

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

June 11, 2007

Corking the camera

Filed under: [baseball, quotes](#) — alecsothblog @ 8:09 am

I'm a sucker for a good sports metaphor. The last two nights I've hung out with [Todd Deutsch](#). Maybe because Todd is a baseball fan and Little League dad, I'm in the mood for a good baseball analogy. Batting, it seems to me, is a lot like photography. Whether you are a slugger like Gursky or a contact hitter like Ervitt, the rules of hitting are mostly the same. Perhaps these tips from [Jack Aker](#) might also apply to photography:

- Have no fear — in order to hit you must stay in the box at a distance from the plate from which you can hit any pitch in the strike zone.
- Have a balanced stance — if you are not comfortable and relaxed in the box, you will tighten up, which will keep you from swinging quickly and smoothly.
- Keep your eye on the ball — this is not just a cliché. Try to see the ball while it is still in the pitcher's hand, and follow it all the way to the plate. Try to see your bat hit the ball. When you take a pitch, or don't swing, watch the ball all the way into the catcher's mitt.
- Grip the bat loosely — your fingers and hands should not tighten up on the bat until you are actually starting your swing. If you squeeze the bat while awaiting the pitch, you will tighten up your arms and shoulders and you won't be as quick with your swing.
- Don't overswing — if you are thinking only about hitting home runs, your swing will be out of control, and you will probably pull your head away and take your eye off the ball. The result — you'll strike out. Think only of making sharp contact and putting the ball into play.
- Learn the strike zone — although a few pitches which are just out of the strike zone may be hit for base hits, most of your safeties will come on pitches which are in your strike zone. Every batter's strike zone is different. Learn your strike zone. Be patient and swing at strikes only.

Or maybe photography is more like flyfishing. I've always loved this quote from Stephen Shore's 1982 edition of *Uncommon Places*:

Color film is wonderful because it shows not only the intensity but the color of light. There is so much variation in light between noon one day and the next, between ten in the morning and two in the afternoon. A picture happens when something inside connects, an experience that changes as the photographer does. When the picture is there, I set out the 8×10 camera, walk around it, get behind it, put the hood over my head, perhaps move it over a foot, walk in front, fiddle with the lens, the aperture, the shutter speed. I enjoy the camera. Beyond that it is difficult to explain the process of photographing except by analogy:

The trout streams where I flyfish are cold and clear and rich in the minerals that promote the growth of stream life. As I wade a stream I think wordlessly of where to cast the fly. Sometimes a difference of inches is the difference between catching a fish and not. When the fly I've cast is on the water my attention is riveted to it. I've found through experience that whenever- or so it seems – my attention wanders or I look away then surely a fish will rise to the fly and I will be too late setting the hook. I watch the fly calmly and attentively so that when the fish strikes – I strike. Then the line tightens, the playing of the fish begins, and time stands still. Fishing, like photography, is an art that calls forth intelligence, concentration, and delicacy.

Or maybe photography is like cricket. The fantastic photographer [Trent Parke](#) (who just opened a show at the [Alice Austen House Museum](#) on Staten Island) is also a former professional cricket player. When I see Trent next week, I'll ask him if he has any good cricket tips to pass along.

22 Comments

1. I can't write about baseball without using photography metaphors.

Comment by [mdm](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [8:51 am](#)

2. I like this

Comment by [Danny G](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [9:15 am](#)

3. All this talk about fishing makes me think about the best book ever; "Troutfishing in America", by Richard Brautigan. A friend of my dad's bought the book in the 70's thinking it was about, well, fishing, and uh, in a sense, it is, kind-of. But the friend thought my dad would like it better and gave it to him. When I moved out of home I asked my father (who's a language teacher) to lend me all the books that one HAS to read, and Troutfishing in America was one of them. It changed my life forever it the best way anything has changed me ever has. Thanks for making me remember that.

Comment by [Olle](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [10:38 am](#)

4. I am both a photographer and a flyfisher. I've never consciously understood the connection before. Stephen Shore's quote make it perfectly clear for me.

Comment by [Bill Gotz](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [10:51 am](#)

5. The baseball analogy fit perfect into a conversation I had with a non-photo friend last week. He questioned the purpose of <http://www.myfinalphoto.com> where I display a photo from the daily regimen of shooting, even self-assigned when I don't have a client or editorial assignment. "If I died in my sleep, this is it" is the mantra.

He better understood my purpose when I explained my daily requirement is just like a professional ball player going to the batting cage every day to both maintain his current skill level and see what the results might be from slight changes in his batting style. A heavier bat, changed hand positions, faster (or slower) pitches, more exotic pitches or learning to consistently push a ball into right field increase his skill level and prepare him for the moment when something happens that he hasn't yet experienced in game action.

There still may be surprises but that's better discussed under the heading of serendipity, which is better handled when you've practiced to expect the unexpected.

Comment by [Gary Gardiner](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [11:13 am](#)

6. "The more I practice, the luckier I get"

Gary Player.

Comment by [Robert Phillips](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [11:41 am](#)

7. Baseball is my favorite sport because it is mostly concerned with failure. If you hit the ball three out of ten times, you are a very very good ballplayer. The majority of the time you miss. If one out of ten pictures is worth printing, you are probably a very good photographer.

Comment by [Dylan](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [12:38 pm](#)

8. To add to Olle's book recommendation, its interesting that my 2 favorite books are about fly fishing and baseball, 2 things that don't really excite me. They are brilliant reads; "The River why" and "The Brothers K" both form David James Duncan. They have both been pivotal in my last 2

photographic escapades and both use the said topics as metaphors for anything spiritual, which can be photography or knitting or fishing or even baseball.

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it"

Yogi Berra

Comment by [Andrew Phelps](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [12:52 pm](#)

9. photography is photography is photography. a miracle unto itself. It is not fly fishing, poetry, sculpture, baseball or tactile even if borrows their languages and metaphors.
all hail photography!

Comment by [David G](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [2:04 pm](#)

10. Coming from a guy who photographs his sculptures and makes thick, juicy fiber prints, I have to take David Goldes' words with a grain of salt. Sorry, just grain. Pure photographic grain.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [2:13 pm](#)

11. Many things changed for me
when I read this quote from
a film director (Cassavetes?):

"In order to hit the ball
you have to want to hit the ball."

Comment by [Uncle D](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [5:08 pm](#)

12. As for cricket, someone could adapt Tom Stoppard's cricket bat speech from "The Real Thing" to photography. But what I want to share with you apropos of Shore's wonderful analogy of photography to flyfishing (and all the recent talk here about grain) is this ecstatic passage from Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It." It's about the sight of his brother flycasting in "big Rainbow water":
"Below him was the multitudinous river, and, where the rock had parted it around him, big-grained vapor rose. The mini-molecules of water left in the wake of his line made momentary loops of gossamer, disappearing so rapidly in the rising big-grained vapor that they had to be retained in memory to be visualized as loops. The spray emanating from him was finer-grained still and enclosed him in a halo of himself. The halo of himself was always there and always disappearing, as if he were candlelight flickering about three inches from himself. The images of himself and his line kept disappearing into the rising vapors of the river, which continually circled to the tops of the cliffs where, after becoming a wreath in the wind, they became rays of the sun."

Comment by [Alan Thomas](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [5:17 pm](#)

13. You should not do it every night [play football]
View quotes by Gianluca Vialli.....

Comment by [Mark Page](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [3:06 am](#)

14. "When a [Samurai] warrior killed himself, he needed an assistant who would finish the job by cutting his head off. The task was always left to a trusted and highly skilled swordsman, because this had to be done with one clean, perfect stroke. If the stroke was not perfect, the result would be a horrible mess. I approached the task of hitting a baseball in the same manner."

Sadahuru Oh

Comment by [kevin](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [6:54 am](#)

15. oops. should be SadahAru. guess i'm gonna go get my head chopped.

Comment by [kevin](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [8:08 am](#)

16. Like Trente I'm a photographer and former / lapsed cricketer. There is a commentator in the UK who refers to bowling a ball in a certain area known as the the 'corridor of uncertainty'. I try and photograph there at least once a week.

Comment by [dan banda lee](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [10:05 am](#)

17. When I was 11, I was utterly, incurably addicted to baseball, and to earn my weekly allowance I had to clean my dad's photo studio. That year, while I was supposed to be cleaning, I read a biography of Sadaharu Oh, in which he recounted his own training regimen for perfecting his swing: dressed only in his traditional Japanese skivvies, he would hang a strip of wet rice paper on a wire from the ceiling. With a samurai sword, he would cut 1" off the bottom of the paper with each swing; of course, were his swing not perfectly level and precise, the paper would cling to the blade and tear. I thought this was the coolest thing I had ever heard of.

I wonder whether this story is apocryphal, and whether any nimble mind out there can somehow relate it back to photography...as for me, I still save all my spiritual speculation for the baseball diamond, and my time in the studio I try to keep pragmatic...

Comment by [Nick](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [1:16 pm](#)

18. Interesting. I've also seen the use of tennis metaphors often compared to the arts. And off the subject, Mr. Soth, it was nice seeing one of your prints in the newest Adbusters edition, as well as Brian Ulrich's.

Comment by [Christine](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [2:39 pm](#)

19. This thread reminds me of a book my father gave me for Christmas some years back: "Baseball's Golden Age: The Photographs of Charles M. Conlon." Conlon photographed the game of baseball for the first four decades of the twentieth century, primarily for The Sporting News. The book collects Conlon's quite stunning baseball portraits, none of which are as well known as one of his "action shots": [this iconic image of Ty Cobb sliding spikes first into third](#). Apropos of this discussion, of baseball metaphors and photography metaphors, both of which are steeped in a good measure of luck and chance. Here's how Conlon later recalled securing that famous photo:

"THE STRANGE thing about that picture of Ty Cobb stealing third at the Hilltop grounds of the Yankees — a picture which has been reproduced hundreds of times, and still is being bought from me — was that I did not know I had snapped it. That season the Tigers won the pennant again. Late in the summer, Cobb, who stole 76 bases that season, was going like a tornado. I was off third, chatting with Jimmy Austin, third baseman for the New York club. Cobb was on second, with one out, and the hitter was trying to bunt him to third. Austin moved in for the sacrifice. As Jimmy stood there, Cobb started. The fans shouted. Jimmy turned, backed into the base, and was greeted by a storm of dirt, spikes, shoes, uniforms — and Ty Cobb. "My first thought was that my friend, Austin, had been injured. When Cobb stole, he STOLE. Spikes flew and he did not worry where. I saw Ty's clenched teeth, his determined look. "The catcher's peg went right by Jimmy, as he was thrown on his face. I went home kicking myself. I said, 'Now, there was a great picture and you missed it.' I took out my plates and developed them. There was Cobb stealing third. In my excitement, I had snapped it, by instinct. The picture was not printed the next day. It did not appear until the Spalding guide came out the following spring and has since been published in more than a thousand papers."

Note: Excerpt from column by Charley Conlon. The Sporting News May 27, 1937.

Comment by [drew Levy](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [3:32 pm](#)

20. In Germany everybody knows the following soccer wisdoms by legendary German Bundestrainer Sepp Herberger

- "The soccer ball is round."
- "The next opponent is the most difficult."
- "A match lasts 90 minutes."
- "After the match is before the match."
- "The fastest player is the ball."

Comment by [matias aguilar](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [6:24 pm](#)

21. Excellent analogy, and much of that advice could have been gleaned from another sport that was not mentioned here, though the use of words like "shoot" to describe picture taking makes it a natural analogy: sharpshooting or target shooting. All those skills you learn at the range could easily be transferred to the realm of photography.

Comment by [Jon Anderson](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [11:50 am](#)

22. Sometimes I feel like I'm fly fishing with a baseball bat.

Comment by [Jeff Ladd](#) — June 14, 2007 @ [10:39 am](#)