

Zooming in on your skaters: Hot hints for great rink photography

By *Connie Evener*

When The Rinksider decided to compile the best how-to advice for great photos, we consulted *The Joy of Digital Photography*, the perennial best seller by Jeff Wignall (Lark Books). Then we clicked through dozens of websites with information on digital photography. Three of the best were www.kodak.com, www.basic-digital-photography.com and www.oreilly.com.

With a wealth of general information compiled, it was time to focus in on rink-specific advice, so we reached out, all the way across the Atlantic to Colchester, England, where Dave Byford practices his own unique brand of rink photography. Facebook.com/davebyford includes 150 separate albums. Search "Rollerworld Skaters (Colchester)" on Face Book, and you'll find thousands of photographs, plus a loyal following of 1,000 fans. Here's what Byford told us:

You don't need expensive equipment...

Byford started taking photos at Roller World two years ago with a 3 megapixel camera. He uses a camera that will shoot from 5 to 12 megapixels now, but thinks he sometimes got better results with the old camera. "Actually a small hand-held camera is better," said Byford. "People

feel threatened and don't like having a long lens pointed at them."

What it comes down to is that more megapixels means higher resolution. For example, if you want an 8 X 10 print, you'll need at least 400 dpi (dots per inch), or 4 megapixels. To produce publication quality 3 X 5 prints for The Rinksider, you'll need 300 dpi, or 3 megapixels. The resolution required for web sites, e-mail, and other online applications is, according to a consensus of digital photography sites, only 72 dpi.

You don't need to be an ace sports photographer...

Ninety-nine percent of your skaters won't be interested in athletic daredevil stop-action shots. They're interested in seeing faces. They're interested in seeing themselves and their friends and families having fun.

You do need to know your equipment...

Every camera is different. To figure out how yours responds, you'll want to take lots of practice photos at the rink, preferably starting out while it's empty. If you'll be taking shots from the sidelines, set a stationary object where skaters come by to experiment with.

Most digital cameras come with a built-in flash. "Whether it's a cheap camera

or an expensive camera, for this type of photography the flash gun determines the quality of the picture," explained Byford. "Anyone who is taking photographs needs to know the ideal distance for their flash gun."

will be used. Byford has printed a white tee shirt and cards with his contact information and Face Book address on them. When a child asks him to take their picture, he gives them a card and asks them to take it home to their parents to get permission.



"This photo illustrates technique, skating at speed, wide angle lens so very close and me mirroring their skating (sidesurfing) to keep constant distance and at their level. Not easy!" says photographer Dave Byford.

Unless you're using a professional quality camera, shutter lag is another consideration. You push the button, but the camera hesitates for a split second (or more, depending on the camera) while it focuses or finishes processing the last shot. Your moving skater is out of the frame by the time the shutter clicks. Byford's technique is to move the camera at the same speed and in the same direction as that of the skater. But to do that, you have to:

Learn to skate backwards and sideways...

Byford takes photos from the sidelines, but he also loves to get up close and personal. By skating sideways, "I can see where I'm going and where I've come from. I will swing around in front of the person so I'm skating backwards into that open space (in front of them). I've only got a few seconds to compose and take that picture before I swing back around." If there isn't enough time or space, Byford backs off and tries again the next time around because:

Safety is the top priority...

Byford confines his initial photos on the rink to people he knows, and who know he's taking photos. "If that's not happening and I'm by the rink side, I'll fire the flash gun a few times at the ceiling first," he explained. In a dark rink, those distant flashes alert skaters. "And I'm careful to not direct the flash at eye level," he added.

After two years taking photos at Roller World, all the regulars know him and love clowning for him and his camera. But new kids and their parents may be worried about photographs and how they

Face Book, when used wisely, is fantastic, said Byford. "What's brilliant about it is that as soon as a photo goes up and it's tagged with the subjects' names (which the subjects do themselves), all their Face Book friends are notified."

With kids, take photos at their level...

To be at eye level with his shorter subjects, Byford often gets down on his knees, or skates in a squat position, "backwards, forwards or sideways - whichever gets me in line with their movement SAFELY," he explained.

For group or portrait-type shots, the children's photography consultant at www.kodak.com at suggests having kids make funny faces so they'll relax and start generating natural smiles.

Take lots of photos...

Taking photos in a rink is a juggling act: counting off the seconds of clearance, assessing the distance for the flash, getting close enough to fill the frame, composing the photo, and ensuring everyone's safety by staying aware of all the other skaters in the vicinity. It takes practice.

And Byford gets plenty of that. As soon he arrives home (frequently after midnight on a Saturday night), he starts getting messages asking when he's going to put the pictures up on Face Book.

"They actually sit up waiting to text their friends. If I only do a few, I'll get 50 e-mails on Sunday asking where the rest are," said Byford. "They remember every flash of my camera, and I'll get a message asking 'Where is the one you took of Sophie and me?'"

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