Useful Tips for Photographing Marathons

PUBLISHED - 26 MAR 2018



© LEON NEAL

Be prepared

If you have the opportunity, scout out the route beforehand to get an idea of the best views and vantage points, and where the sun is likely to be at a particular time. Google maps is a useful alternative. For the most popular events, like the London Marathon, you'll need to get there early to bag a decent position – particularly if you want to photograph crowds of runners vying to start – but that shouldn't be so much of a problem with smaller competitions.



© LEON NEAL

Lens choice

What type of shots are you after? For details, a telephoto zoom such as a 70-300mm will enable you to crop in tight with the long end to fill the frame with the running pack if you're standing some distance away, or on individual runners' faces, feet, competitor-number bibs and so on. It will also blur out any distracting backgrounds so the focus is purely on your subject.

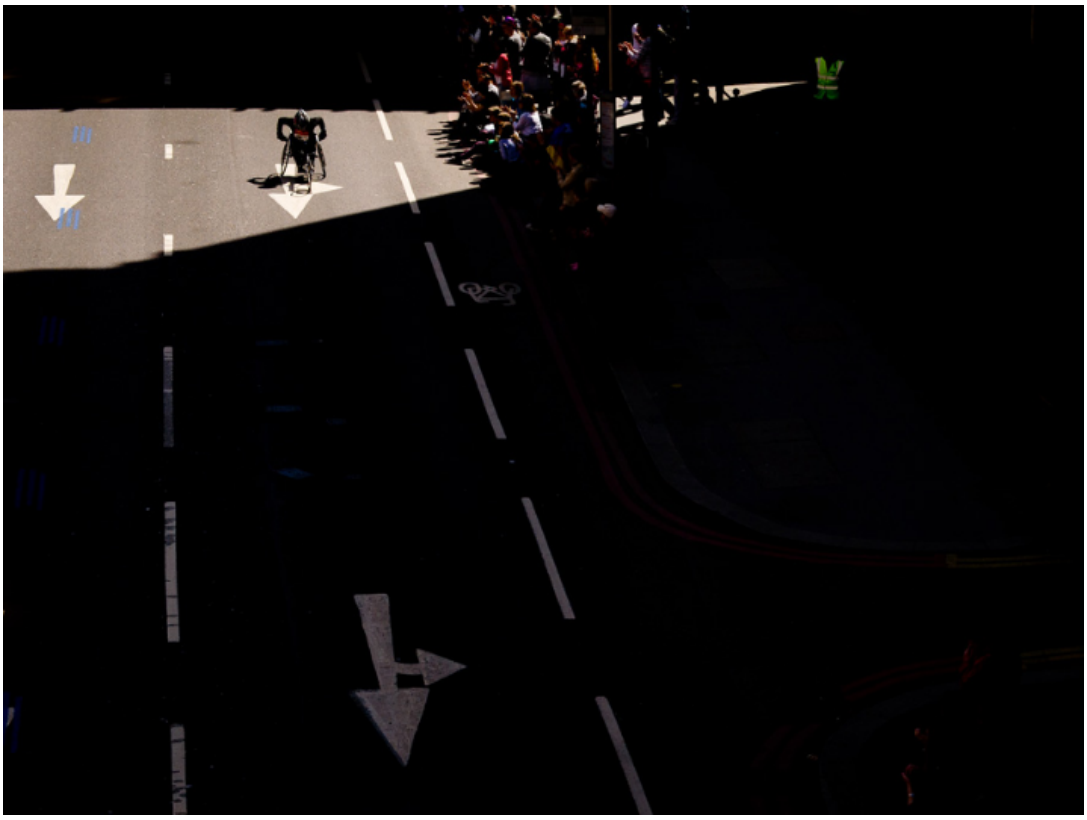
A midrange zoom – for example, the DX-configured 18-105mm, or the 24-70mm f/2.8 or 24-85mm for an FX (full-frame) camera – will bring you closer to the action while enabling you to include some of the surroundings and background for context.

Wideangle zooms are great for creating dynamic, low-angle shots or for capturing the whole scene, which can be spectacular, especially if you're shooting the start of a major race with thousands of competitors. On a DX DSLR you'll need around 10-12mm minimum for the best results – try the AF-P DX 10-20mm or the AF-S DX 10-24mm f/3.5-4.5G ED – while if you're using a full-frame camera, go for a 16-17mm minimum focal length, such as the 16-35mm f/4 or the 14-24mm f/2.8.

Shutter speed considerations

You'll probably find it best to hand-hold the camera, as tripods are slow to set up and can get in the way in crowds of spectators. Remember that the faster the lens (i.e. the larger the maximum aperture, or the lower the minimum f-number, such as f/2 or f/2.8), then the faster the shutter speed you can set to freeze your subject's motion and reduce the risk of camera shake causing a blurred result. Using a lens with VR (vibration reduction) technology will enable you to shoot handheld at up to four stops slower than otherwise possible for sharper results, so if it's on your lens, make sure it's switched on!

Putting your camera into shutter priority mode will enable you to select the shutter speed. To freeze the action, you're going to need a shutter speed of at least 1/250sec, and generally the faster your subject and the larger it is in frame, the higher this will be. Plus, when you're handholding, for pin-sharp shots the rule of thumb is to set a shutter speed at least as high as the lens's maximum reach, so if you're using the 18-300mm, you'll need a shutter speed of at least 1/320sec. You may also need to boost the ISO to enable a fast enough shutter speed in the light available. The key is to experiment.



© LEON NEAL

Quick tips

- Continuous AF focus mode (AF-C) enables you to keep the focus bang on track, focusing on your subject continuously all the while the shutter-release button is half-depressed. Read our tip .
- Pan to create a dynamic sense of speed, capturing the subject sharply against a motion-blurred background. Read our tip .



© LEON NEAL

© NIKON U.K.