Photographing High School Basketball

Welcome to my write up on shooting high school basketball for the Fred Miranda Sports Corner. This write up is intended to assist those who are having problems with shooting in low light high school gyms or starting to shoot high school level basketball. We will cover the basics on equipment, where to shoot from, what to look for, contacts, and the basics of a small strobe set up and shooting for sales or shooting for media.

It varies from school to school, school district to school district and state to state on who is allowed to shoot from courtside. So, let’s start this with contacts.

Permission:

This can be as easy as you want or as difficult as you want. Unless you are working for a paper, you never want to just show up and start shooting from the baseline or setting up strobes. You need to make contact with someone. If you want to sell photos to parents, the first person you need to contact is the Booster Club president. You will probably be asked to come to a booster meeting to make a proposal, so be prepared. If you are shooting freelance for a newspaper, either they will get you permission or issue you a media pass. Some smaller schools/districts/towns will not have a media pass and your camera is your access, but it is better to obtain the permission than to just show up expecting to shoot. Contact the school’s athletic director for information on obtaining access. Be sure to let them know you are shooting for media only. If you are shooting for yourself, you may have to shoot from the stands. With the level of play the kids are at these days, and the regulations some leagues have, you may be faced with NCAA D1 or NBA type restrictions. Again, contact the Athletic Director and tell him what you want to do and see if he will grant you access.

Preparing to Shoot:

Knowledge of the game is key. If you have no idea what to expect, you will not capture “the” images. If you are unaware of the rules, head to the book store and read as much as you can. Watch games on TV; learn about the game. This will help you understand what is going on and anticipate what is going to happen.

When preparing to go to a game, you need to look at what gear you have and decide what you really need to take with you. Do you know if you must keep your bag with you at all times, or will there be a place you can safely put your bag while shooting? Think about the kind of shots you are looking for and what lenses you will need to get those shots. Is the gym dark, bright, mixed lighting, etc? These things will dictate what you need to take. The basic high school basketball kit would contain the following:

Camera
Short fast lens (50mm 1.8 or 24-70 2.8)
Midrange fast lens (85mm 1.8 or 70-200 2.8)
Batteries
Memory Cards
This is the bare essentials.

My typical kit for ambient light shooting is as follows:
2 camera bodies
50mm 1.8
70-200 2.8
Hand held light meter
4 gigs of memory cards
Portable hard drive

Notice I said ambient light shooting? If I am going to shoot with strobes, my kit gets a lot larger. Along with what I have listed above, I add:
300mm f4
17-40 f4
3 strobe lights
3 clamps or light stands
Extension cords
Safety cables
Radio Slaves
Gaffers Tape
Multi-tool

And when I am shooting for a booster club, add to that list:
1 or 2 laptop computers
Business cards
Signs
Promotional prints for display

As you can see, you can easily go out shooting with less than 10 pounds of gear or you could end up lugging over 100 pounds. Knowing what gear you will need is critical. When you put together your kit, start with only the things you know you will need. Then add the gear you think you might use or want to try to use. If you have something you do not think you will use, then do not take it.

When choosing a camera body—even if you are going to strobe—it is a good idea to find one that will handle high ISO shooting and has high frames-per-second capability. When strobes are used, you can shoot lower ISO, but you shoot at one frame a second or slower. But if your strobes fail or you shoot ambient light, you want something that will deliver acceptable results at ISO 800-3200 and having 5 to 8 FPS can help ensure you capture the peak moment. Also, AF capabilities are an important feature to look for. A camera that will not offer continuous AF or has slow AF performance will not work as well as a camera that focuses fast and accurately in low light situations.

Another factor for choosing a camera is the lens choices. Some manufacturers have lenses
that will cover every possible situations, and some have less of a choice of lenses. Some lenses will cost a lot more than the same offering from another camera company. Keep this in mind when choosing a body. Make sure you can get the focal length and low light lenses from that camera company.

When choosing lenses for basketball, the faster the better. When most people say fast lens, they are talking about aperture only. “That Canon 85mm 1.2 lens is so fast.” Well yes, and no. A f1.2 will allow you to shoot in some of the darkest gyms out there, but is it fast enough when it focuses? No. You can manual focus with it and most other lenses (remember, basketball was being photographed long before auto focus was introduced) But today’s cameras are not designed for full time MF, so it can be harder to continually manual focus action than with older film cameras. When selecting lenses you want something that has a fast shooting aperture, in the f1.4 to f2.8 range, and something that will focus quickly and accurately. Probably the three most popular lenses for high school basketball are the 85mm f1.8, 24-70 f2.8 and the 70-200 f2.8. However, there are some great lenses within the focal length you want for basketball. From 16mm up to 300mm you can get lenses that focus quickly, and have fast apertures from f1.8 to f2.8, depending on the lens and how much you want to spend.

To help select what gear you may want to use, here is a basic rundown on focal lengths and where these focal lengths usually work best:

16mm to 40-50mm—As close to the basket as possible on the baseline.
50mm-85mm—From outside the key to about half way to the side line.
100mm to 200mm—From the baseline/sideline intersection. Great for tight shots and shooting to mid court.
300mm—Cross court action and tight game portraits. The 300mm is typically on a second body and not used nearly as often as your main camera lens combo.

**Meters:**

Camera meters work just how they are suppose to. They read the scene and give you exposure readings based on what is in the metering zone. Some gyms may turn out the side lights (over the bleachers) and if suddenly your background is dark, your exposure may not read correctly. That is why I highly recommend a hand-held meter. By using a hand-held meter and taking readings of the light falling on the playing surface, and shooting in your camera’s manual mode, you ensure that the exposure is correct and you do not have to worry about the camera thinking the scene is to dark or too bright and adjust the exposure to a unwanted setting.

**Odds and Ends:**

Be prepared. Have a small screwdriver (eyeglasses style), multi tool, tape, travel sized Kleenex, a small notebook, hand sanitizer, band aids, batteries, extra memory or a digital wallet/portable hard drive, lens cleaning supplies, and your camera manual with you in your bag.

**White Balance:**

I will not go into how to set white balance (WB). But I will say, it is important to set WB
whether you are shooting JPEG or RAW formats. Getting the correct WB will ease your post-game workflow and yield nicer images straight out of the camera. Use what will work for you to set WB. If AWB or one of the preset WB’s were perfect, why would camera companies bother to give you the option to set a Custom WB? Because, like camera light meters, they are not perfect.

Shooting Locations:
High school gyms are usually small. When compared to a NCAA or Pro arena which will have dozens of access points to the arena, high school gyms typically will have one, maybe two entrances and they are usually located directly behind the hoops. Also, a lot of times bleachers will be almost right up to the court. Do not place yourself directly in the line of site of a fan watching the game.

Unlike NCAA and Pro basketball, in High School, you have the ability to move around more and even stand if there are no bleachers behind you. I personally recommend shooting from a seated or kneeling position. It is a good habit to get into, especially if you start shooting at higher levels of play (State tournaments, NCAA or Pro). If you stand at a pro event, you will be pulled down to a seated position and you may not be treated well by fellow photographers. Also, if you do stand and move around, be aware of your surroundings. Make sure you are not blocking anyone’s view or getting in the way of referees or players.

Baseline is the main place to shoot from. From either side of the basket, just outside the key, to the sidelines. You want to be about 3-5 feet back from the baseline to allow the referee room to do his job and room for out of bounds plays. This position sets you up for plays at and around the basket. Lay ups, rebounds, fast breaks, steals all are great from this location. But be prepared. You will have referees get in your way or the action take place out
of your view or you may just miss it entirely. That is the way it goes; you can not capture every single play. If you try to capture everything, you will probably miss more action than if you let it simply come to you.

Another place to shoot from that offers an interesting perspective is from the stands. If you are photographing a team with a lot of jumpers, get a line of site with the hoop from eye level in the bleachers and shoot from with a longer lens. 200mm to 300mm will give you some great captures of dunks, rebounds and blocked shots from this vantage point.

Lastly, the sidelines. Usually this is not a place you can shoot from. A lot of gyms have bleachers that come almost to the court on one side, and the teams and scorers table will be on one side. When shooting from the sidelines, you are really limited to defense and mid court action. This is only a place I will shoot from if I need to get a specific shot of a player.

What To Look For:

When shooting a action sport that involves a ball, having the ball in frame is key. When shooing from the baseline, if your lens choice allows it, have the ball handler/shooter fully in frame. Try not to cut feet, hands or legs off of your main subject. Include the ball, and if at all possible, try to get part of the goal in frame. Even if it is just the bottom portion of the net at the top right hand corner of the frame, it will be a much stronger photo. It gives the viewer a sense of where the player is going. When shooting tighter with a longer lens, frame your shots so when you do cut part of the subjects limbs off, you are not cutting them off at the joints. A shot of a player from thigh up or waist up will be a much stronger image than one from the knees up. Do not worry about other players loosing body parts in your capture as long as your subject is framed properly. There will be hands and bodies flying all over, so you will most likely have a hand missing here or a arm coming out of the side of the frame. As long as your subject is there, do not worry.

Additional Lighting:

So, you still have light issues? You have fast lenses, you have a great camera with great ISO performance, but you are still suffering from lack of light. Some sort of strobe set up is your next option. The first thing you need to find out is if you will be able to strobe. Some schools allow it, some do not, so talk to the coaches during a practice or contact the school and ask the Athletic Director. Once you have permission to use strobes, do not run out an buy any, or head off to the gym to try them out. DO NOT USE A STROBE SET UP UNLESS YOU ARE INSURED. If you do not have at least a million dollar policy, do not even bother thinking about using strobes. On-camera flash, maybe--if it is allowed--but not strobes. If you have a light stand fall or a bulb burst and shatter all over fans or players, well, lets just say, protect yourself prior to endangering others. Take every precaution to protect players, fans and others.

If using on-camera flash, adjust your settings to give you the best image. Do not expect to shoot with on camera flash and drop your ISO from 1600 down to 400. In fact, I would suggest leaving your ISO at 1600 and set your flash to manual and 1/64th power. This will allow your flash to recycle fast, and just add enough pop to your images to make the colors pop. If you approach shooting basketball with flash as you would approach normal flash photography, you will get harsh shadows on the walls behind the players, red eye, and flat looking images. I have had some success with bouncing the flash off of the wall behind me,
and if you have an off camera cord or wireless set up, you might want to think about setting your flash on a monopod and holding it (or have a assistant hold it) above your camera by a few feet. This will help reduce the shadows and reduce the flat look of flash.

Strobes on light stands. You need at least 13 foot light stands from court level. Sand bag these because they will get top heavy. Tape down extension cords and safety chain your strobes and radio receivers to the light stand. Not using light stands? However you mount them, make sure that they are tethered with some sort of safety device so they will not fall.

Typically a two strobe set up is all you need. You will have to decide what works best for you. You can use inexpensive radio transmitters to trigger battery-pack powered flashes and you can be up and running for under a couple hundred dollars. Or, you can use full-blown pro-level strobe set ups that can run you a few thousand dollars or more. I will not tell you what strobes to look for because you need to choose what would work for you and your shooting. The main factor in choosing strobes though is flash duration. A strobe that has a long duration (say 1/200th) will show motion blur, where as a strobe that flashes at 1/1250th of a second will freeze your subject when shooting at the cameras X-Sync setting.

That is all I will talk about on strobes. There are many online resources from various places that will offer more insight if you choose to go the strobe route.

**Shooting for Media or Sales:**

If shooting for a newspaper, the best two pieces of advice I can give you is, make sure your photo tells a story and think high contrast. There is the possibility that your photo could be reproduced in black and white for a newspaper, so having a high contrast photo will translate to black and white better. Do not go overboard however. A photo with too much contrast is not always good. So, if you are shooting a team with black uniforms in a gym that has a darkish background (lights off in the bleacher area), position yourself so your subject does not loose their uniform into the darkness of the background. Also, think about composition. If a player is making an ordinary lay-up with no one else around, it makes for a pretty boring news photo. But if you capture a thunderous dunk with a defender in the way or a player blocking a shot with the shooter in frame, or jubilation images after a big play, those shots make for more of a news-worthy shot.

Also, watch the backgrounds. Distracting backgrounds can make an editor chose a different photo to run. If the stands are full and the crowd is into the game, great, but if they are half empty or no one in the background is paying attention, move to a different shooting location if possible. Also, be sure you have a team line up or roster. When submitting to a newspaper, you will need the player’s name, game score, stats, etc. I suggest picking up the AP books on writing and photography. They will help greatly when shooting for news and writing captions.

If you are shooting for sales to parents and students, you want a good mix of great action shots and nice tight game portraits. Parents love to get photos of their kids, so you want to be sure to have their faces sharp and be on the watch for little things. Maybe the kid is playing against someone he is best friends with, or maybe it is his last game and there will be a special presentation. Watch for these things. You will be amazed at what you might think is a plain, boring shot, no action, no substance, will be the shot parents want printed poster size.
**Communication:**

This is very important on all levels of shooting, but I want to end this write up by discussing communication. Communication is a very important tool that can get overlooked. If you are a media shooter, communicating with your paper to find out if they want a specific shot, communicating with the school to locate areas to shoot from and not to shoot from, talking to the scorers to get line ups and stats (point totals, fouls, etc) and even chatting with the refs (when appropriate), can make for a more enjoyable outing and make your next time out even more productive.

On the booster side, talking to players when you possible (after games, before games, even when at the grocery store) will help give you feedback on what they think of your images, and they might even give you some ideas on shots they might like to see. Talking to parents is also a plus. While they may seem to want to talk to you at the most inopportune times, they are your main customer, so you do not want to blow them off. You might even get some tips on things to look for (number 30 on the other team is Steve's cousin, so if you can get a shot of them together on the floor during the game, I know you will sell at least 2 or 3), or you might find out that the kid has just signed or is signing with a D1 college and you could see extra revenue coming from shots of him. So many things can be going on that if you just come in, shoot and leave, you could miss out on a lot of shots that you might sell.

In closing, let me retouch on what I said early on in this write up. Basketball is a fast paced sport and you will NOT get every possible play captured. Focus on the images that come to you in your chosen shooting location and do not worry about shots you might miss. Have a game plan and stick. Shoot from one location for the first quarter, then move to another for the second quarter. Sit in the bleachers for the 3rd quarter, and get as close to the hoop for the 4th quarter. For example, you could be sitting at the baseline/sideline corner on the bleacher side, and all the action seems to be taking place on the opposite side of the court, out of your range or view. As soon as you get up and move to where the action was, the action could suddenly be right in front of your original shooting location. It happens. You may have a game that you have a handful of images you think are good, and the next game you will have 50 or 60. Learn each time you go out what works for you and what does not work for you and use that new found knowledge the next time you head out to shoot.

I hope this has been helpful. Good luck.