I moved to South Lake Tahoe almost 12 years ago for its proximity to great rock climbing in the Sierra Nevada mountains. But after just one winter here, I realized—boy, it snows in Tahoe. It snows a lot! So, naturally, I learned to ski. I also
learned to shoot action ski and snowboard photographs. And for the last decade, I've created commercial stills for such Tahoe ski resorts as Heavenly, Kirkwood and Northstar.

In a lot of ways, creating great ski pictures follows many of the rules and methods prescribed by any other type of action-sports photography. In other ways, ski photography is whole other animal. Let me take you through some of the tips and tricks I've learned over the years for creating dynamic ski and snowboard pictures.

The Perfect Storm

Great ski photography begins with great snow conditions. By becoming a storm-tracking meteorologist, you'll learn to recognize when a "perfect storm" is brewing a day or two in advance, which will give you the time you need to prepare for your shoot.

So, what are those perfect conditions that you're looking for? First, you'll want a storm that unloads 12 to 24 inches of fresh snowfall overnight. You want bottomless, untracked snow. Next, you're looking for it to be super cold. Light, cold snow billows into beautiful clouds of smoke behind a carving skier. It breaks up into interesting particles in a way that wet, heavy "warm" snow doesn't. Last but not least, the storm needs to clear by morning, providing you with blue skies and crisp light all day.

That said, every rule is made to be broken. Shooting in stormy, overcast conditions is, of course, possible. It can even lead to interesting pictures. Just not as great as those shots captured in crisp, clean light with a backdrop of blue skies.

Scout your Location

One thing every ski photographer should keep is a running list of locations that make for great pictures. Make the time to create such a list. In other words, get outside to play and explore! Look around for unique situations, stunning backgrounds, interesting foregrounds, and try to imagine what the eventual shot would look like. Take a notebook to make hand-written notes, or use a note-taking app in your smartphone to create notes with both pictures and written descriptions. The point is that, when that perfect storm hits, you already have an idea of the specific locations you want to go.

Manage the Skiers

Once you see that a perfect storm is on its way, it's time to rally the skiers—whether that means a group of professional athletes that you're working with for a
commercial or editorial shoot, or your friends, spouse or kids. Whoever your models may be, you will need to explain to them that on the day of the shoot, they will need to work with you to help you create a fantastic set of pictures. And what that really means is that they may be sacrificing a powder day.

The reality of ski photography is that it requires a lot of standing around. While everyone else on the mountain is doing lap after lap, your ski models will be waiting for you to get into position and set up your camera.

Needless to say, convincing anyone to do this for you isn't easy. I've found a group of reliable pro and semi-pro athletes who I like to work with. They're great mountain athletes and, just as important they're reliable. We've built a great relationship over the years, and they know that my photos will go places and help them out with their careers as professional skiers and snowboarders. But with friends and family just the simple act of giving them images in exchange for their time often times will do the trick.

Schedule a meeting with your models the day before the shoot to go over logistics of when and where to meet. If you're planning to shoot commercial ski or snowboard pictures, ask the athletes to bring several wardrobe options. They will need to be wearing the latest season's apparel in the brightest colors available—new gloves, new skis, new outfits, and helmets that don't have stickers on them. All of that is extremely important to commercial ski photography. But even if you're just shooting your friends or family, the bottom line is that brightly colored, contemporary clothing makes for better pictures than muted or dark-colored clothes.

Plan to get to the resort as soon as possible. As a commercial ski photographer, I contact the resort and get special permission to be up on the mountain with my models at 6 a.m. But even riding first chair would give you an advantage—not to mention give you the motivation you need to be in the lift line before everyone else.
Brent Abrams flying skiing at Heavenly Mountain Resort in South Lake Tahoe, CA.

Getting into Position

So, the day finally comes. You have perfect conditions. You have your group of athletes. They've all arrived on time. And you're up on the mountain, heading toward that first location you've already scouted. Great! Now you need to get into position to start making pictures.

Where you want to shoot from, what your foreground and background will be, and what you want your subject to be doing, are considerations every photographer makes, no matter what his or her genre. But in ski photography, a few special considerations need to be made. Typically, you want to position yourself downhill from the athlete so you can see the skier's face and body coming at you. You also want the skier to be carving through fresh, untouched snow. This is a good starting point camera position. In order to accomplish this, I'll often need to find a way down that doesn't track the snow I'm about to shoot. This involves skiing or side-stepping through trees—whatever it takes to leave the white canvas untouched.

Getting Prepared

Before choosing your shooting position, the first thing to consider is safety. Are you in a position where you're likely to get hit by another skier on the mountain? If so, you'll probably want to move. Always keep your helmet on for this reason, even while shooting!

Once I find my spot, I'll spend a couple minutes building a little station in the snow for myself. I dig out a flat platform to lay down my rear-opening backpack. I'll open the pack, choose a lens for my camera and then—and this is absolutely essential
—I ALWAYS CLOSE MY PACK! If you leave your camera bag open, snow will get dumped onto your equipment, and you will spend half an hour cleaning it out and drying your camera off.

Managing Camera Equipment in the Snow

First, use a lens hood, especially if it's snowing out. Lens hoods are great ways to keep your glass dry and protected. Sometimes, though, you might choose to "sacrifice" your dry lens for a great shot in which a skier carves right past you at full speed, with a lot of snow spraying up at you into the frame. This is fine—your camera and lens will survive. But you have to be prepared for the reality that you just lost five minutes because you'll now have to now dry your equipment off.

Communicating with the Skiers

Communication is key. I use several tricks.

**Walkie-talkies:** That morning, I'll equip all the athletes with walkie-talkies. This makes it easy for me to provide them directions when I'm 200 feet downslope from them.

**Snowballs:** It can be hard to communicate where exactly on an open, white slope you want the skier to make his or her turn. I will typically throw a snowball to the turn point in order to provide a visible mark for the skier.

**Clear, simple, precise directions:** Always speak in clear, simple and very specific language. "I want a right turn 50 feet above me, skier's left of that tree. Then I want you to make a left turn past me at full speed." Let them know how close you want them to get to you. Give them an idea of where to turn. And do it in a way that is easy to understand, and very specific about what you want. Telling the skier what lens I'm shooting with can be valuable information to them, especially if we've worked together in the past. This information lets them know how close they will need to be.
Getting the Shot

Now comes the fun part! Here are a few technical tips about getting the shot:

**Shutter speed:** If you're trying to freeze ski action, you want a minimum of 1/1000 second shutter speed; I try to be at 1/2000 second. That's really where you get those snow particles frozen in space, and everything looks razor sharp.

**Aperture:** I'll typically shoot at f/4 or f/5.6, even on long lenses.

**ISO:** There's no problem adjusting to a high ISO with today's Nikon D-SLR cameras if you need to achieve a faster shutter speed. In the past you might have had to compensate for the super bright, white conditions. But today, you could leave your camera in an automatic exposure mode and get a great shot. That said, I shoot in manual because, typically, the light won't be changing.

Shoot the Before and After

Say you’re anticipating capturing that turn at 50 feet above you, to the skier's left of that tree. Shoot that situation, but also begin shooting it before it happens and continue shooting after it's over. Capture bursts of images through each and every turn. Allow your lens to continue tracking and autofocusing on your subject. Basically, don't stop shooting until all that's left in the frame is the skier's goggles as they whiz past you. Because while you may have had that preconceived idea for your shot, the magic of photography is letting the situation unfold before you and capturing it all with your camera.
D3, AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II, ISO 200, manual exposure, Matrix metering.
Corey Rich at work, photographing Spencer Ray on a ski tour of Carson Pass, CA.
[Although Corey is not wearing his helmet while shooting in this image, you should always wear one for safety. —Editor]

The Right Stuff

It goes without saying that you need to have the right photo equipment, too. Here's what I use:

- **Nikon D4**: For the last two years, the D4 has been my camera of choice for ski photography. Simply put, I need speed, and the D4 delivers with 10.5 frames per second and incredible auto focus. Needless to say, I will be trading in my D4 and upgrading to the D4s as soon as it's available. The D4s takes everything that's great about the D4 and makes it faster, sharper, and better.

- **AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II lens**: This is my go-to lens, on my camera 90% of the time when shooting skiing and snowboarding.

- **AF-S NIKKOR 16-35mm f/4G ED VR lens**: I bring this lens for wide-angle perspectives, especially for situations when I'm shooting in trees. It's lightweight, fast and a great workhorse.

- **AF-S NIKKOR 200-400mm f/4G ED VR II lens**: But use it less frequently than the other two given its size and weight. It's really a specialty lens.

- **LowePro Flipside 20L AW**: I use this backpack because its rear-entry opening allows me to set my bag down in the snow, easily access my
camera and lenses, and not worry about getting the back of the pack wet.

- SanDisk Extreme Pro 128 GB cards: Memory is cheap these days. There’s no excuse for running out of it. Bring plenty of cards.

- Extra batteries: Today’s Nikon batteries are so great that I can often get through a whole day of still photography with just one battery. However, in really cold weather, batteries die quicker. I keep an extra battery inside my coat pocket, to keep it warm.

- The right clothing: I bring multiple pairs of gloves, I never shoot bare-handed. I have a pair of lightweight, dexterous leather-palmed gloves that I use for operating the camera. I also have a larger pair of warm, insulating gloves that I put on over my lightweight gloves whenever I’m not shooting. In addition to my ski outfit, I might have an extra down coat in case I get cold standing around. Remember, there is a LOT of standing around in ski photography!

- Safety equipment: As they say, safety is no accident. I always bring a shovel, probe and beacon—and make sure all my athletes are wearing beacons, too—whenever we’re traveling in freshly snow-loaded terrain, whether that’s at a resort or especially when we’re in the backcountry.

- Essentials: Snacks, small bottle of water, sunscreen, lip balm, a few packets of hand-warmer, a Chamois cloth for drying camera bodies, a micro-fiber towel for wiping glass, and radios for communicating with the athletes.

To see more of Corey’s work, check out his website at [www.coreyrich.com](http://www.coreyrich.com).

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