

Crafting the Race

It's not about turning up and snapping a shot, says **Russel Wong**. Capturing the moment is easy if and only if you've done your homework

words and photos Russel Wong

Ponale Riva de Garda, Italy

My friend's dad, Mr Giuliani, lives here and recommended this place as it's typical of the landscape with cliffs and tunnels along the lake. We checked it out the day before and picked the best spot to shoot the Giro d'Italia peloton (French term for group of people in a bicycle race). Sometimes it's best to just talk to the residents!

SETTINGS

ISO 400 • f/4.5 • t 1/800sec



When you mention the name Russel Wong to photography fans, you'll more likely than not get a starstruck response. After all, you're talking about the man who's known for his stunning minimalist portraits of celebrities.

But what most people aren't aware of is that Russel's photography roots are in sports, not celebrity. A keen runner, he began taking photographs of other track athletes when he was attending the University of Oregon back in the 1970s.

When he was just 19, he took a picture of Sebastian Coe – then the world record holder for the fastest mile – for Nike, who gave him a pair of shoes in return. The photo ended up on the cover of the sports publication *Track & Field News*. Nike was soon giving Russel regular assignments in exchange for shoes.

Russel doesn't work for shoes anymore. He's shooting portraits of iconic stars like Jackie Chan, Michelle Yeoh and Robert Downey Jr. But he still indulges in his passion for sports photography. His latest obsession – competitive cycling.

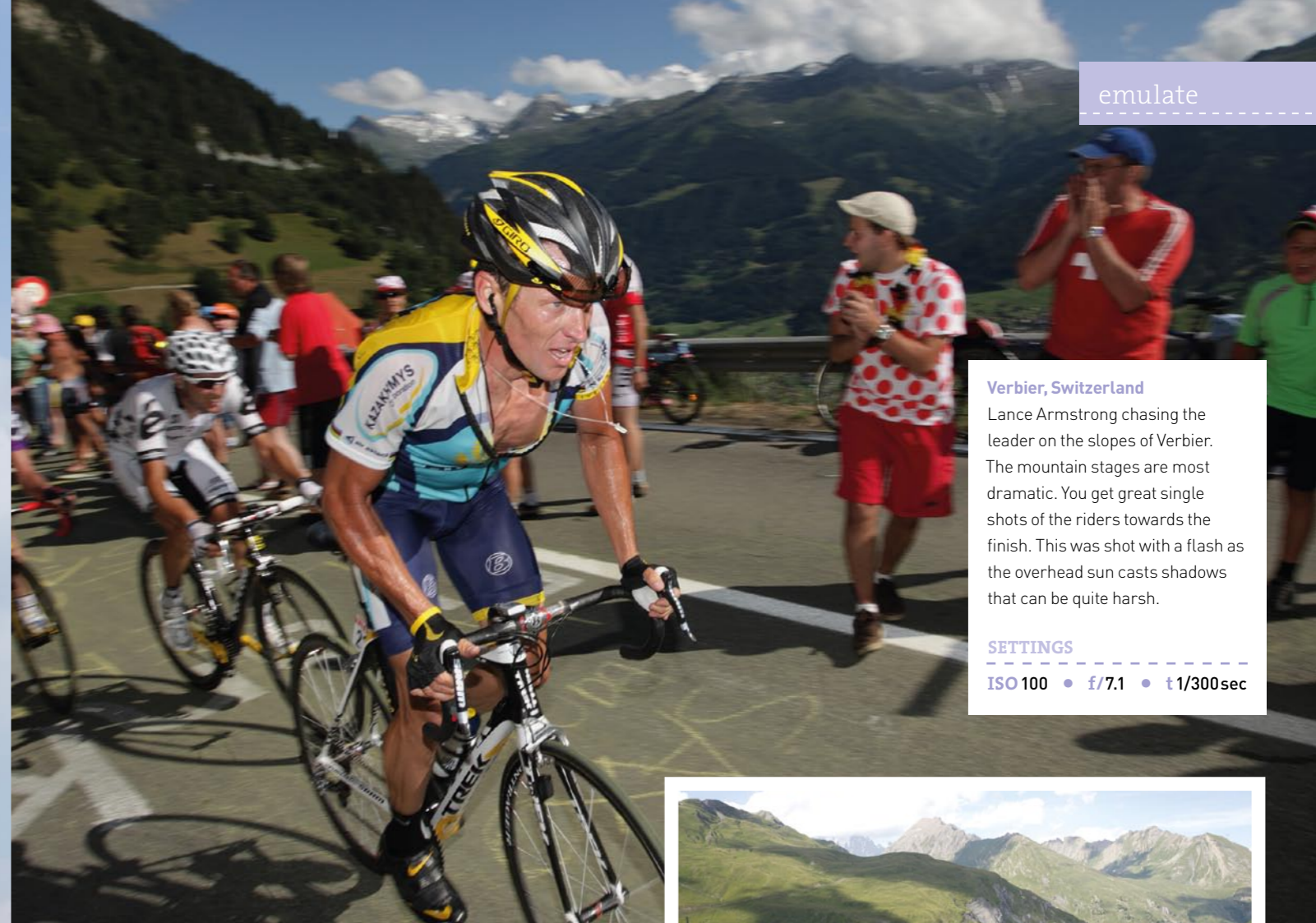


Eiffel Tower, Paris

I was looking for an image that says "Paris" right away. The Eiffel Tower was the obvious icon. The morning of the race, I walked along the river and looked for a spot where I could fit the peloton and the tower all in one shot so doing a recce before you shoot is so important.

SETTINGS

ISO 200 • f/8.0 • t1/1000sec



Verbier, Switzerland

Lance Armstrong chasing the leader on the slopes of Verbier. The mountain stages are most dramatic. You get great single shots of the riders towards the finish. This was shot with a flash as the overhead sun casts shadows that can be quite harsh.

SETTINGS

ISO 100 • f/7.1 • t1/300sec



Petit St Bernard (right)

I try to look for great panoramic vistas. I got there very early in the morning, like 8 am, and waited 8 hours for the shot! This allowed me to get both scenery shots and also dramatic cyclist shots with the mountains too.

SETTINGS

ISO 400 • f/5.6 • t1/1000sec

Shooting Competitive Cycling

"I love competitive cycling, in particular, the Tour de France actually. It encompasses everything I love shooting right now – landscapes, sports and people. I scout around looking for beautiful landscapes. I love driving around the country. I feel liberated and I'm not stuck in the studio.

Canon's been sponsoring me for quite some time. They just sponsored a small show I had called, 'A Taste of the Tour de France'.

I've been shooting the race since 2005 so it was easy for me to put together a set to exhibit. These photos were all taken with a Canon EOS 5D Mark II and EOS 1D Mark III, which is the fastest camera in the world! This is my whole body of work spanning four years since 2005 when Lance Armstrong won his 7th Tour de France. I was sent on assignment to cover it and I've been going back ever since. It's a great event and I get to drive all over the country. It's travel, and it's sports. I'm there every July. I don't bring lights, just my camera."

Taking Portraits vs. Tour de France

"With the Tour de France, it's sports. Unlike a portrait, it's the moment that counts. But even then, I still like to design the shots I take.

I don't just wait for the cyclist and shoot a picture of him riding a bike. I do the research. I watch video after video of the course and note the scenery. I scrutinise different mountain passes, note the time of the day so that I can choose my background. I decide which backdrop I want to shoot first and then wait for the cyclists there.

You don't have control over when the cyclists will appear or what they're going to do when you see them, but most of the other elements, I have control over. Factors like the time of day, positioning of angles (high, low), how much of the background I want, do I want the shot out of focus are all the things I can determine. You only get one crack at the shot when it comes to sports photography, so you need all the elements to come together."

Alpe D'Huez
There are iconic places in the Tour de France and this is one of them. One million people on the mountain and cars were parked there a week before just to get a spot. I walked the course in the morning to get a spot where I could see the mountains and the cyclist. The higher you go, the less trees in front of you which is better so your view is not blocked by them.

SETTINGS
ISO 250 • f/8.0 • t 1/800sec





Tourmalet (left)

I wanted to show the scale of these Pyrenees mountains, hence a much wider shot. I was walking around the route for about 8 hours, looking for a spot where it gave me a lot of options of getting both scenic and cyclist shots using different lenses.

SETTINGS

ISO 100 • f/2.8 • t1/1600sec

Lance on the Champs-Elysee (below)

The yellow jersey on Lance with the Arc de Triomphe behind him epitomise the Tour de France. This was his 7th win and I just framed a shot that had both. I was thinking of this shot even before the race started!

SETTINGS

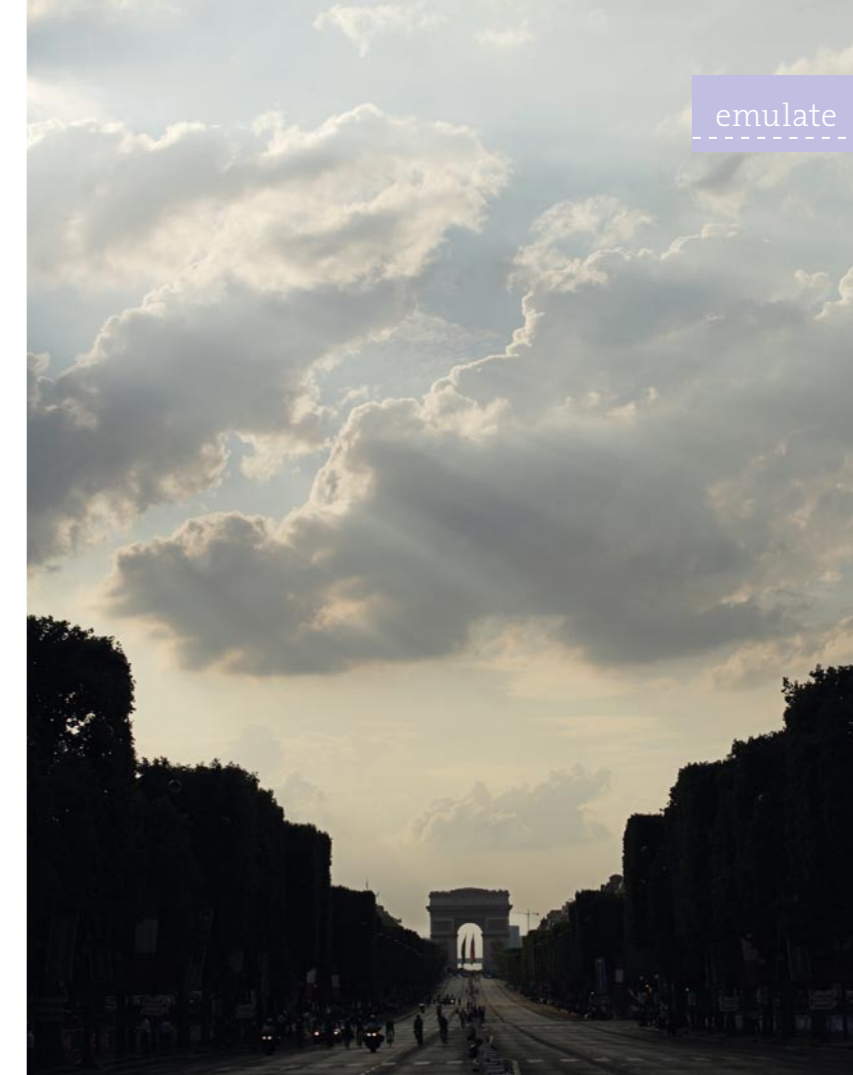
ISO 100 • f/5.0 • t1/250sec

Arc de Triomphe

The race always ends with the setting sun and the winning cyclist taking a lap of honour. Sometimes going for the less obvious always works. You don't need to show detail in everything you shoot – just a suggestion is sometimes better.

SETTINGS

ISO 100 • f/11.0 • t1/500sec



Crafting Your Photographs

“It’s all about preparation and doing your homework. Whether it’s shooting a cyclist or a celebrity, I try to design the photos I take. That’s key – design and light. If a person’s involved, then definitely include the whole disposition and feeling of the person.

It’s all about crafting the photograph you want. Get to know your subject intimately and do as much research as you can about the person, place and context. You can’t get a feel for what you’re shooting if you know next to nothing about it or them! I spend a lot of time doing research, whether it’s on a cycling route or a star like Jackie Chan. I read articles on them, buy their music, watch their movies, recce the location and so on. I’m there to photograph the essence of my subjects, find the soul and NOT just create a physical representation.”

What Women Bring to Photography

“I think women approach photographs in a different manner from men. I can tell if a woman’s taken the picture. In general, the photography’s more subtle, there’s a certain flow and grace about it. You see it in Annie Leibovitz’s pictures. I don’t think a guy could shoot it that way. Some subjects react better to women, so women photographers can get more out of children than I can because I’m a guy!

Everyone has access to a camera these days. Women are more interested than men in taking snapshots with their phones and pocket cameras. Women are the ones who post

pictures on sites and email photos to their friends. At parties, it’s the women who are taking the photos not the guys. Women have made photo taking a social thing. You see it all the time now – women taking pictures with their friends. Guys can’t be bothered.”

Advice to Those Who Want to Improve

“There will be times when you’re just too close to what you do and you don’t know what’s wrong with your picture. Talk to someone; even if it’s just a person at the camera shop. Get people to critique your pictures. Ask how a photograph can be improved. With the DSLR, it costs you nothing to keep taking the same picture over and over again. So you have the ability to get a photo critiqued and then go back and try it out again.

You can’t talk about photography, you can’t read it, you’ve got to just do it. You’ve got to mess up in order to figure out how to solve your visual problem. Keep shooting, keep trying, keep asking – how can I make my photographs better?”

Any Last Tips?

“For any kind of photograph, preparation is key. Know your subject, understand the location, take test pictures, test your ranges so you know what you’re going to get in terms of exposure, shutter speed and f-stops. Capturing the moment is easy if and only if you’ve done your homework and you are prepared.”