It became apparent in early 2013 the Rolex Motorsports Reunion at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, world’s most famous road racing course, would become my second Vintage Auto racing photography event for the year. The US Vintage Grand Prix at Watkins Glen International Raceway, Watkins Glen, NY, hit the schedule at the end of that event in 2012. Even though The Reunion occurred first, it hit my schedule second.

 Thinking how I could try something photographically different, I coerced our dedicated Sony rep, Mr. Armando Flores, into committing Sony’s top line gear for my use. You might ask, “Why would you want to use Sony gear for something like this? Wouldn’t other more established brands be better?” Funny you should ask. Sony’s translucent mirror technology, known in the business as SLT, has no traditional reflex mirror. Instead a semi-transparent translucent mirror directs a small portion of incoming image forming light to a separate sensor within the camera. Metering and focus systems obtain information from this dedicated sensor for not only live view focusing but continuous light reading throughout exposure. Since “normal” DSLR designs temporarily lose focus and metering when their mirrors rise, passing light through to the sensor, Sony should maintain an advantage since metering and focus never lose sight of the subject. This is all great in theory. I wanted to see it perform in a demanding high speed environment.

 I created a laundry list including camera models A77, noted for its 12 frame per second firing rate, and A99, noted for its extreme image quality even at high ISO. The world class A Mount Zeiss 24-70, Sony G Series 70-200, 16-50 and, most importantly, the 70-400 G lens rounded out the arsenal with which I hoped to document the race. For extra capability, I requested the Sony NEX 6 with the super range 18-200 E Series.

With lots of experience selling A series Sony DSLR’s I had no doubts regarding their performance. Armando assured me the NEX 6 with its Hybrid AF technology would be up to the task. What a great place to experiment!

Arriving at Oakland Airport August 11th, we set out for Shielia’s, my wife , childhood home in Santa Cruz. I wanted a little time to get to know the gear prior to race days August 16th and 17th. Even though roaming California’s Central Coast for a couple of days, tasting wine and shooting photos in one of the most beautiful places on earth surely makes for tough duty, someone had to do it. Might as well be me!

After a short trip north for shooting time at Pigeon Point’s scenic light house perched on the rugged coast, more time at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk made famous in the not Academy Awarded movie, “Lost Boys,” as well as some not Academy Awarded “Dirty Harry” movies, and a day at Point Lobos near Monterey, I felt ready. The A77, A99 and NEX 6 performed flawlessly at all locations. Zeiss glass worked smoothly providing its renowned razor sharp images and the NEX Series E 18-200 covered all conditions. My exceedingly tolerant wife spent most of her time with the NEX having a blast with the automatic panorama mode as well as Picture Effect filters.

I took cameras and lenses aboard the plane in Salt Lake City, minus the 70-400. Discovering only a few hours before departure the lens’ absence from Fed Ex’s delivery of Armando and company’s shipments, I panicked. A delirious phone call to LA and Armando reassured me; the lens will be there, shipped in time to Santa Cruz. Not only will it be there, but it will be the brand new 70-400 Series II, faster focusing and even sharper than the lens’ first iteration already reputed as the sharpest long range zoom on the market. Cool! I figured I’d get by with the 70-200 f2.8 on the A77’s APSC sensor netting me 300mm effective focal length if the longer lens failed to show up. After 3 years of shooting at Watkins Glen, though, I knew 400mm was nearly a requirement.

If, by the way, you ever get a chance to go to a vintage auto race event, go! Nowhere else in the world, save for a Sportscar Vintage Racing Association (SVRA) event or that put on here by Rolex thru Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, will you get to see such a collection of automobile history in one place. Not only that, with 16 total groups, 1 a&b thru 8 a&b, you experience sights and sounds heard around the world for over 100 years ‘til present day. In fact, I try to find the oldest race car on the track at each vintage auto race event I attend. 2012’s Vintage Grand Prix at The Glen featured a 1926 Frazier Nash Boulogne. At Seca I saw a 1911 National requiring 2 operators; a driver and a mechanic. Sort of ironic to see 2 people dressed in Nomex and latest helmet technology aboard a car built in 103 years ago.

This article won’t attempt any in depth analysis of either Sony SLT DSLR body or lenses. Reviews and opinions exist across the internet providing far more thorough treatment than I can or want to give these sturdy examples of top tier engineering and technology. I wanted to see how they actually performed in a race environment. Rapid focus, rapid shooting and quick handling mean difference between success and total exasperation when doing automobile race imaging. Having spent lots of time selling Sony gear across the counter, I knew where I’d start.

Menu and function settings look nearly identical in both cameras so setting up both was a breeze. Since I like knowing which cars I’m shooting at any particular time, I double checked clocks in both cameras. Correlating shot times with stat sheets provided by Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca control at race weekend’s completion allow me to know driver name, car make and model, year of manufacture and car number.

Menu settings first: Image Size at full 24 Megapixels, Aspect Ratio 3:2, Quality at Extra Fine. Many shooters might use RAW here. I find the largest JPEG adequate. Many photogs utilize the RAW for this sort of shooting. Since I know I’m the world’s laziest photographer, waiting for my computer to chew through giant RAW files holds little value for me. I use Photoshop CS3 for processing. It performs admirably with JPEGs. Since I don’t have Photoshop beyond CS3, it won’t handle A77 or A99 RAW, hence JPEG Extra Fine.

I set my Grid Line at “Rule of Thirds,” and left the other menu choices at their standard settings.

I set the camera on A for aperture priority. Many shooters employ Shutter Priority for this sort of event. I’m Aperture Priority through and through. Since most lenses perform their best at f8, I adjust ISO keeping my shutter speed where I want it for the particular class of cars on track at any one time. With Shutter Priority setting too high, swinging the camera through a shadow might end up underexposing the shot. Setting it too low might overexpose the shot swinging through a sunlit spot. Shutter priority makes depth of field control very difficult. Aperture Priority truly provides the most flexible exposures under the widest variety of conditions while permitting use of the lens’ “sweet spot” on every shot.

I triple checked the clocks and moved over to Function, “FN,” as shown on the camera back. I turned off Object Tracking, Smile Shutter and Face Recognition. ISO went to 400, Metering Mode at Multi Segment, White Balance to Auto, DRO to Off, Creative Style to STD., and Picture Effect to off. Auto Focus required a little more thought. Sony provides Focus Modes Manual, Continuous, “Auto,” and Single. Manual will not perform at adequate speed tracking cars travelling at high speed. Continuous tracks moving subjects without locking focus at any one distance. Auto lets the camera decide whether to use continuous or single shot focus depending on subject movement. Single locks focus on shutter partial depression. Since cars move very fast nearly without pause on the track, continuous gets the nod.

Next comes focus area selection. “Wide,” sits atop the list. I found wide lacking in that users cannot select any specific area of the screen for focus. The camera makes the choice for you. Not good. “Zone,” allows user selection of left, center or right multiple focus point groupings.

Following come 2 different single focus point settings, “Spot,” and “Local.” Both allow use of only 1 focus point. Spot keeps the single point in screen center. Local allows positioning at any of the camera’s 17 focus point locations. Single points cover areas far too small for accurate speeding car tracking. Zone gets the nod. I started with the center grouping.

I attended Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca’s mandatory photographer safety meeting Friday morning , August 16th,at 8:00 AM then headed track side next to the paddock. Since the 70-400 hadn’t yet arrived for my first day’s shooting, track position became critical for making the most of the 70-200’s maximum throw. I started both cameras at Continuous Shooting yielding approximately 6 frames per second though doubted I’d lay on the shutter release that long. I began with AF Zone setting at center group. Race Group 1B blasted down from upper track. One by one, classic early 1900’s cars passed in front of me. I missed focus on as many shots as I captured. It seemed easier than this last outing at The Glen. Next group up, yielded the same thing; low success. Maybe my low percentage of sharp images resulted from back lighting. I decided to head up to “The Corkscrew,” Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca’s most famous track feature where I spent the rest of my first morning at the track.

I reassessed my settings. The Sony 70-200 f2.8 G lens felt like it focused as fast as any lens I used in the past. It has a good image quality rep. No problem there. Choosing a correct shutter speed is always a challenge when doing race photography. You want to have a slow enough speed to show tire movement but not slow enough to cause body blur. This magic shutter speed varies from car group to car group with pre-war requiring a lot less speed than, say, Formula 1. At the Cork Screw I started at high shutter speed gradually slowing to get the right combination. Good results started flowing.

The morning progressed well. My location permitted changing bodies though the A77 body and 70-200 proved most consistent maintaining proper image quality. I blasted away with both cameras at this very exciting track feature. Even the NEX 6 handed back great images. Not paying attention, I learned part way in my wife left the Picture Effect in “Retro,” adding even more to the entire vintage racing effect.

Lunch break rolled up stopping action for an hour so I decided to check in at home regarding the 70-400 lens while inquiring of my family’s fare during my absence. On my phone screen…it arrived. The lens arrived! Armando’s message showed big and bright, “Did you get it?”

I called to see if the package had, indeed, arrived. Shielia answered.

“Is it there?” I asked. She inquired back, “Didn’t you get my text?”

“Apparently not,” I answered.

“Yes. It’s here, 1 lens and 2 batteries.” Batteries are a different story.

I thanked her, immediately texting Armando the package arrived in good shape. Tomorrow‘s shooting would bring new opportunities with twice the lens throw. Yes!

Friday afternoon began across the track from my morning shooting spot moving from west trackside to east. I ran through 2 groups of cars as well as the Corvette demo team from Bondurant and Fellowes driving schools. Thinking it time for a change I wandered down the track from Corkscrew just into Rainey Curve and set up for afternoon races. Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca offered no location closer to the action. The 70-200 f2.8 G lens provided more than enough throw. I settled in. The afternoon warmed considerably so shade at the Curve proved most welcome.

Down came the next groups. Since I set up so close to the track, I bolted the 70-200 to the A99 body. This ought to be good. Shooting turned out just the opposite. Whatever the reason, the A99 and 70-200 f2.8 G Series lens made a poor match. The majority of the several hundred A99 shots from this location were out of focus from grossly to just barely. I nailed enough but something was wrong. While they looked decent, for the most part, on camera monitor, later review on my computer showed things amiss. I don’t know whether it was speed, close proximity or what. It seemed as though the camera’s AF couldn’t keep up with subjects moving at high speed in close proximity. Ouch! I switched the 70-200 back to the A77, achieving more consistently good results. Not a total loss.

Thinking back, it seemed as though the closer cars approached, the more difficulty the A99 experienced with auto focus. Since relative motion increases as distance decrease, AF might fail more often. Losing the 1.5X crop factor meant shooting racers a lot closer in.

I wrapped the day at 4:30 and headed back to the car for the one hour trek back up California 1 to Santa Cruz.

Dead tired, I arrived at the house and quickly grabbed a look at the 70-400 Series II G Lens. What a gorgeous piece of equipment! I believe I was the first to use it in the field. I cleaned up, dumped cards, took a shower and went to bed.

My trip down to Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca from Santa Cruz on Friday morning for the first day’s shooting flowed by quickly. Tendrils of low fog, at times moderately heavy, hung over forests, fields of artichokes, broccoli, and Brussels sprouts. Closer to Monterey, fields gave way to overgrown sand dunes on Route 1’s west flank. Monterey Bay lay just to their west. Covering around 50 miles or so, I made the trip in just under an hour. Pretty much the same on Saturday, August 17th. Anticipating larger crowds officials placed traffic control signs out on 1 about 8 miles or so north of Monterey Salinas Highway 68. I drove right to the A Road gate on 68 and up into the Media Parking. No traffic issues either day.

On Saturday the 17th, I wanted something different for photo perspective. I like a downward ¾ shot off the car’s port or starboard front wheel. That meant taking advantage of Rahal Straight’s upward slope 1st thing….after repeating shots on the edge of the Paddock as on Friday. I was particularly interested in Peter Giddings’ newly acquired 1927 Grand Prix winning ’26 Delage. I felt this might be my only chance in case he didn’t make it to Rolex Group 1A race Saturday afternoon. He did well enough in qualifying. I grabbed decent shots and it was off to the tracks east flank and Rahal Straight.

I took up residence next to the corner 7 TV cameraman for the 1st couple of laps. OK shooting right at the curve but not the downward angle I wanted. Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca provides chain link fence protection for photographers at certain points on the track. They create “Shooting Holes,” within the fence intending shooters to share access, getting their shots through the fence. This works moderately well with, I believe, no one feeling they have total freedom when more than one camera wants access. I arrived at the hole about 1/3 the way up the straight first so I graciously allowed the occasional passing photog to shoot. None of them stayed very long. I was getting my images including the occasional spin out at the curve below as well as the closest thing I saw to a collision all weekend. It was here I took my best image of comedian Adam Carolla in his 1988 Nissan 300ZX.

Looking for another favorite shot, cars coming into and exiting a curve, I walked down to Turn 5. Another wide open, non-shooting hole site, it had everything including lots of room as well as shaded and vinyl covered hay bales on which to sit. Only thing was, though, by that hour clouds descended over the track with wind off Monterey Bay made me wish I brought a jacket. For about 2 hours I froze until the sun finally exited the clouds bringing warmth back to track side. We had about 45 minutes of sunshine from then ‘til the track day ended.

I spent the day with only the 70-400 lens for my telephoto needs. In fact, I used only the 70-400 all day at track side leaving the 70-200 f2.8 home feeling the bigger lens would more easily cover my shooting needs, reducing carry weight. Looking back, making that decision was quite risky. What if the 70-400 had the same ailment on the A99 as the 70-200 f2.8? Following a few shooting technique changes, the 70-400 performed as well as the 70-200. I brought my monopod just in case the larger lens’ weight became an issue. After more than 6 hours hefting the 70-400, my arms and shoulders gave up the ghost telling me they had enough. Onto the monopod went the big lens. What a relief!

Those of you astute readers familiar with Sony SLT cameras such as the A77 & A65 cameras may have familiarity with their high speed shooting, up to 12 frames per second. This is really fast! I didn’t have field shooting experience with it prior to this weekend so I decided to give it a try toward the end of Saturday’s shooting session. I spun the mode dial to the “12,” aimed it track ward and let ‘er rip. I noticed I had control over focus points but not over aperture or shutter speed. The camera controlled both of those functions, allowing only ISO setting. As a result, I could only use ISO to control shutter and aperture with the latter locked wide open. While this actually worked pretty well, I felt I needed a little more control over tire movement so reluctantly abandoned the feature. It seemed focus locked on fairly well, staying on cars passing through the corner. I didn’t try it on a straightaway where speeds could double those in corners. Maybe I’ll get another chance to try new iterations of this technology.

While at this writing I have no knowledge of new Sony models or features in store for 2014, rumors predict their arrival. Canon made a big splash with their dual pixel AF technology. Sony supposedly has an A77 replacement in the works with some kind of similar on sensor AF capabilities replacing the SLT translucent mirror. I anxiously await arrival of this capability though I wonder how it will work in high speed situations. If camera shutter opens and closes in front of the sensor, how will focus perform during rapid shutter operation? I guess we’ll see soon enough.

Nikon and Olympus reportedly have an answer to Canon’s new tech as well. What a great time to be alive if you like techno advances. They’re coming fast and furious showing no sign of slowing down. Good thing Vintage Auto Racing stays with us. We need an historical basis from which we define ourselves. I can’t think of a better one that Vintage Autos.

Update: Late October brought forth new tech from Sony in the form of 2 new full frame small bodied cameras, the A7 and A7r. Both offer on sensor AF with the 7 featuring phase detection as well as contrast detection and the 7r relying solely on contrast detect. Sony states the A7 focuses as fast as any DSLR. Coming months offer us a chance to see if that’s fast enough. Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca 2014, anyone?