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Enjoying the Ride: Nikon D750 Style

“When you show up at an athlete’s door with six cameras rigged to a car they are pretty impressed,” says Dan Marks, co-founder and co-producer/director of South District Films, referencing a project he’s doing with cinematographer Anthony Arendt and Adam Goldberg, his business partner and also the series producer/director. Jetting around the United States has taken the crew to N.Y.C., Cleveland, Baltimore and other cities where they chat with sports names such as CC Sabathia, Steve Smith, D’Angelo Russell, Karl-Anthony Towns and Riley Hawk.

Vice Sports’ Ride Along hits a reality television bulls-eye. Knowing that athletes often have very little free time, the producers invented a way to grab small talk without a big time commitment. They created a recipe that encourages casual, free form, intimate conversation—the Ride Along concept. Shares Marks, “While sitting in an SUV, either to or from practice or a game, we find that athletes are pretty relaxed. It’s an unpretentious setting that encourages open dialogue. They’ll talk about just about anything. Sounds like Jerry Seinfeld’s series on comedians, doesn’t it?”

Continuing, “For the concept to fly, we needed a small form camera that was not intimidating, could capture excellent quality and would work through all conditions. The D750’s compact size makes it easy to rig, as well as travel with. We’re able to capture a true 1080p image at 23.98 fps.”



Nikon D750 & AF-S NIKKOR 24-120mm f/4G ED VR lenses rigged up with Atomos Ninja Star recorders ready to capture interior views for Ride Along.

Hooking Up

It generally takes a staff of four to rig and acquire footage for an episode. That single web episode, once edited, runs roughly five minutes or less in length, but the in-transit capture can last 45 to 75 minutes. Marks operates as the on-site director of photography. Tagging along will be an audio operator, one cameraman, plus a rigger. Six Nikon D750 bodies are configured to the vehicle and aimed to record the interviewee from various angles. The capture space is tested well before picking up the athlete. Nikon cameras are placed using suction cup mounts, rods and ball joints supplied by the key grip person. Notes Marks, “An interviewer in the car poses questions, but the show focuses on the athlete. As a result, we have to position each lens to keep that person out of the frame.”

Cameras are always set to 1080p 23.98 fps. A custom flat profile is dialed-in by the DoP, Arendt; that profile is later color graded. “Auto ISO is always turned on and transitioned from 100 to 3200; specific ISO is not really set when shooting. The Auto ISO assists when going in and out of shadows/dark areas; it feathers very nicely,” explains Marks.

He adds that aperture is always f/4 for interior cameras, and anywhere from f/11 to f/18 (depending on time of day) for exterior cameras. Tiffen ND.3 filters are attached to the 77mm threads on the AF-S NIKKOR 24-120mm f/4G ED VR lenses. The shutter is set to 1/50—which is as close to 1/48 as the camera can go. A 5600k White Balance prevails. “We always set the focus manually, never auto.”

Gaining a Glance

“Some of our best shots come from the D750 mounted within the car and focusing squarely on the face of the athlete—filling the frame. We’ll position a camera to capture their eyes as seen in a rear view mirror, or we put the camera low between

the two front seats and angle it up,” notes the DoP. Other angles include a camera on the hood and aimed to shoot through the windshield (polarizing filter added), and a wide and tight profile with the camera placed inside the passenger window. “If the athlete is riding in the back we put a camera 3/4 behind for an over-the-shoulder shot.”

For all points of view, the AF-S NIKKOR 24-120mm f/4G ED VR is used. “This lens provides just the right depth of field flexibility to work in close proximity while providing the right look to anything in the background outside the car,” asserts Marks.

Once on the road there’s generally only three people inside the auto—the athlete, the interviewer and director Marks, who must crouch or lay flat in the back seat to keep out of view, (sometimes there is a driver). From his vantage Marks cannot directly see what is being recorded, so he relies on the Atomos Ninja Star. “We have six of these, one for each camera. We use each to capture the clean HDMI signal that comes from the camera into ProRes 422 HQ. Working this way keeps our edit work faster by bypassing transcoding. In the field, the assistant cameraman brings a monitor for framing and focus.”

Aside from footage of the athlete, the crew will grab B-roll (environmental) shots to splice into the episode. Cameras can be rigged inside to capture the speedometer, or on the roof to give the scope of the vehicle and city. Marks says the cameras are stopped down to f/14 or f/16 when mounted outside to increase the depth of field for B-roll shots. “The size of the camera is perfect for unique cutaway angles, and the 24-120mm lens with VR is great. It helps reduce notable vibration from the vehicle in motion.”



Nikon D750 & AF-S NIKKOR 24-120mm f/4G ED VR lens rigged up to capture driver POV footage for Ride Along.

Scoring with the Nikon D750 & the AF-S

NIKKOR 24-120mm f/4G ED VR

Marks, who has worked with everything from heavy, bulky traditional Hollywood camera rigs to small action cameras, says he's finding plenty of benefits from the DSLR. "As a documentary shooter it's about creating that cinematic look using the right lenses. We want the best image quality with a rich color palette and nice feel. The DSLR and interchangeable lenses format brings that high-end look to production." He points out that the sports industry does not skimp on production: there are usually big budgets. "We see plenty of extreme sports shows with amazing POV (point of view) capture, but for the most part capture has come from smaller action cameras. Those devices have their place, but there's a sweet spot for giving viewers truly high quality footage when using a DSLR like the Nikon D750."

Imagine shooting the breeze with pro athletes from basketball, football and baseball while riding down La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles, or catching the latest from surf legends while cruising along the beach through Miami. *Ride Along* presents it up close and personal.

Dan Marks and Adam Goldberg are co-founders of South District Films (SDF), a company that produces sports documentary, commercial and digital series for Internet and broadcast networks. Passionate fans of all sports, Marks and Goldberg created the company in 2013 after several years independently pursuing freelance production, directorial and editing projects. The South District Films client list includes names such as Nike, Vice Sports, Taylor Made golf and more. SDF is based in Venice, California. Combined, the founding partners count seven Emmy Awards, plus a prestigious Peabody Award for work on ESPN's *30 for 30* (*Sole Man*, *Pony Excess*, *Straight Outta LA*) and HBO's *24/7 series*. For more information, visit the website at www.southdistrictfilms.com.