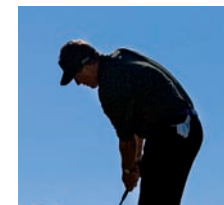




Tim Howard goalkeeper
for Everton F.C.

ATLANTIC CROSSING

With an unashamedly parochial focus on baseball, basketball and college football, the glossy magazine *Sports Illustrated* is as American as hotdogs at halftime. So how did the cricket-loving limey SIMON BRUTY become one of its leading photographers? Keith Wilson hears how the smack of leather upon willow gave way to the smash of helmets at the Super Bowl...



For all the thousands of magazines weighing down the shelves of newsagents and supermarkets across the globe, there are only a few that have become synonymous with great photography. The late, lamented *LIFE* magazine immediately springs to mind, as does *Picture Post*, *Esquire*, *National Geographic* and *Vogue*.

What else? Well, across the pond there is a title that sells more than eight million copies every week. That magazine is *Sports Illustrated*. It is the bible of US sports coverage with page after page of photographic brilliance.

A couple of days before I pick up the phone to ring Simon Bruty in Washington, I dig out an old dog-eared copy of a magazine feature I wrote in 1987 about two sports photographers covering the British motorcycle Grand Prix at Castle Donington. One of the photographers is a baby-faced youngster sporting a yellow cable knit jumper and a classic 1980s George Michael style haircut. His name is Simon Bruty. Although only 21 at the time of our meeting, Simon has already spent three years with the acclaimed agency, Allsport.

A quarter of a century on, Simon is driving the streets of America's capital city while talking to me on the phone about working for the world's greatest sports magazine and how he's looking forward to the London Olympics. He doesn't recall our day at Donington, but he clearly remembers his early days at Allsport: Simon had just finished his A Levels when he first approached the international sports photography agency: "Steve Powell took my call and he just said 'Why?' when I asked if I could see them about working there," he recalls. "He said they got loads of enquiries, but I got to speak to Adrian Murrell, the manager, and he just listened and said, 'Don't expect anything', and that was that. I thought, 'Well, that won't lead to anything' and promptly forgot about it."

It was only a couple of years earlier that Simon became enthused about photography, taking it as a subject for his O Levels. He was already a sports-mad teenager playing rugby and cricket for his school and with high hopes of playing

cricket for Hampshire. "For a time I really wanted to be a professional cricketer, but at the end of the day I was no Ian Botham. I loved sports as a kid and before my A Levels I had a trial with the U19 squad for Hampshire. I still follow cricket, it's easy to keep up with on the internet, but I don't get to photograph it much this side of the Atlantic!"

After a short shrift from Steve Powell and a reality check from Adrian Murrell, Simon went through the motions of applying for university places. Six weeks later Murrell rang back: "We have got a job for you, but it won't say photographer on the contract and the pay is shit." It was £2,500 a year but it represented an opportunity big enough for Simon to seize. So, in the summer of 1984 he left the home comforts of Hampshire for the uncertainties of London.

"Adrian Murrell most certainly didn't give me a photography job," he emphasises as though there is still a bone to be picked with his former master. "He got me to make the tea, empty the bins, do the post, all the dogs body jobs. But I also got to work in the library, and I learnt a lot from that, looking at all the pictures and working out how the guys took them, the angles and lens choices, all that stuff. It was definitely an apprenticeship and I was learning from some great sports photographers: Guys like David Cannon, Steve Powell, Bob Martin, Tony Duffy and of course Adrian Murrell. I just observed and learnt from them. I didn't have anything else to do anyway. I was away from home, had no friends in London, no money and living in a shitty bedsit in Southfields."

CHANGING SPORTS

The dedication paid off and ten years later, in 1994, Murrell sent him to America where he has remained ever since. It wasn't the smoothest of starts: his posting to the Los Angeles office was brief because he "absolutely hated it," but instead of giving his protégé a tongue lashing with a reminder about living in shitty London bedsits, Murrell reassigned him to a new bureau in New York. At the time, Simon was the only Allsport photographer on the East Coast but it expanded quickly and he remained in New York for the next six years, covering all the major American sports and making major cultural ▶

{THE BIG INTERVIEW}

adjustments, such as referring to football as soccer. “Well I’m talking to you so it’s football, if I was talking to an American I’d be calling it soccer!” he laughs. So what other adjustments did he have to make in switching from a regular diet of cricket, rugby and football to baseball, basketball and, er, American football?

“There wasn’t that much difference,” he counters. “Many of the shooting positions are the same and ultimately you are looking for a great action photo. Learning and understanding the sport of course was vital. American football was the easiest to understand actually. I saw a lot of photographs of it when I was working in the picture library at Allsport, and back then it was shown a lot on Channel 4, so it wasn’t that unfamiliar. I watched the great American photographers and asked their advice, guys like John Biever and Al Tielemans, but I also learnt a lot from just looking at their images in magazines and trying to figure out how it was done.”

Biever and Tielemans are senior staffers on *Sports Illustrated* and for the past ten years also his colleagues. Leaving Allsport for *Sports Illustrated* seemed like a logical move once he was settled on the East Coast. “It was just time to move on. I had a great time with Allsport and all the people involved there,” he reflects. He also saw the move as an opportunity to develop as a photographer, having noticed how American sports photographers were more technically astute than their British counterparts and more creative as a result.

“The main difference of being a sports photographer in the US is not the actual sports. Some of the lens choices might have been different, but American sports photographers are more into the technical side, such as using loads of remotes and strobes. In the UK, where you would have one remote camera at a game, in the US there would be five or ten. There is a lot more call for sports portraits too. As a sports photographer in America, one of the first things I learnt was that you had to light the picture, whatever the weather. There was no case of waiting for the sun to come out! You had to light it no matter what. At the time it helped me to expand my knowledge. I have definitely evolved as a photographer since coming here. I can decide the sports I do, and I do a lot of portrait work which I enjoy. It’s a very different type of work to going to an event. Athletes generally don’t want to give you much time so that is why you have to be prepared.” ▶



“For someone growing up in the UK, I had no idea about tornados and their strength. The most difficult photograph was of the footballer, Carson Tinker, who had lost his girlfriend whilst he was holding her.”
Simon Bruty

Former Alabama football player Javier Arenas. University of Alabama tornado aftermath, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Kentucky Derby 2006.
Barbaro, ridden by Edgar
Prado, winning Derby.



TORNADO TRAGEDY

Nothing, however, could have prepared Simon for his most challenging assignment of recent years. It was neither a major league baseball game nor the Super Bowl, not even an Olympics, but a major news story: photographing the aftermath of a tornado that devastated the city of Tuscaloosa in Alabama last April. Home to the University of Alabama and its celebrated college football team, Tuscaloosa was ripped apart with the loss of 39 people and hundreds more left homeless.

"I was at the Kentucky Derby when the magazine asked me if I wanted to go," Simon recalls. "Normally big bonus pieces (*Sports Illustrated's* name for in-depth feature stories), have a healthy lead time but this one needed to be done quickly and in the magazine whilst still fresh in the public mind. I knew the

writer Lars Anderson well, so I was in contact with him as I was trying to get my gear together. I had an assistant in DC fly to meet me in Birmingham, Alabama with my lighting gear – Profoto 7bs. I hooked up with the writer and we just tried to get things done on the fly. The story revolved around the university and how the sports department was affected. They were helpful but also wary at putting their athletes back in the position of reliving their stories. We asked the athletes if they would recall the stories. I sat in and listened to most of the stories – pretty harrowing – and then asked them if they would go back to the scene and be photographed.

"For someone growing up in the UK, I had no idea about tornadoes and their strength. The most difficult photograph was of the footballer, Carson Tinker, who had lost his girlfriend whilst he was holding her. He was, as you would expect, still very fragile. We never asked him to go back to the house, but I went out there and shot a panoramic image to give some sense of the strength of the tornado."

The Tuscaloosa experience reveals how versatile a *Sports Illustrated* photographer has to be: the job isn't just about photographing sports action; the magazine has photographed US Presidents and film stars for the front cover, so staff photographers have to be as proficient with lighting the celebrity portrait as focusing on a slam dunk. Simon enjoys the variety: "I have a little bit of a ▶

New Orleans Saints
VS New York Giants.
Mike Bell – Saints –
scores atouchdown.



"The main difference of being a sports photographer in the US is not the actual sports... American sports photographers are more into the technical side, such as using loads of remotes and strobes." Simon Bruty



2008 Summer Olympics: China Zhao Yanni (1400) in action, pushing Kenya Veronica Nyaruai Wanjiru (2268) into the water again after tripping during Women's 3000M Steeplechase Heats at the National Stadium, Beijing.

“I love the sequence of the women’s steeplechase I shot in Beijing. I think it happened in the heats. I shot about 25 frames of this athlete tripping and falling in the water and trying to get up whilst being pummelled repeatedly by runners coming over the hurdle after her.” Simon Bruty

luxury in that I get to do portraits, shoot for features, as well as action. I think it’s important to mix it up a bit because that blend keeps me on my toes. If I did action all the time I would get into a rut, get stale, get bored by it and it would show in my pictures.”

CAMERA CHOICE

One thing that hasn’t changed in the 25 years since I first saw Simon at work is his choice of camera brand. While other sports photographers have readily switched allegiance at the flash of a cheque book, and a seemingly endless supply of ‘long term loan stock’, Simon has stuck with Canon. The F1 and

T90 are now distant memories for the photographer who now packs three or four EOS 1Ds Mark IV bodies into his kitbag. “Over the years, the design and ergonomics of these cameras have been very similar from one model to the next,” he explains. “It helps a lot because you develop an instinctive feel for the camera, knowing exactly where everything is by touch. With sports photography you are talking fractions of a second to get the picture, so you don’t want to be fumbling with the controls. That’s the main reason why I have stuck with Canon, if I had changed to another brand I would be learning a whole new layout and feel of the camera, and lenses too for that matter.” Changing now with the London Olympics just weeks away would seem a huge risk, despite the lures of the new flagship SLRs from both Nikon and Canon.

When we speak, the Olympics are not yet in the forefront of Simon’s thinking, despite the fact that they are returning to his home country for the first time since 1948. There are no plans to come over earlier than normal; instead, he will travel with the rest of the *Sports Illustrated* crew about a week before the opening ceremony. “You know, it doesn’t really matter where the Olympics are,” Simon reasons. “At the end of the day you are so immersed in what you are doing. I was over 18 months ago to see the site but even though I’ve been back to the UK since, I haven’t been to the site. There’s no need. I will be over the week before the games start and I will look at everything then. To be honest, there’s no point coming over any sooner, because it changes totally when the security is in operation and the routes to and from the venues are in place. That’s when we need to know how it’s all set up.”

London will be Simon’s seventh Olympics, his first was Seoul, 1988, when he was just 22. And although there have been tens of thousands of frames and amazing spectacles witnessed since, he remains reluctant to think ahead to Friday, 27th July 2012, when the games of the XXXth Olympiad will be declared open by Her Majesty The Queen. Any national pride or patriotism will be quickly set to one side: “I work for an American magazine and there will be an



Trapeze artist in Washington .D.C.

American bias to our Olympic coverage,” he explains. “So there will be a lot of track and field, a lot of swimming, they are the big ones, but we will get a chance to mooch around and cover some of the lesser sports. *Sports Illustrated* is great. They give you a lot of freedom, they trust you as a photographer and understand you have been around the block a few times and are very experienced. All the *Sports Illustrated* photographers are highly motivated, so they don’t need a lot of direction or reminding about what to do.”

OLYMPIC SELECTIONS

I try to coax some Olympic moments from his memory bank, those instances where he has taken a picture that lingers with pride in the memory, or a story of an award-winning shot. But he’s not giving anything away: “I am not really one to reminisce and sit round with other photographers and talk about past shots and what was a great photograph that I took. The most important photograph is the one you are going to take next. I don’t sit back and ponder. The moment you do that you gather cobwebs.” The man is remaining resolute and when I ask for his hopes and ambitions for the future, he succinctly replies: “That I keep learning and improving my photography.” The dedication is absolute, but when I ask him to recount a particular event or off-camera experience that stands out from all the Olympics he has covered, he finally relents.

“I love the sequence of the women’s steeplechase I shot in Beijing. I think it happened in the heats. I shot about 25 frames of this athlete tripping and falling in the water and trying to get up whilst being pummelled repeatedly by runners coming over the hurdle after her. She eventually gets up out of the water and carried on – that was the Olympic spirit.

“My other Olympic moment happened in Atlanta in 1996. I was covering the swimming and on the pool deck. Before the event started I was sitting in a corner of the arena trying to stay out of the way of everyone. The doors behind me opened, and several burly secret service guys told me I could not sit

there and told me to move. At this stage of the games, having taken so much shit from men in uniforms, I informed them that I could sit there and they should go and intimidate someone else! Before I was beaten to a pulp, a small grey haired man walked in and said to me: ‘Sit down, it’s no problem.’ It was the IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch. I sat with him discussing the problems of the games for about five minutes before he got up, shook my hand, and gave me a rather large Olympic pin.” With a moment like that to share, who needs to choose a single photograph to pin up for all time? 📷

www.simonbruty.com

WHAT’S IN THE BAG?

Simon tailors what goes in his camera bag according to the assignment. “With basketball you use shorter lenses, whereas with NFL football you tend to use long lenses,” he says. Typically, he will pack three or four Canon EOS-1Ds Mark IV camera bodies and the following Canon lenses: 400mm f/2.8, 16-35mm f/2.8, 70-200mm f/2.8, 50mm f/1.2 and a 15mm f/2.8. He will take a monopod instead of a tripod, a selection of filters, plus up to a dozen 8GB memory cards. “At a football game I shoot between 1000 and 1300 frames. *Sports Illustrated* has a transmit system called Opus which I use. At halftime I start the download and finish it at the end of the game. The system transmits small JPEGs for editing and later they can call in the Raw files for production.”

Michael Phelps – swimmer.