

The Art of Action

A professional action-sports star turned action-sports shooter reveals a thing or two about extreme filmmaking

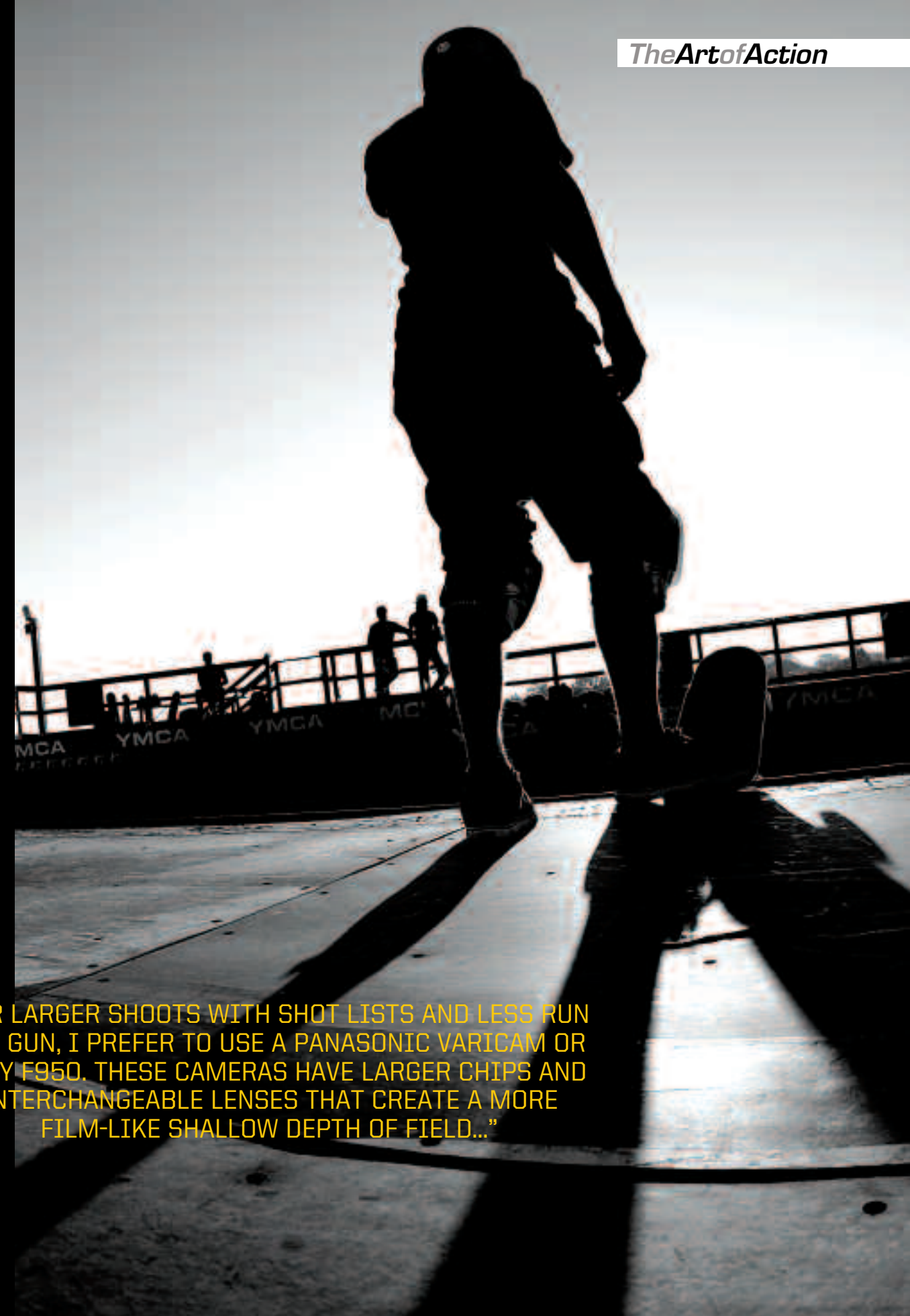
By Mark Edward Harris



Todd Grossman makes a tough job even tougher by placing himself within the maelstrom of action sports. An extreme filmmaker who's lauded as a master of shooting action sports, Grossman utilizes many years of expertise as a professional skateboarder, snowboarder and inline skater to get the elusive shot. An X-Games and Gravity Games alumnus, Grossman has performed stunts in a number of commercial and films, including a Michael Bay Super Bowl commercial series for Nike, plus the feature *Batman and Robin*.

HDVideoPro: Tell us about your new book *Shooting Action Sports: The Ultimate Guide to Extreme Filmmaking*?

Todd Grossman: It's a soup-to-nuts bible on the tools and techniques of making action-sports content. With a strong focus on shooting, it also covers prepping, editing and distributing projects. I give real-world examples and tips to getting the best footage possible, whether you're shooting a home skate video or making a documentary on your



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favorite sport. I've also included technical information, such as selecting your camera format and lenses, and some grassroots tricks, like how to turn your cell phone into a fisheye camera for just \$3. The book is a way I can share the knowledge I've gained through the many successes and failures I've encountered in the field.

HDVideoPro: Give us an example.

Grossman: A personal favorite involved shooting with the Sony F900 and Sony HVR-Z1U cameras aboard the *USS Nimitz* off the coast of Mexico. It was a fully operational nuclear aircraft carrier, so I had to keep my eyes open at all times. I came home with some incredible footage, plus a great deal of expe-

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rience—plus a couple of stitches after a run-in with an F-14 Tomcat. Needless to say, I lost.

HDVideoPro: What are some of the most difficult shooting situations you've experienced?

Grossman: Shooting live at the Summer X-Games because the show was being cut live. I had an RF transmitter broadcasting my three-CCD camera signal to a truck wearing an earpiece and walkie to hear the cuts being called out—especially nerve-racking because I had to be right on top of the athletes with a Century Optics 0.3x Precision fisheye lens while keeping my distance to stay out of the other cameramen's shots. To compound it all, you need to stay out of the way of the athletes. I spent years learning where my lens was pointing by feel, and I kept my eyes on the athlete and where they were going, my ears on the director and what he was saying, and my mind on the camera and what it was shooting. After shooting more than 200 60-second runs in a day, I was physically and mentally spent, but the technical and creative challenges paid off as our sequences were one of the most-used shots in the show.

HDVideoPro: What's so different about shooting action sports compared to any other type of event?



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Grossman: The idea of motion. Like filmmaking, action sports are often comprised of static shots and moving shots juxtaposed together for dramatic effect to enhance the content. Just like in narrative storytelling, your camera position or move should always fit your content. If you're shooting a skater or other athlete during a series of tricks, you'll track along with them. If you keep your camera low to the ground and have a static foreground strafing through the frame as you pass, you'll create a stronger sense of speed because of how the eye registers movement. Consider the all too popular handheld frenetic camera style of recent action films. By keeping things moving, you're constantly providing new information for the viewer's eyes to process. In the case of action sports, the camera shake typically isn't used since your goal is usually to capture the story.

HDVideoPro: What goes into the decision-making in terms of camera choice?

Grossman: There are so many cameras, recording formats, frame rates, codecs and so on today that it can be overwhelming. But unlike the past, we can choose exactly what format fits the project. My go-to cameras of late are the Panasonic HVX-200 and the Sony HVR-V1U. Both offer incredible images without being too obtrusive for documentary or action-sport shooting. I love the V1U's ability to capture crystal-clear images to tape—HDV resolution—so I can keep shooting for hours and hours without downloading cards.

I was recently in China shooting with director Rob Cohen on *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*. We had 13- to 20-hour-long days, sometimes in sandstorms on the edge of the Mongolian Desert. The V1U had only minor trouble with the sand, but overall was an absolute trooper, bringing back incredible images. The Panasonic HVX-200 I recently shot with Windowseat Pictures at the 2008 Winter X-Games. Director Bill Keily and I would spend our days on the mountain shooting pro snowboarders. We had ACs and support staff to constantly bring us new P2 cards while offloading the others. In this case, we could use the P2 camera to overcrank much of our action sequences at 60 fps, something the V1U is only capable of doing in short bursts. We designated one HVX-200 to shoot everything at 60 fps so we could then choose in post what to ramp back to regular speed.

For larger shoots with shot lists and less run and gun, I prefer to use a Panasonic Varicam or Sony F950. These cameras have larger chips and interchangeable lenses that create a more film-like shallow depth of field with a less compressed image. To really utilize the camera's quality, you need a solid zoom lens or 35mm film lens adapter. For a new batch of action toy commercials for Razor USA, I'm shooting on the Varicam with the P+S Technik adapter that allows 35mm film lenses. The end look of

"I'VE HAD A STRONG PERSONAL DRAW TO THE STUNT COMMUNITY SINCE I BEGAN MY CAREER IN ACTION SPORTS. STURTMEN HAVE AN INCREDIBLE WAY OF SHOWIN GUP TO A SHOOT WITH THE BEST ATTITUDE, DOING AN AMAZING JOB AND GOING HOME WITHOUT EVER GETTING THE CREDIT..."



