

May 2016

Olympic Rugby Champs for 92 Years! Tips for on-site high-volume digital capture

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Recommended Citation

Hurn, Jeff and Schaeffer, Jack (2016) "Olympic Rugby Champs for 92 Years! Tips for on-site high-volume digital capture," *VRA Bulletin*: Vol. 42: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol42/iss2/8>

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Abstract

The digital imaging team at ACT 3 Partners describes the tips and techniques used to capture a special collection of 2000 photographs, negatives, news clippings, medals and other memorabilia on site at the University of California Davis Library.

Keywords

archiving, digital capture, photography, rugby, olympics, news clippings, memorabilia



Olympic Rugby Champs for 92 years!

Tips for on-site high-volume digital capture

If you work in archives, you know they are full of great stories waiting to be unlocked. The legend of Colby “Babe” Slater is one of those stories.

The story goes back a hundred years to the time before World War I. Babe Slater was a student at the University of California at Davis, an up-and-coming agricultural college. The school did not put a lot of emphasis on sports but they were one of the few schools in the country that had a rugby team. Maybe that is because rugby is the kind of rough-and-tumble sport that appealed to big strapping farm boys. Babe became an enthusiastic rugger.

Then World War I intervened and Babe shipped off to Europe. When he returned he stayed active in the sport, playing on community teams. Eventually he was accepted onto the U.S. Olympic Rugby Team and became the team captain in 1924. That year, the games were held in France where the home team was heavily favored to win, but in a stunning upset Babe and the U.S. team won the gold medal. The French fans were so bitterly disappointed, they rioted. Since then, rugby has not been played at the games.

Now in 2016, rugby is being reinstated as an Olympic sport and U.C. Davis wants to celebrate the fact that one of their sports heroes led the team that has been the reigning Gold Medal champion for the last 92 years.

The University's Special Collections team at the Shields Library had received a treasure trove of documents and artifacts from Babe's life. The plan was to digitally capture everything in high resolution, then develop a website to bring the Slater story to the public and showcase the Special Collections archives. With almost two thousand items in the collection, and the summer games looming, the collection team knew they would need outside help and there was no time to waste.

There was one big catch: the collection, with its gold medals, photographs, newspaper clippings, and other memorabilia was considered too fragile and too valuable to leave the University.

The University conducted a rigorous RFP process to find a vendor that could do the digital capture on site and was experienced in capturing the full range of assets, from odd-sized negatives and photographs to bound diaries, posters, and 3D memorabilia. Jack Schaeffer and Jeff Hurn of Act3 Partners were awarded the job.



Tips for high-volume capture

Here are some tips they wanted to offer to those of you who might be faced with a similar challenge.

We learned that the key to achieving both quality and quantity during an on-site capture project comes down to a few key components:

- 1) **Forget flat-bed scanning:** A modern DSLR camera with a 24 megapixel sensor is much more flexible when you have items of varying sizes. It can capture an image in a fraction of a second with rich detail and accurate color.
- 2) **Tether the camera:** We send the camera output directly into a computer running Adobe Lightroom. We can evaluate each shot instantly and add metadata on the spot. Lightroom allows very precise non-destructive manipulation of the RAW format images, and it is a great cataloging program as well.
- 3) **Use a heavy-duty camera stand:** If the project includes objects of widely varying size, you are going to be moving the camera up and down constantly. We use a Swiss-made FOBA stand with precision bearings and counterbalancing, which makes changing position almost effortless.



- 4) **Use professional strobes:** Consumer flashes are fine for small projects but for high-volume work you need professional gear that does not rely on batteries. Our Speedotron studio strobes produce precisely repeatable color over thousands of pops. With cross polarizing filters on the lights and the lens, you avoid glare and get deep rich colors.
- 5) **Use lasers for positioning:** Lasers are sexy, so naturally we try to find a way to involve them. We use a couple of small construction lasers to draw lines on our table surface to indicate the edges of the capture frame. This makes it much easier to quickly and accurately position items in the frame. The strobe flashes are much more powerful than the laser light, so the red lines do not show up in the final images.

In retrospect, the only things we felt we should have added to our gear list were bicycles! They are almost a necessity on campus at U.C. Davis.

With the gear listed above, we were able to capture and catalog almost two thousand items in less than two weeks. Then off-site we exported the images in a variety of formats suitable for both a high-resolution academic archive and a public website.

On a personal note, projects like this are always rewarding because they offer such an intimate view of a life well-lived. Babe Slater went on to be a respected California rancher and a beloved member of his community. The school's award for athletic achievement is named after him. Now with the Summer Olympic Games about to begin, we have a bit of esoteric trivia to impress our friends with: "Who has reigned as the Rugby Gold Medalists for the last 92 years?"

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