

Life in the Production Compartment

A Conversation with Steve Beim

Steve Beim is a television director for sports production. Even if you are not interested in sports, you have probably seen his work. Besides directing college football for ABC, he also does golf for NFL Films and directs a number of auto races every year, including the International feed of the Indianapolis 500, which forms the core of the network coverage in the United States and various networks around the world. Steve started as a runner at \$50 a day in 1984. He directed his first golf remote in 1987, and his first car race in 1988. Steve started directing the Indianapolis 500 in 1994. This section will reveal a little of his insight into television production.



Figure 6.18 A couple of shots of the "bridge" of the production truck, the production compartment. The TD, director and producer sit in the front row in most trucks. The producer generally writes the story, which the director tells through the TD, A1 and the graphics people. Additional people in the production compartment usually include associate directors and producers, who are most often there to help with the flow of graphics and replays. Steve notes that the "chemistry" among the crew, and especially in this compartment, can determine if the shoot is a smooth, good one, or if this outing will be a struggle.

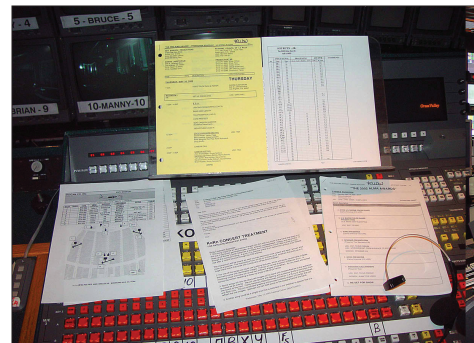


Figure 6.19 The key for a successful production is communications. Here Steve discusses production issues with his TD. Steve's advice for anyone who aspires to be a director is to learn to write, as communications skills are extremely important. The most important class in college? English 101. During the show the director must be able to concisely convey to the crew what needs to be done, how and when. The director needs good command skills to control the elements that make up the show. He points out that it usually takes an avid fan of the sport to tell a good story about a game or match. In essence, the producer and director should know as much about the sport as the announcers. For the Indianapolis 500, production meetings start the beginning of March, and preparation consumes almost a day of Steve's time per week, up to the month before the race at the end of May, when he works full time on race preparation.



Figure 6.21 Sports shoots are as different as the various sports themselves. Steve thinks that college football is a made-for-television event: a play and then 30 seconds to regroup or tell the story along the sidelines or to capture some of the spirit and spectacle that can be part of the college game.

Figure 6.20 Beim says that golf and racing are a couple of the hardest sports to cover. In both sports there are no time-outs. In racing when there is a yellow flag, signifying a break in drivers trying to pass opponents and a slowing down for safety reasons, usually there is a lot of activity in the pits as cars take advantage of the situation. Golf can be thought of as a number of matches, a different one at each hole, all being covered at once. It takes a good knowledge of those sports for the producer and director to determine where the most compelling stories are on venues that can literally be miles long, and when a commercial break can be taken without losing too much of the live action.

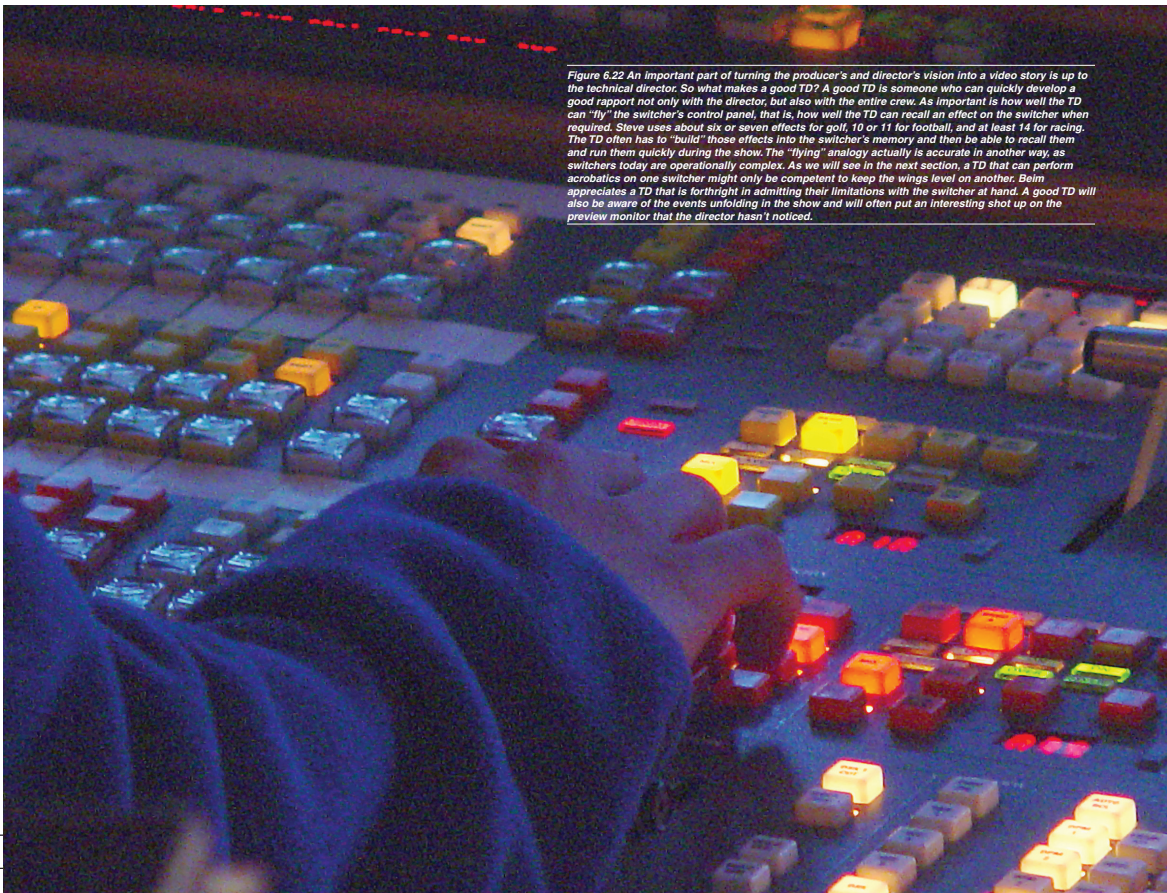


Figure 6.22 An important part of turning the producer's and director's vision into a video story is up to the technical director. So what makes a good TD? A good TD is someone who can quickly develop a good rapport not only with the director, but also with the entire crew. As important is how well the TD can "fly" the switcher's control panel, that is, how well the TD can recall an effect on the switcher when required. Steve uses about six or seven effects for golf, 10 or 11 for football, and at least 14 for racing. The TD often has to "build" those effects into the switcher's memory and then be able to recall them and run them quickly during the show. The "flying" analogy actually is accurate in another way, as switchers today are operationally complex. As we will see in the next section, a TD that can perform acrobatics on one switcher might only be competent to keep the wings level on another. Beim appreciates a TD that is forthright in admitting their limitations with the switcher at hand. A good TD will also be aware of the events unfolding in the show and will often put an interesting shot up on the preview monitor that the director hasn't noticed.

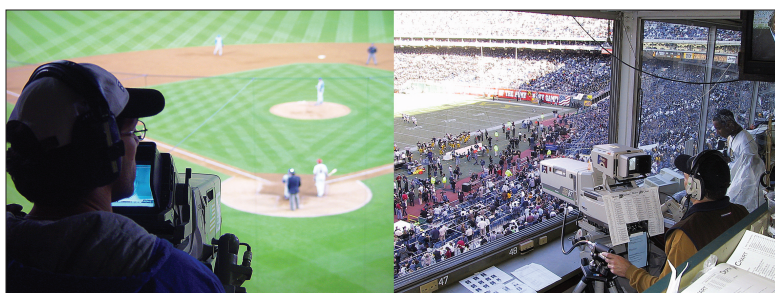


Figure 6.23 A good cameraman? Besides getting the shots assigned to their camera position, a good cameraman anticipates what the director is trying to show, and is always thinking ahead about show continuity. Steve says that the announcers are often directing as much as the director, so a good cameraman listens to program audio, and offers shots that advance the audio dialogue. Also, many of the best camera operators keep their heads out of the viewfinder; in other words, they are looking at the action that is outside their shot so as to react faster and more smoothly to action that might intrude into their shot. The director usually has a camera meeting before the show to let the camera operators know the key stories, and what areas of the action they are expected to cover.



Figure 6.24 Some assistant directors (ADs) involved with a shoot help shepherd talent through the production by relaying commands and providing cues. ADs in the truck are used for commercial and feature coordination.

Figure 6.25 Replays are an important part of telling the story. As we have talked about earlier in the book, they are an integral part of almost all sports shoots. Multiple replay activities often take place all at once. Just as the director is concerned about covering the drama of the moment, and the producer telling the overall story, so goes its replay strategies. Often assistant directors direct instant replay coverage, and let the director know what replays are available immediately after the fact. At the same time, associate producers could be at work assembling highlight packages.



Figure 6.26 Spotters are often found near the field of play, as well as in the truck. Near the field of play, spotters are the eyes and ears of the director and producer, letting them know when something is happening that might not be obvious on camera. For events like golf, spotters travel with each group, and there is often one in the truck as another set of eyes to observe overall action and alert the director if something interesting or important is happening. In racing there is a spotter at each corner. Spotters are needed because the crew might be concentrating on a current story line and not notice that a new, and maybe more interesting story is unfolding.



Figure 6.28 The video operators are charged with maintaining the correct video levels and ensuring that all the cameras have the same "look." The director often only notices video operators when it is obvious that they are doing a good job under adverse conditions, or if they are doing a poor job.

Figure 6.27 Here an A1, the audio person who actually does the main mix for the show, looks through the glass partition separating the audio booth from the production compartment. Many trucks have portals that allow the audio person to see the activity in the production compartment so as to anticipate the audio needs of the show. A good A1 sets up all the sub or group mixes on their own, understanding the general audio needs of the event, taking most cues from the video and only generalized direction from the director. The director and A1 will often discuss specific audio production goals and philosophies before the show. The A1 can have a number of A2s doing sub-mixes also. If an event has effects mics scattered in diverse locations, often a sub-mix is done by an A2 in a location where they can see the action.



Figure 6.29 Below: The director of an entertainment shoot prepares to go through a rehearsal. Entertainment shows present a different set of demands on the director and crew. Whereas the sports crew can anticipate some of the action, a lot of the activity cannot be predicted — thus camera moves and switching can be a little looser and imprecise to allow for rapid response as events unfold. With most shows, the program is scripted, and usually rehearsed at least once. Therefore, the producer and director are expected to create a show that has smooth, calculated and deliberate camera moves, and switching that happens at precise moments during the production.



As we have already observed, if the remote truck was a ship, the production compartment would be its bridge. Teamwork and an ability to perform your job under pressure are required whether you are in this compartment or in communications with it as part of the overall production. The video equivalent of the audio AI is the technical director (TD). In the next section we will look at how the TD and the video switcher, along with digital video effects devices, weave the various video sources into the visual montage demanded by many clients today. ■

Figure 6.30 Although many are similar, no two production compartments are exactly alike. Directors and production crews differ on how they like the compartment laid out. An almost equal number of trucks have production compartments with monitor walls facing the front or rear of the truck, or conversely, with monitor walls parallel to the side of the truck, facing the street side of the truck. Directors and production crews differ on which layout they find more comfortable. All want layouts that facilitate scanning the monitor wall and making eye contact with other crew members, and that minimize surrounding commotion and confusion. Monitor walls parallel to the side of the truck facilitate the many sources found at some entertainment shows. Walls facing the front or back of the truck allow for more benches and consoles for additional producers and graphics operators. But there is no clear consensus as to which orientation is best.



Figure 6.31 Being in command of a production can often be stressful, especially when everything appears to be conspiring against a production. The director earns his pay by working through the problems and keeping everyone on task. (Source: A.F. Associates)