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HD Passes the Eco-Challenge



Format, Hardware Proves Reliable In Rugged Multicam Test

by Robert Brilliant

PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA

New Zealand's Team Greenpeace may be the official winner of the recently run Discovery Channel Eco-Challenge race, but the real winners for the video crews who shot the grueling adventure race are the

tacular HD race footage were acquired for use in two one-hour specials to be domestically broadcast by The Discovery Channel in April.

This year's race course over Patagonian glaciers, mountain passes, sheer cliffs and freezing lakes called for camera crews with adventure athlete credentials themselves. For Michael Graber, a mountain climber

"In the mountains it got down to 19 degrees Fahrenheit with very strong winds, and then there were days when it warmed up and got very rainy," Graber said. "When you go from rainy conditions one day to freezing the next, it's a perfect recipe for trashing electronic equipment."

Some days the temperature went from below freezing to 55 degrees within a few minutes.

"So the Sony HDW-700 camcorders were going through the sort of freeze-thaw cycle capable of splitting granite," he said. "But they came out everyday and worked fine."

The 16:9 widescreen format was also an interesting challenge for shooters. Aside from framing issues revolving around the need for aesthetically compatibility with the standard 4:3 screen, the extended horizontal axis tended to amplify any handheld-induced camera wobbling.

"I made a real effort to use a tripod whenever possible," Graber said. "Or I tried to be rock-steady when I had to go handheld. Fortunately, the HD camcorder is small enough and light enough to make that possible."

The size factor made it easier for shooters to follow the fast-moving competitors and leapfrog to set up positions ahead of them on the course.

"After a while it was really not much different than a shoot in standard definition, which is what [everyone] wanted to see," Graber said.



high-definition format and the 20 Sony HD camera packages used to cover the event.

Both the format and the hardware proved highly reliable in 12 days of wind, rain, freeze-and-thaw temperature swings and rugged, remote terrain. Several hundred hours of spec-

turned cameraman who has shot outdoor adventure subjects for more than 20 years, this Eco-Challenge was a chance to put the HD format and camcorders to a severe ENG test. The shooting conditions were certainly ripe for that challenge.

Shooting under adverse conditions is nothing new to Martin Unversaw, the only cameraman to have shot all five Eco-Challenges run to date. His concerns prior to this years' race were centered on camera durability issues and HD format aesthetics.

"I found shooting with the HDW-700A to be very similar to any other high-end Sony camcorder," he said. "I'm used to seeing gear take a lot of abuse, and given the weather and terrain in Patagonia, I had some concerns. But the cameras proved very rugged and performed extremely well in amazingly difficult weather and handling conditions."

While the widescreen framing, especially with two shots, did create some tricky "airspace" situations for Unversaw, he found the rule of thirds to be a useful guideline. "Like any ENG it was real-time TV, not staged. You couldn't tell the athletes to go stand over there," he said. "Sometimes you have to go with whatever framing you could get."

But in the end it was the sheer beauty and remarkable detail of the race images captured on HD that impressed Unversaw and many other people associated with the Eco-Challenge shoot.

"We shot the closing ceremony and when the highlights reel came up on a 16- by 9-foot screen at the back of the stage you could hear a hush fall over the audience," Unversaw said. "The video had no noise. It was like a huge window opened up on competition going on right in front of us. It's that striking." ■

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