decided to get a chairlift up the Grande Motte, Tignes in the French Alps. On the way up, I noticed on the North Face of the Grande Motte were some skiers letting off mini sloughs on a huge pristine powder field.

When Tom and I walked in at the top, he asked which face I wanted to photograph on. The North Face was divided by a line of seracs, creating the Petit North Face. I said to Tom, because of the sloughs I'd seen from the chair lift (which we would not have seen if we had taken the Funival, a 45 degree train that runs through the mountain), we might be best to ride down the Petit North Face, as we had the protection of the seracs if there was a slide.

Part way into our shoot, we heard a rumble, which we took to be a plane flying by. Over Tom's walkie-talkie, we were told by another friend on the opposite mountain that the whole North Face had avalanched. Sadly, we later found out that two English guys, who had passed us at the top of the mountain and taken the path towards the North Face, had died.

midnight oil and getting up at 3am to have enough quiet time to apply myself to learning to edit in Photoshop, FCPX, etc.

So I headed to the Alps, where I went on to live for 10 years, and started photographing Extreme Sports, convinced that this was the future. Snowboarding moved from being an amazing 'Extreme Sport' into the mainstream and, once again, digital technology was aiding photographers, who in film-only days would never have survived. Images went from £1000's per shot in multiple sales to £100's relatively quickly. Then royalty-free arrived, giving my agents a good run for their money. Micro-Stock also turned up to the party and further decreased the saleable price of imagery.

You see, none of this is a moan because I don't believe in whinging. But I do believe in getting on with life, and so if you can't beat them, join them. I, too, got into the 'stack it high and sell it cheap' mentality, and I enjoyed that too. It kept me living in the Alps, having a great time, staying super-fit and feeling alive, spending every day on some part of a mountain or glacier in the sunshine and deep, fresh snow, with my camera.

I now shoot International advertising campaigns with stills cameras. I edit in Photoshop and send my images, in split seconds, to clients globally. I can then pick up my Sachtler Artemis gimbal and shoot 4K super slow motion, edit it in FCPX and optimise the footage for any use. I've created niches, such as shooting while hanging out of airplanes. I ski down mountains with my kit in hand, travel across deserts, and go in search of imagery in -50°C temperatures on the frozen Arctic Ocean, and I sit in the open doorway of an airplane, island hopping from Australia to Tasmania.

My one-man-band rolls on, and the tech I use to accomplish all this has sadly put a lot of people out of work. But I'm still here, fighting to offer my customers the skill sets they require today, and every day, in this industry of ours that changes so fast—sometimes not by the day but by the hour.

A great deal of my work, nowadays, is shooting moving images. I was making a film for Darley, the global horse racing stud farm operation, owned by Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai. I was in the middle of

a huge paddock, with camera on tripod, and a stallion guy was about to unleash Helmet, a multi-million-dollar Stallion, who would then run around his paddock. I was looking to make this shot on 240fps super-slow motion.

As is normal in these situations, nothing went to plan and Helmet started sprinting, but not to his normal area that I had been told he always runs to. Instead, he ran in a wide arc at top speed and missed me by a whisker.

I had to hold my nerve with a big stallion running at full tilt and I started to film the frame. It looked as though he was coming straight at me! It could have caused a flinch, so I had to trust that he didn't want to injure himself and would instead power past!

My camera was mounted on a Vinten Blue 5, and the smoothness and solid construction of that head and legs is, really, the only reason I nailed that shot as he sprinted past.

Would I have nailed the shot on a lesser tripod? I don't think so. As I turned the tripod to keep the Stallion in frame, I was exposing it to forces and fulcrums under which most tripods would have buckled and affected movement in the image, causing the slow motion to wobble. It was a high-pressure moment where only experience and a great set of sticks saved the day.

There was, as in most things I film or photograph, no second chance to nail this shot. These horses demand millions in stud fees each year and they have to limit the threat to their welfare. It was a one-off opportunity and he may never have run past me again (even if I'd had a second chance).

The Stallion man came over and asked to see the clip. I showed him, to which he replied: "That's bloody amazing". Clients are won and lost in moments like that.

I've had to make many professional changes and I feel that I've done that successfully over the last 33 years. I'm very proud of that. I've won World Press Photo awards, a Gold lens from the I.O.C., etc., but to still be here at 51 years old and acquiring imagery for clients around the World is my best professional achievement. After all, there's always been (and will likely always be) plenty of image-creating talent, snapping at my heels.