

*There is hardly a sport that **Bob Martin** hasn't photographed. He tells **Keith Wilson** about his favourite Olympics, using robots at Wimbledon, and falling over backwards at the World Athletics Championships...*

For someone who wasn't that interested in sport as a boy, Bob Martin's journey from the *Surrey Comet* to *Sports Illustrated* had many twists and turns. But his passion for photography and desire to take great pictures has never wavered...

When you were a kid, which interest came first: photography or sport?

Photography. I was 14 when I first got interested in photography. I was more interested in the processing side, looking at prints develop in trays, than photography itself. It was my big hobby at school.

Were you not interested in sport?

A little bit, but not overtly. I wasn't one of the people who was playing sport every weekend. I'd lumber up to the rugby club, I liked playing squash when I was in my 20s, but I was never crazy about sport.

Did you study photography at school?

I thought I was going to be a vet, but I started A-levels and didn't finish. I went off to work part-time for FNG Clarke in Teddington, a wedding and industrial photography company, as an assistant.

How long did that job last?

About a year and a half. I learnt about black-and-white developing. We just shuffled paper: say we had a hundred prints to do, it was like playing cards with a giant tray of developer and a great big rotary drier. So I was a darkroom person during the week and at weekends I would go out and help on the occasional shoot.

When you left this job, what came next?

I went to work at Imperial College London as a photographic technician, which was really a step backwards because it didn't teach me much about photography, but it did teach me to be technical. I was working for the civil engineering department. It was not photography as I think of it today, because there wasn't much creativity in what I was doing. However, I'd go off at weekends and take pictures of a bike trial, ►



CLOSE-UP

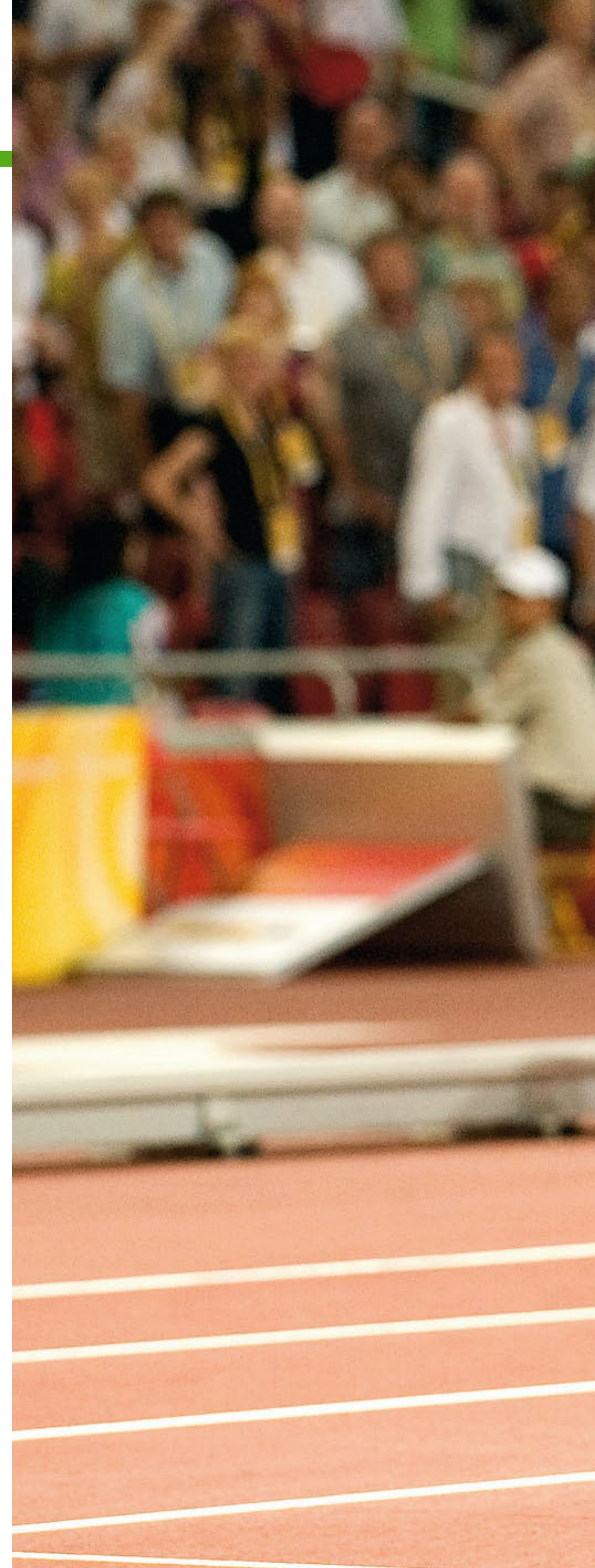
**BOB
MARTIN**





FEDERER IN ACTION
Bob Martin ranks Roger Federer as one of the greatest sports stars he's photographed





TIGER WOODS

The doughnut-shaped bokeh in this photo is a classic feature of mirror lenses, and it's arguably what makes the shot

ATHLETIC SILHOUETTE

The Olympics is Bob Martin's favourite event to photograph – and while the athletics is a big part, he covers the lot

or the local football match, and just do some pictures for myself.

What was your first break?

A picture of a motorcycle scramble published in the *Surrey Comet*. I don't think I got any money for it but I was really pleased to have got it published.

Did more work emanate from that?

Not really! My next step was straight into

the sports world. I got a job at Allsport [the photography agency] as a darkroom junior in 1979. I had a very good background in developing because of what I had done at FNG Clarke and Imperial College, so it was a shoo-in to work in a press darkroom, but these pictures were a lot more interesting!

How long did it take you to progress to being a photographer?

Well, I started taking pictures quite rapidly, because they were quite happy if you went out at weekends shooting, but I wasn't really a full-blown photographer. I moved on to another company called Sporting Pictures. After a period there, I went back to Allsport, and in that second stint I was a full-blown photographer. That was around

1988 for the Seoul Olympics. That was the first Olympics I ever went to.

Wimbledon, Olympics or World Cup?

Well, the Olympics is my real thing. I like football, even though I'm not the massive football fan that some people are. For me the Olympics is the biggest event and the most influential event for my photography.

Is there one Olympics that particularly stands out for you?

Barcelona 1992.

Why's that?

It was just theatre. I took a preview picture of a diver over Barcelona with the city in background. I took it during a test event. I



GOLDEN FEET
Bob shoots constantly – there's no second chance for a shot at Usain Bolt's speed

was the first one to do it. Many people have done it since then. I felt I was really firing as a photographer, shooting good stuff. It was Allsport at its best, in my opinion. The other one that was memorable was Lillehammer, the Winter Olympics of 1994.

What's your desert island lens?

The 400mm f/2.8 is the *de facto* sports photographer's lens. Nikon has just come out with a new one, which is fantastic – it's lighter, easier to handle. Generally, it's on a monopod. When you're shooting sport and packing your kit bag, 90 per cent of the time you're packing the 400mm first and packing the other stuff around it. For some events you might go with a 300mm and a 500mm. But if someone told me I

PROFILE

He's spent years at the top of his game, shooting sports stars at the top of theirs

- Bob Martin has been recognised by more than 60 national and international photo awards, including a World Press Photo prize for Sports Action in 2004.

- He has covered every summer and winter Olympic Games since Seoul in 1988 – a total of 15 Olympics.

- Based in his native England, Bob has worked for leading magazine *Sports Illustrated* for the past 20 years, and was the magazine's only staff photographer based outside the USA.

- As well as *Sports Illustrated*, his photographs have appeared



in leading magazines and newspapers including *Time*, *The Sunday Times*, *L'Equipe*, *Newsweek*, *Stern* and *The New York Times*.

IN THE NET

Take three cameras to a football match? It makes you wonder how Bob Martin triggers them all...

Can you describe how you work with remotes at a football match?

■ I have a little bypass cable and I cable them up if I'm close enough to them; if not they'd be fired via Pocket Wizards. I've got a little foot pedal switch that engages or disengages the remote. The foot pedal switch engages either net one or net two. Some people who are more co-ordinated than I am can press the foot pedal when they want the remote to fire. I can't really do that! When the play comes towards the end in question I engage that remote, when the game goes towards the other end I engage the camera at the other end. Now, I don't think about when I'm shooting because the remote fires whenever the camera I'm holding fires. That's a standard technique when using a remote in a team sport. It's something I learned from the American guys who shoot basketball, where they use tons of remotes. They just engage an end. If you can have three remotes on a basketball net, when the play is at that end of the court you just switch on that set of remotes. You're doing it when the play is not at its peak moments, so you're not screwing up your hand-eye co-ordination from trying to do two different things at once.

Have you ever had a remote in the back of the net that missed the goal?

Yeah, loads. Also, pictorially it doesn't always work. The thing about remotes is they give you a second chance, a second picture, a second angle. They are an extra. You can never totally rely on remotes. You should always be working on the camera you hold.

was going to shoot sport, but didn't tell me exactly what it was, and I could only take one lens, then I'd take the 400mm f/2.8.

Which has been your all-time favourite Nikon camera?

The Nikon D3 was the one that made me think 'Digital is here and it's better than

“ Unless you're shooting away you're not going to get the key moment if something happens unexpectedly ”

Bob Martin *Sports photographer*



film.' I like film cameras. The F3 was a great camera. But the D3 was the game-changer, the first real press digital camera that made you realise that film was a thing of the past.

Which camera bodies do you use now?

The D4s. I also have the D800E and D810. The D800E is a nice little camera for when you want to be less obtrusive than carrying a D4s. I use the D800E for portraits, feature pictures, anything that's not action. For some commercial jobs it's worth it because people want the big file.

What's in your bag for a football match?

I've got so much gear I tend to cherry-pick. I've got three 70-200mm zooms, for

instance: two f/2.8s and one f/4, which is a lightweight one for feature stuff. I've got all the normal zooms: the 14-24mm f/2.8, the new 16-35mm f/4, the 24-70mm f/2.8 and three 70-200mms. On most jobs I take two 70-200mm zooms because it's such an important range. In the old days you had an 85mm, 135mm and 180mm.

What will you use next weekend?

For a football match, the 400mm f/2.8 would be my main lens, a 70-200mm f/2.8, and probably a 16-35mm on a spare body, in case something happens in front of me.

Do you put a camera in the net?

There's a remote in the net and it would probably be the 14-24mm f/2.8. You could



SNOWY NIGHT IN TORIN
Getting a sense of place as well as action is an important part of Bob's shots



BLUE SKY THINKING
Clean patches of colour are another regular feature of Bob's sports images

use two of those quite happily, one at the back of each net, all on D4s bodies.

So how many D4s cameras do you take to a match?

Well, I've got six! I would take five. If there are two remotes it's five cameras.

What size memory cards do you use?

They're Lexar, all far bigger than I need. Nowadays you can't really buy a small one, but they're 16Gb or 32Gb, 1000x speed.

In a typical Premier League football match how many images do you take?

The nature of sport photography means you shoot every build-up that runs towards you, because unless you're shooting away

you're not going to get the key moment if something happens unexpectedly. Not counting remotes, because with remotes you get tons of wasted frames, I would think 200 frames a half, so 400 frames a match. The remotes would probably be another 400 frames per camera, and there'd be one frame that you'd keep.

What percentage of shots do you delete?

Loads. Sports photography is all about shooting away. From the moment you pick the camera up at an event the first thing you do is get a picture in the bag. Then all you're doing is trying to improve on it. You don't think, 'I've nailed that, I don't need to shoot any more.' You keep going, you're trying to take the best possible sports

picture, so you're there trying to improve on it. That's your job.

You're the only *Sports Illustrated* photographer based outside of the USA.

Well, I'm the only one that's regularly used by them who's based outside of the US. I was the only one outside of the US as a staff photographer for many years. They closed down the London office, so I was put on contract. Budget cuts continued apace. Now, I'm a regular freelance for them.

What's the most important lesson you learned from your time there?

What *Sports Illustrated* taught me was that it's all about the best picture. I think my photography improved through working



ACTION!
You don't need to see the spectators:
Venus Williams and the ball are all that counts

with *Sports Illustrated* because everything about that magazine was about the quality of the pictures that ran. For example, you'd go to Wimbledon for two weeks and they'd run maybe five pictures. What *Sports Illustrated* taught me is to chase the one great picture and not worry about getting lots of pictures.

“ What *Sports Illustrated* taught me is to chase the one great picture and not worry about getting lots of pictures ”

Bob Martin *Sports photographer*

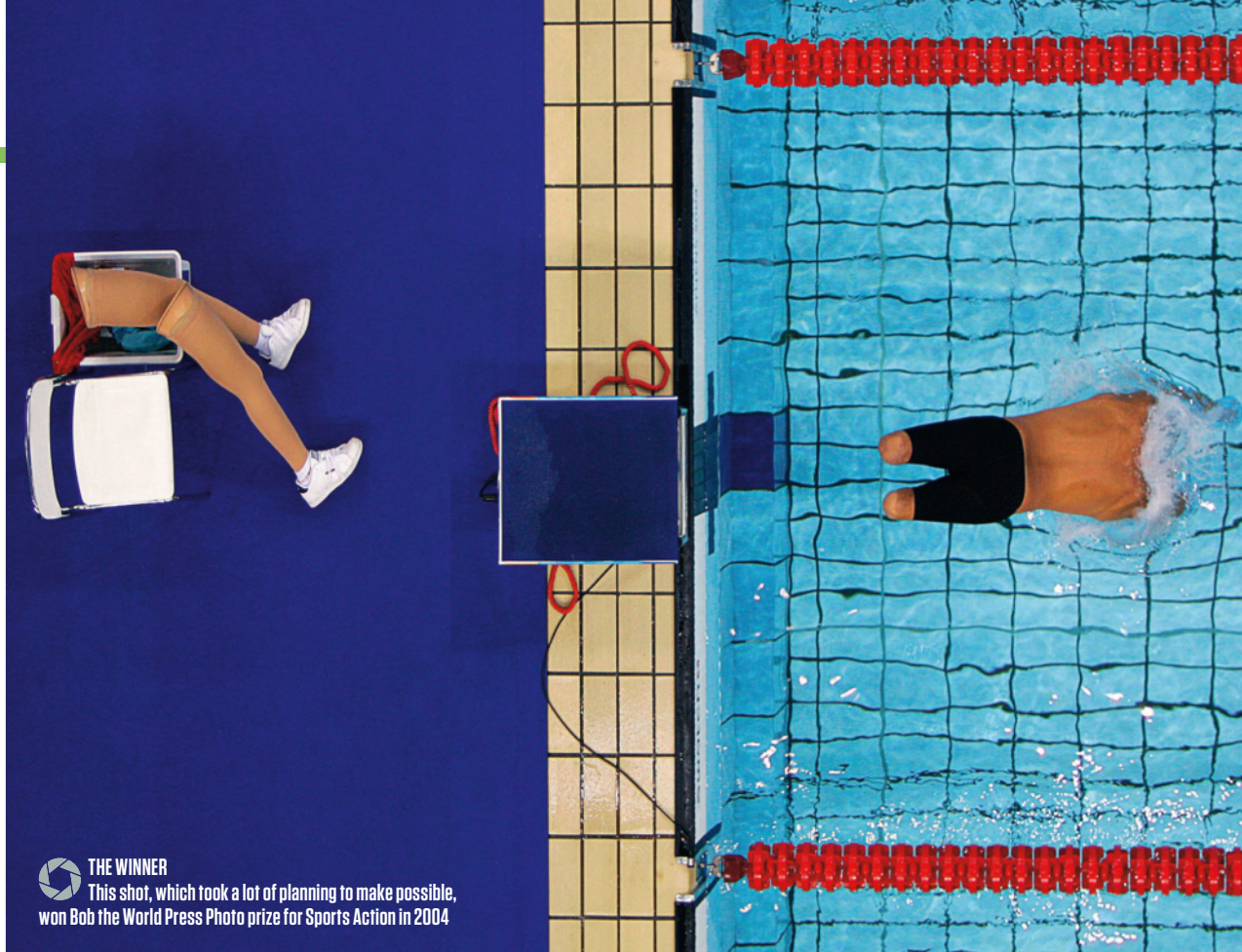
Which assignment has presented the biggest challenge?

It's a difficult question to answer. What I consider one of my biggest achievements is the picture from the 2004 Paralympics of the swimmer swimming away having left his artificial legs behind the chair. To get up into the roof to get that position took maybe three trips to Athens, talking to people, negotiating and so on. I was working for *Sports Illustrated* then and when I went up into the roof they only let two people up on the catwalk at any time. You had to time when you asked to make sure you were up there when the event you wanted was on. If you include the letters that were written beforehand; the negotiating with the photo managers; the

trips to Athens to talk about it; the effort to produce that picture, which is arguably my best; it was the most I'd ever done for one assignment. The reward of having that set of pictures winning loads of awards, including World Press Photo, that for me was my biggest achievement.

It sounds like everything came together for you at that time?

To a degree it came together. You know, *Sports Illustrated* hadn't published a Paralympic picture. They sent me to Athens for two weeks with an assistant for something they didn't even have space in the magazine for! It was in the golden days of the magazine when they would send you somewhere on the off-chance of getting a



THE WINNER

This shot, which took a lot of planning to make possible, won Bob the World Press Photo prize for Sports Action in 2004



NEED FOR SPEED

Bob's images were the first of the Paralympics to be published in *Sports Illustrated*

RISE OF THE ROBOTS

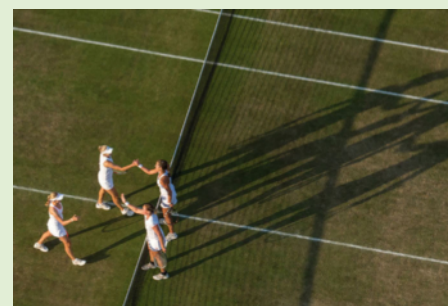
Bob Martin reveals how he works with robotic Nikon cameras at the world's greatest tennis tournament...

Can you explain what you do with robotics?

■ I sometimes shoot just robotic, but that's because I'm following the action with the remote. You'd call it a remote but it's not, it's a robotic camera. You are operating that camera.

Was Wimbledon 2013 the first time robotics were used?

■ That was the first year we did robotics in the roof, but they were used for the first time by the major agencies in the summer Olympics of 2012. But the most advanced ones, the ones I use, are totally robotic. They are cameras you can pan and tilt and follow action with, and were used first at Wimbledon 2013 by me.



picture. Halfway through it I got a phone call saying, "You've probably got enough now, how about coming back?"

I said, "No, this is really going to be a great set, you've got to leave me here."

I convinced them and they said, "We may have space for one double page this week." They ended up running three double-page spreads at the front of the magazine with Paralympic pictures, which was unheard of. It's normally for events like the Super Bowl. It doesn't often happen, and it's even rarer for one photographer to have all three.

What has been your most embarrassing photographic experience?

I was in Gothenburg for the World Athletics Championships in 1995. Kim Batten had

just finished the 400m hurdles. She broke the world record. I tucked in front of her with a wide-angle and flash to shoot her celebrating as she ran round and I forgot the hurdles were still out. Running backwards, I hit the first hurdle halfway down the finishing straight, fell over upside down, landed on my head, almost knocked myself out, smashed the cameras and laid there wondering if anyone had noticed! When I started to get up the crowd started to cheer and my colleagues in the photo stand were all photographing me getting up with bits of camera dropping off. It was used on EuroSport in their end-of-year wrap-up silly bit, played in slow motion and reversing it, so falling to pieces and getting up, falling to pieces and getting up. ▶



YES, WE PAN!

A panning shot like this is technically difficult, but blurs out the distracting crowd

Of all the stars you have photographed, who do you regard as the greatest?

I really liked photographing Linford Christie. He was incredibly difficult to deal with, incredibly arrogant, yet if you got your pictures right and took good pictures of him he was so great to deal with. I did three or four pictures of him, which I still regard as some of my best sports portraits.

As a sportsman, the greatest has got to be Roger Federer. He's always polite, and many sports people you photograph are not. But Roger Federer is the consummate professional when you photograph him. He poses as well as a model does. He is always polite, on time and respectful. I remember watching him in a press conference in Paris, and he was answering questions





“ Roger Federer is the consummate professional when you photograph him. He poses as well as a model does. He is always polite, on time and respectful ”

Bob Martin *Sports photographer*

SHIP AHOY (LEFT)
Shooting the Olympics means knowing where and how to photograph an incredible range of high-action sports

HE SHOOTS, HE SCORES! (ABOVE RIGHT)
Bob uses five cameras – currently all Nikon D4s bodies – when he's photographing a football match

LONG JUMP (BELOW RIGHT)
A shot like this requires split-second timing – or, as Bob advises, constant shooting to get the one you want

in English, German, French, Swiss German and Italian, so he managed to learn five languages and still win more Grand Slams than anybody else has ever done. I've photographed him a lot of times and he amazes me with how he plays and with how he conducts himself. So, he's got to be the greatest, I suppose.

What is the biggest change you have seen in your profession?

The greatest change is a recent one. It's the demise of the printed product, how newspapers and magazines are dying as we speak. My answer three or four years ago would have been digital photography, but now the whole business is in turmoil. *Sports Illustrated* used to throw money at photography, but the budgets for photography are becoming smaller.

The problem is, if you have a magazine or a newspaper the picture is all-important to the front cover, but on a website how often does the picture sell the product? Very rarely, is my view, and because of that the picture is less valuable. They need lots of pictures, but they're not so worried

about exclusivity, and the user glances at the picture and moves onto another one. The pictures are necessary but only as part of the process, so therefore they are less valuable. That change is going to wreck the profession of being a sports photographer because there's not the money for many people to make a living out of it today.

So, what is the best piece of advice you can give to someone starting out?

Try and get a job in the biggest of the agencies that you can. As much as I hate to say it, your goal today has got to be to work for Getty, AP, Reuters or AFP if you want to be an editorial photographer, which is my love. I love being an editorial photographer. I just can't really be one any more. ☐