

Paul H. Phillips,
Owner of Competitive Image
www.competitiveimage.us



Competitive Image: Taking Sports Photography to New Levels by Becca Hatch

Competitive Image isn't your typical sports photography company. Paul Phillips, Midwest Events Magazine's Senior Photographer, has catapulted his company to the forefront of the industry. His magical photographs grant the viewer a unique, rarely seen inside look at endurance sports, transforming images of effort into art.

In the adept hands of Paul Phillips the camera, when combined with sports, is an auspicious duo. His company is Competitive Image, and his photographs embody Competitive Image's tagline: Capturing the Indomitable Spirit of Sport. Paul's passions for sports and photography combine to create photos full of depth and brilliance. "Indomitable Spirit" is one of the five tenets of Tae Kwon Do, and Paul is a second-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do. So the phrase resonates with him on both personal and professional levels. Not that his work as a professional photographer isn't personal ... it certainly is. His photographs intimately link photographer, subject, and viewer. They are stunning, inspiring and captivating. At times, jaw-dropping.

Midwest Events is one of many publications graced with Paul's photographic presence; his work is far-reaching and Competitive Image's resume is rapidly expanding. He has been internationally published and is a regular contributor to Inside Triathlon, Triathlete Magazine, Velonews, and Ski Racing. In addition, the Competitive Image website (www.competitiveimage.us) has been highlighted in Shutterbug Magazine. He is the lead photographer for the Twin Cities Marathon, Best of the U.S. Triathlon, Get In Gear, Turtleman Triathlon, and the Mora Vasaloppet ski race. He captured the only shots of Barb Lindquist collapsing at the finish of the inaugural Lifetime Fitness Triathlon in 2002. Professional Triathletes Hunter Kemper and Becky Lavelle will soon be using Paul's photos on their websites, and, most recently, Paul and his crew were named lead photographers for the Capitol Square Sprints Cross-Country ski race in Madison, WI in January 2007 and the new ING Georgia Marathon in March.

Competitive Image: a history

Competitive Image was officially established almost five years ago, but its history goes back to many years before that. In 1971, Paul bought his first 35mm camera with his first paycheck as an accountant. Paul reminisces how "taking pictures is what I've always wanted to do when growing up. I loved photography. In my first apartment I had my own dark room." There was about a ten-year gap from the mid-80s to the mid-90s when Paul took a hiatus from shooting, but his free time was never idle; he has been involved in sports for 35 years. Paul swam, raced bicycles, ski raced, and ran before he began studying Tae Kwon Do 8 years ago. He has finished fourteen marathons and was a two-time division winner at the Border to Border ultra-distance triathlon in 1997 and 1998. Paul has done all the distances in an Ironman Triathlon ... just not in the same day, or, as Paul says, "even in the same decade."

Why does Paul gravitate toward shooting endurance sports, like his favorites, nordic skiing and bicycle racing? Paul explains "anybody can walk out the door and do those sports ... but actually racing them takes something more, and to compete at a high level, it truly takes an indomitable spirit - it's what takes you from riding your bike around Lake Harriet to doing an Ironman. Everybody can relate in some way." Then, in 2001, Paul and his son, Jonathan, were spectators at Tour de France. Jonathan looked around at the photographers that were there and told his dad "all you need is a vest that says 'Canon' on it and you could go anywhere!" So, Paul took his son's advice and, thanks to eBay and \$41, showed up at the Professional Cycling Championships in Philadelphia, PA that same year donning a Canon vest. As he recalls, "I got some great photos, and for the first time, I thought, 'I could get published.'" He was able to get media credentials for the first Lifetime Fitness Triathlon in July of 2002 and captured some images that Lifetime is still using to promote the event. Eight weeks later he was internationally published in Triathlete Magazine. Then he shot Ironman Wisconsin, also for Triathlete, and it kept building from there.

Kate Ellis, an elite nordic skier and Paul's Border to Border relay partner, can be credited for naming Competitive Image. Credit is also due to the folks who make up the Competitive Image crew. They include Paul's son Jonathan (currently in his 3rd year of film school at Columbia College in Chicago), Paul's daughter Elizabeth (Paul's Event Coordinator, who makes sure everyone is in place and on time), Kerri Yndestad, Phil Bowen, Matt Moses, Dick Bend, and Steve Crum.



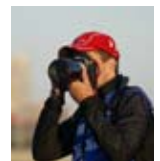
Jonathan Phillips



Dick Bend



Phil Bowen



Kerry Yndestad

How the "competitive image" is achieved

Paul shoots with the state-of-the-art Canon 1D Mark IIN camera that shoots 8 1/2 frames per second. The advent of digital photography has allowed Paul to economically shoot the volumes of photos he needs in order to capture the quality and type of photos he produces today. Paul describes how getting a phenomenal photo is about many things, but is mostly about planning and luck: "While shooting 8 1/2 frames a second is fast, video is at 24 frames per second. I don't shoot continuously; I typically shoot in bursts of between two and five frames. We shot 13,000 images at this year's Twin Cities Marathon (2,400 from the back of the motorcycle), and 7,000 at Best of the U.S. No matter how good you are, no matter how much you plan, no matter how many frames you shoot or what kind of equipment you use, you still have to get lucky, and have the action happen in front of you. But to paraphrase Louis Pasteur, 'luck favors the prepared mind.'"

To capture images of such precision, clarity, and grit, Paul must know both the sport and the race course intimately. He needs to know exactly where to position himself so that the action will unfold in front of him: "In any sport there are moments of power, moments of grace, and often transitional moments that look so bizarre that they shouldn't be captured. My job is to give the athlete an opportunity to look good, so I need to know the sport as well as the course. For example, there is a section on the Mora Vasaloppet course where I would never shoot. It's a steep short hill near the finish where not even the best skier looks good!" Paul style, as he explains it, is very "heads on." There is a psychology behind his photographs: "Two people can have a side-by-side intimacy, in which they are looking in the same direction, or they can have a face-to-face intimacy in which they are looking directly at each other. My style is heads-on with the athlete, which is much more intense and intimate than shooting from the side of them. When an athlete is facing the camera, the energy comes right at you from out of the picture. You make eye contact with the athlete, and if the image is successful, you feel an inexplicable bond with the image."

Being a good editor is also essential, according to Paul. "Shooting at a high frame rate allows me to pick out what is truly a great shot, which, at times, is only subtly different from a good shot. Having skill as an editor is needed when you are choosing that one shot from two or three shots that are quite similar." To put into perspective his editorial demands, Paul draws an example from the 2006 Twin Cities Marathon: "I deleted 11,000 of the 13,000 images captured over the weekend. Every photo that was selected had to stand on its own and tell a story."

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Jonathan Phillips shooting the 2006 Twin Cities Marathon

It isn't only Paul's pictures that are innovative. Competitive Image is attaining lead status at prestigious events because they offer more than just pictures. Paul explains: "In the role of lead photographer we create an event web page, which becomes an online gallery for the event. Our work includes, in addition to shooting, all the planning (including meeting with the event's marketing group to ensure that we are aware of the images they need), editing, and post-production. This is a much more strategic and comprehensive approach than just shooting a race." Competitive Image also has the capability to act as a wire service for an event. This expedites the press recognition a particular race receives. At Twin Cities Marathon, for example, newspapers were able to download high-resolution captioned images the evening of the race. This has been significant in the transformation of Competitive Image, according to Paul: "It's gone from just providing photos to providing different services that make it easier for the race director to use the images we capture and helping them look for ways to promote their event, access more athletes and increase their sponsorship base using the photos. If they can't leverage what we have done, then our work is just a nice scrapbook of the event."

Future Snapshot

Paul loves all aspects of being a photographer, but points out the best parts of his job: "I have the best seat in the house! It's so much fun to be right in the middle of the action. As a photographer, I am so much closer to the front of a race than I ever was when I was a competitor!" Paul also notes, "it's a great group of people that I get to meet and spend time with." What is the most challenging aspect? For Paul, the hardest thing about being an independent sports photographer is attaining an economically viable business: "It's not just about having the right equipment, access to the events and great photos. That is just what gets you in the door. It's about having a style that people recognize and are attracted to. It's about optimizing web presence. Most importantly, it's about relationships; getting to know the race directors, elite athletes, magazine editors, and the manufacturers and being able to consistently deliver to them what they are looking for. And then, going an extra step to over-deliver. It's about them trusting you to get what they need, and developing any relationship takes time."

In a short time Paul has brought his company to the forefront of the industry, but his sights are set even higher: "My goal is to be at Beijing in 2008 and Vancouver in 2010 with a crew. I want to move Competitive Image to an International

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level, and 2007 will be the year it starts ... I need to spend as much time working on and developing the business attributes of Competitive Image as I do working on the images themselves."

Bruce Challgren took this shot of Paul at the 2005 Twin Cities Marathon

MIDWEST EVENTS STAFF FAVORITE PHOTOGRAPHS CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

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Playing Favorites is Never Fair:

Visit the Competitive Image website (www.competitiveimage.us) and prepare to be mesmerized as slideshows unfold in front of you. With so many truly spectacular shots, it is unfair and unreasonable to ask anyone to pick their favorite. But I asked anyway, including the Photog himself. Here are the Midwest Events staff choices for favorite Competitive Image photograph:

“It was a visually spectacular day. Lanny Barnes had just finished her last prone shot and, as she was getting up to ski, was still focused on the target.”

-Paul



“There’s magic in the boys’ running – the purity of their bodies, free and natural in the way only kids can run. You can see the hero worship and know these kids will forever remember the day they ran with the leaders. How can they know that they are the ones we envy, that their ease and lightness of spirit is what we wish we could recapture?”

-Trudy

“This shows an artistic point of view of agile runners. It looks so cool; I wish I took it!”

-Laura





“I believe this shot captures the spirit of Endurance. You see the juxtaposition of pain and purpose. And you know that purpose will win.”
–Jerry

“It is incredible that this could be captured on film.”
–Marnie



“Since no one is making *me* choose a picture, and my husband begged me to include this one, I submit his choice. He is passionate about Nordic Skiing and about this picture; the balance of colors and light, the grace, the power, the framing of the action - how the athletes are launching over the hill right at you. It says everything about the excitement of this sport.” –Becca

It’s impossible to experience the full effect of these images as they are printed here. Since we didn’t have room to dedicate a full page to each picture, we urge you to visit midwestevents.com to truly appreciate these photographs. There is a link off the home page.