

Cycling Snapshot: An Interview with Cycling Photographer Jonathan McElvery

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By: Charlie Issendorf

Jonathan McElvery has been taking bicycle racing pictures for the past decade and his photos have graced the covers of VeloNews. RaceListings.com caught up with the man behind the lens for this exclusive interview. We also included three of Jonathan's all-time favorite pictures and why he likes them.

Tell us your background in cycling and photography?

I've never raced bicycles though I did a fair number of running events and biathlons (duathlons as they are now called) toward the end of the 80s. My brother (Richard) had raced a number of years, and that coupled with an interest in photography got the wheel rollin' for shooting races. Showing up at my brother's races and 'shooting' (while not really knowing what I was doing, and what was really going on within the race), was a casual activity, and the race was just another victim. My brother made me aware of VeloNews and the newly formed RIDE Magazine to contribute to, and the seed was planted. Being totally self taught, the evolution of improving the images was a slow one, but that strong interest/desire to improve never waned. I would have to mark the 'official' start of my shooting races as the 1992 Fitchburg Longsjo when Mark Riordan asked me to 'officially' shoot the event. This happened to be Lance Armstrong's sole appearance at Fitchburg.

Do you have an all-time favorite road race or criterium you like to photograph?

There is no doubt that my favorite race was the Thrift Drug Classic in Pittsburgh. Unfortunately this race no longer exists. My in-laws are from the Pittsburgh area, and combined with the race, made for a fine trip (honestly!). This backdrop of Pittsburgh from their Mt. Washington, and the repeated most grueling climb up Sycamore Street (making Manyunk seem flat from my perspective) offered a shooter splendid opportunities. Tied in, time-wise, with the USPro Championship and series brought a great field of riders. It was great to see Frank McCormack win what turned out to be the final one of these races. It would also have been great to shoot at my current capability for I was still on the early side of my never-ending learning curve. Ahhh, the workout I could have had with the ladder!

For existing races (I generally stick to the Northeast for the road scene), this is a hard call. NYC has a different look for its tall buildings, but due to the crowds and security, there is less flexibility from the shooting perspective, and the USPro has a lot of character along with another impressive urban back-drop. This is a hard question to answer, but the most appealing races are the ones that draw a huge Pro, 1, 2 field, and a big crowd. I am (in my opinion) not a pushy person, so the races with a large press contingent can take away from a race being appealing to me...

You have a real passion for cyclo-cross as evidenced by your yearly trip to the World Cyclo-Cross Championships. Tell us why you like to shoot 'cross races so much.

I think cyclo-cross is such a great sport. It is very course accessible, plenty of shooting opportunities (except at places like Belgium for the World Championships!), quite often found with much character (mud, snow, rain...), and a casual and friendly atmosphere (misery loves company?). With New England having a huge chunk of the best in the U.S. and with a distance reachable, full schedule of events, how can it not be appealing?

In Europe, you will sometimes see photographers getting too close to the action and in some cases photographers on motorcycles have actually caused crashes. What's your feelings on the fine line between doing your job and affecting the outcome of a race.



First of all, rider safety is paramount, and there should be no way that any form of the press should affect the outcome of a race, otherwise it should be prohibited.

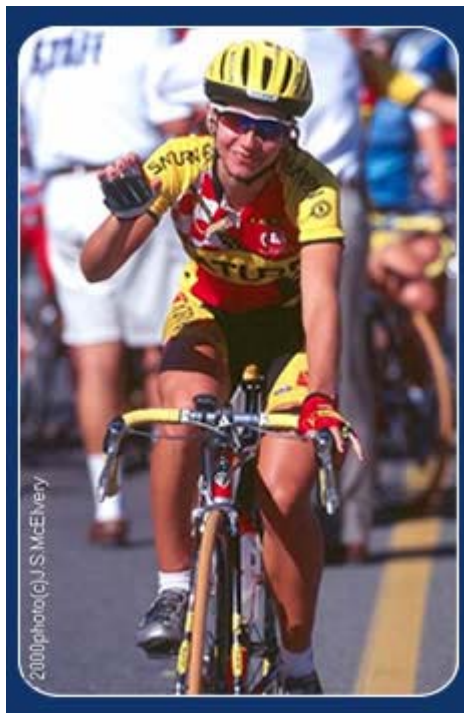
Most of the races I shoot don't really warrant a motorcycle that needs to be a foot or two from the rider, and I have to say I am not the most comfortable with this. Most of the races in the NE have either multiple laps or a large single loop with smaller finishing loops (as John Eustice does with the Tour of Connecticut and the Uninvest Grand Prix), such that a scenic with the peloton or break group is the desired image on the road, and is the hardest image to find and do well. These scenics can be done from the side of the road (scouting vantage points prior to the race, and prior experience on the same course helps finding these spots). This, coupled with some finishing loops allowing one to tightly shoot the GC or potential winner usually providing an adequate supply of images. I am aware that I occasionally get very tight to the riders on a curve or straightaway. As long as one does not exceed the bounds (tough call to make at times), and one does not make any unpredictable moves, there should be no problem. An awareness of how much a rider can lean into a curve should be observed closely beforehand.

It does seem as though some of the video cameramen are now getting a little too tight for that upward peering wide angle perspective. I do believe that most of the cameramen at the big races are competent enough to not affect the race, and a greater image impact (both still and video) does help the sport. Anytime there is a greater occurrence of interaction between the press and moving riders, there is a greater risk for accident, but this does not necessarily mean one should ban the press, but a predetermined level of photographer/video/moto driver competence needs to have been observed, and a limited number of these individuals be allowed. It is the guy who has never been so close to a race before, or that does not know the sport that we need to be concerned about.

Is there a strong market for a cycling photographers? Can a promoter hire you to shoot his race?

In my opinion, there is not a big market in the U.S. for cycling photographers. There is a limited demand for images, and to make a living solely off this is tough. In my opinion, for the U.S. road cycling scene, Casey Gibson is the only true full-time U.S. road cycling photographer. Most likely due to Europe's thriving thirst for cycling, there are a few more true photographers in Europe, most notably Graham Watson. A lot of travel certainly would be necessary to make ends meet. I do have an unrelated full-time job that pays the majority of my bills that limits my time.

I do have a busy enough schedule, and for the majority of events of shoot, I shoot them without being hired. I can be hired, but it would have to fit into the schedule, and there would be a charge.



Nicole Reinhart. One of the most tragic days I've experienced. This is Nicole being introduced at her final race, and the acknowledgement from her was a very quick wave. With her being the sole woman rider capable of winning the series' prize,



Richard Groendendaal at 'cross Worlds. As I have said, individuals in action generally would not make my list, but if I had to choose one, here it is. Part of the reason is that it made the cover of VeloNews. It was a weekend that I had the flu (the

and having an improbable tragedy happen to her, that the odds seemingly suggest a meaning somehow or somewhere... I don't know. Just remember Nicole Reinhart.

only time in my life that I can remember having the flu), and this was taken from a point on the course that was not an intended location; the leaders happen to be coming by at a point of time when I was trying to make it elsewhere. Sometimes it is the spontaneous image that turns out to be the best, and not the one intended.

Technical question – do you have a favorite camera and do you shoot film or digital?

Shooting races encourages me to shoot 35mm, though I did tinker quite a bit with the medium format cameras as I was wallowing around on the learning curve in the early/mid 90s. It is the speed of the 35mm (and the autofocus on the longer lenses) that gives the edge over the earlier cameras and other format cameras. I currently tend to shoot primarily manual focus and manual exposure with lenses shorter than 300mm, though.

Now we get to the trend in society that I personally am not favorable to, and that is shooting digital. I shoot exclusively film (primarily Provia 100 slide film). I see the virtue and value to the availability of the image that can be sent around the World in a very short time, and the quality of the images that come out of the high end digital cameras are more than adequate for most needs, but I consider the digital image as too temporary and too intangible, and too easily lost or discarded. Though film does not last forever, an accumulating storage of digitized images will never keep up with the changing technology of data storage, and within a relatively short period of time, many/the majority of images will not readily be viewable from the medium they are stored upon, and permanently lost from forgetfulness and too little time/expense. If the idea is to have an image solely for the present, digital images are fine, but somehow I desire to attach a permanence, or a record of a point in time, to my images. I have no problem with scanning slides or film. As I have said before, I may do more real black-and-white before I go digital. I cannot keep up with turnaround time that is offered with digital cameras (this then encourages publications to tighten deadlines that I cannot meet with film), so I may need to offer a different perspective of cycling photography.

If an aspiring photographer wants to take pictures at a major event like U.S. Pro Championships, what type of credentials do they need?

Certainly experience in shooting races, and an affiliation with a publication or on-line cycling/sports news site is basically what you need.

What advice do you have for other photographers looking to photograph bicycle races?

Head out to the races, and shoot. There are plenty of races to have easy access to in the U.S. The Fitchburg Longsjo in the Northeast provides a great example with its large fields and ample opportunity to shoot a variety of situations. Certainly a passion to photograph the sport is a must, but there needs to be plenty of experience for that expertise. I believe cycling is one of those sports that need the practice of shooting, and that the first many rounds of images are not going to provide one with very satisfying results. With a lot of the current photo equipment providing great exposures and auto-focus capability, such that most novices can shoot a decently sharp and exposed image, the way to get noticed is to look for that unique perspective or that creative/artsy look; don't always do as everyone else does. Though it helps to have the biggest or widest lens, a good mechanical camera with standard lenses can provide for some great images... and this comes with creativity. This is what I need to do, and there is no end to finding that other look.

It is tough to get affiliated with publications, so my advice to get noticed is to send images to the on-line cycling sites. Hack photos will be noticed without awe, but those that stand out from the rest will certainly be recognized, and time and effort will provide the rest.

To see more of Jonathan's pictures [click here](#)

Want to see someone interviewed on RaceListings.com? Send me an email. You can reach Charlie Issendorf online at charlie@racelistings.com.