

# Building a career in broadcast through steadicam work for live television

Freelance television cameraman and steadicam owner operator **Alex Doherty** shares his career path, essential skills, and practical advice for excelling in broadcast and live television production

## By Alex Doherty

When I first entered the television industry, I had no idea I was also building my own brand. The concept of self-branding was not something I was familiar with; I was simply focused on expanding my knowledge of broadcasting and being true to myself. Over the years, I have built my career as a camera operator, gaining experience across a wide variety of projects and genres, from sports and live events to music and studio productions. I have leaned into specialising in Steadicam, making it a defining focus of my work and a new chapter in my career.

So, when the GTC invited me to share my journey and insights from over two decades in the business and my thoughts for the future, I eagerly embraced the opportunity.

After sending what felt like hundreds of letters to various media companies, I was offered an apprenticeship at ITV Central at 17. There, I shadowed the technical support department and learned the inner workings of a television station. Engineers showed me the essentials of play-out and distribution, including MCR (Master Control Room)—responsible for managing all incoming and outgoing signals. This experience gave me a foundational understanding of broadcast and news operations that has been invaluable throughout my career.

**Building Skills and Navigating Diverse Productions.** Working across a wide range of productions, it is easy to get typecast in a specific genre, especially in sports. However, my experience spans various events and genres, from Premier League Football to the UEFA Euros and the Tokyo Olympics. Each project has contributed to my understanding of sports broadcasting, but since I was not a football fan and did not

follow any team, I thought that might be a disadvantage. However, it turned out to be a benefit, as it allowed me to cover the game impartially without being emotionally invested in any team's outcome. That said, when a match heads into extra time or penalties, you sometimes find yourself quietly hoping for one side to win before the 90 minutes are up.

My career has spanned a range of projects and genres, offering me insights into different production styles and setups. In sports, I have covered everything from high-profile tournaments like the All Elite Wrestling and ATP Tennis in Madrid to unique events like the Moto Cam coverage on the London Half Marathon. Each event presents a new challenge and requires a distinct approach; for example, football coverage demands real-time tracking of fast action, while events like boxing and snooker focus more on capturing intense, close-up details.

This experience has not only expanded my technical skills but has also shaped my adaptability. Whether it is a Premier League football match, NFL, London series, or the Commonwealth Games boxing, each sport has its own rhythms and requirements. Working in these diverse settings has strengthened my ability to quickly adjust to each production's unique demands, enhancing both my technical expertise and my understanding of what it takes to bring these events to life.

**The Best Seat in the House.** I have been fortunate to work on games ranging from the conference league up to prestigious World Cup matches, covering every league and tournament in between. This range of experience has given me a unique





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perspective on the game at every level, from local league atmospheres to the high-stakes energy of international tournaments.

In football, my favourite position is undoubtedly Camera Three, a role I have taken on many times. Positioned on the same side of the pitch as the other main cameras, Camera Three sits on the halfway line—typically with an 86:1 lens or larger—either between the dugouts or beside them. Camera Three's placement provides a low, close-up perspective that captures the game's intensity. On the gantry next to Camera One, the main camera, Camera Two serves as its counterpart with a similarly close-up role. If you imagine a football match as a two-sided story, Camera Three usually covers the good guy, while Camera Two focuses on the bad guy adding to the narrative through visual perspective, with griping commentary and a good director the coverage will tell a story.

Camera Three demands precision and mental sharpness throughout the match. It's often the first cut after a goal, giving me just a split second to identify the right player and capture their reaction as the red light comes on. Operating Camera Three is a fast-paced, high-pressure role, but incredibly rewarding when you nail that crucial shot and bring the intensity of the moment into viewers' homes.

**The Role of a Camera Guarantee in Skill Development.** One of the most valuable learning experiences early in my career was working as a camera guarantee at Arqiva OBs, where I spent seven years managing a range of complex setups. My main responsibilities were to ensure that all necessary equipment like Sony HDC-2500 cameras, spares, and other essential parts, were loaded, fully operational, and ready to meet each production's demands. With some broadcasts involving up to 33 cameras, careful inventory planning was essential, from heads and lenses to protective covers and smaller items like wedges to level the Sheffield plate on Camera Three. I'd prep Canon 95:1 box lenses or other smaller lenses like HJ22s and wide angles for 6-yard cameras and beauty shots as required. I also needed to balance resources carefully, avoiding taking too much from other jobs running the same weekend.

Clients would often request that I operate a camera, allowing me to work with different crews, meet new clients, and gain exposure to various production styles. In addition to overseeing all the jobs the OB company had to offer, these requests allowed me to broaden my experience across a diverse range of outside broadcasts. This role taught me the importance of preparation, quick problem-solving, and building connections across the industry.



One minute, I could be working on Goodwood Festival of Speed on the rally stage, and the next, I could be at the Royal Albert Hall for Last Night of the Proms, a scripted musical show.

**The Movement and Skill of Steadicam.** As a Steadicam operator, understanding the positions and roles of other cameras, whether on an outside broadcast or in a studio setting, is essential. The ability to navigate through a space while carrying 25 kilograms of gear, all while staying as unnoticed as possible, is a skill that requires both physical endurance and spatial awareness. In larger environments like football stadiums, the task is somewhat easier because most of the cameras are focused on the action happening on the pitch, giving you a bit more freedom to

move without being caught in the shot. Wearing black is also crucial—it helps you blend seamlessly into the background, ensuring the focus remains on the broadcast, not the operator.

However, in more intimate and dynamic studio settings for example Question Time, the challenge is much greater. The set is designed as a 360-degree space, with the audience seated directly opposite the panel, creating an environment where every angle is in play. Unlike in a sports stadium, where the primary focus is the field, on a show like this, both the panel and the audience are equally part of the broadcast. This means that every movement has to be carefully planned and executed to avoid drawing attention or disrupting the flow of the programme, often finding opportunities to



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cross other cameras to make a shot using the narrative of the debate to time my entry and exit point, Maintaining that delicate balance—being mobile yet invisible—requires not just technical proficiency, but also a deep understanding of the production's rhythm and the way each camera is contributing to the final output.

**Physical Preparation and Endurance: Fitness for Steadicam Work.** Operating a Steadicam isn't just about technical skill—it's also a physical challenge, especially when the job demands prolonged concentration and endurance. For instance, during the play-off final at Wembley, one of my key shots is to follow the winning team up the stairs to the Royal Box. After a full 90-minute game, and sometimes extra time and penalties, climbing those steps with

a 25-kilogram rig can be intense. By that point, every step requires complete focus to keep the shot steady, especially amid the crowd's energy and the players' emotions.

To prepare for moments like these, my fitness regime includes core strengthening, balance training, and leg endurance exercises, all tailored to build the physical resilience needed for extended shoots. My routine also incorporates regular cardio to maintain stamina, especially for those times when quick movements and steady tracking shots are essential. Maintaining this fitness directly impacts the quality of my shots, enabling me to capture each moment steadily and precisely, even when pushing through physical fatigue.

**My Steadicam Kit: Tools for Precision and Flexibility.** Over the years, I have assembled a Steadicam kit that allows me to handle a range of demanding projects with precision and adaptability. My main rig is the M2 Volt, a reliable setup that offers advanced stabilisation and allows me to capture smooth, cinematic shots even in complex settings. I pair it with both a G-50 and G-70 arm, which gives me flexibility depending on the weight and requirements of the camera setup for each job.

To enhance the focus and control of my shots, I use a Terratec RT Motion follow focus kit, which allows me to adjust focus seamlessly, even while moving. My Pro Vest offers the necessary support and adjustability for long shoots, and I have added various accessories to customise the rig based on each project's unique demands. Altogether, this setup provides the stability, control, and freedom to capture the shots that clients rely on, whether on a bustling set or a live broadcast.

**Heat and High Stakes: Filming in Saudi Arabia.** Probably one of the most challenging things I have worked on is the Saudi Pro League. I remember getting in the car one afternoon, looking at the thermostat reading 50°C, knowing that later that evening I would be operating Steadicam on a game with Ronaldo on the field. Temperatures in Saudi Arabia can remain intense even at night, often hovering around 29-32°C (84-90°F) in August, especially for a 9 pm kickoff. During the rig, when it was hotter, the challenge was to keep the kit protected from the sun and manage gear to avoid overheating. Not turning anything on until the last possible moment. Every aspect of operating in this climate required careful preparation and endurance, but adapting to these conditions was a rewarding experience.

**The Art and Adaptability of Live Sports Camerawork.** While much of my career has been rooted in live sports, I bring

a versatility that adapts across different genres. Sports camerawork demands instinct, precision, and an ability to capture each player and reaction in real time. However, my aspirations reach beyond sports, with a strong interest in drama, commercials, and film.

One of my proudest achievements has been creating and producing The Short Film Show, a series dedicated to showcasing the work of independent filmmakers. The idea took root after working on a feature film and realising how limited the platforms were for short films. I wanted to give filmmakers a way to reach a wider audience, allowing their diverse storytelling and creativity to shine. Launched in 2018, the show has since become a go-to venue for short film lovers and a unique platform where these works can be appreciated on their terms.

The industry segments differ greatly in style and pacing, but my adaptability lets me navigate these worlds seamlessly. In sports, every moment is unscripted, while drama and film require meticulous planning and a heightened focus on emotional storytelling. I'm excited by the prospect of blending my sports background with the artistry of scripted content to create something distinct. Each genre has its rhythms and rewards, and I'm driven by a desire to expand my skills and contribute creatively in every field.

**Memorable Projects.** One of my early outside broadcasts was The Gods' concert, a gritty event that felt like a rite of passage. Imagine a dark room filled with clouds of cigarette smoke, the relentless thud of heavy metal music, sticky carpets underfoot, and strobing lights flashing over a crowd of dedicated headbangers fully immersed in the experience. The atmosphere was intense and chaotic—a real baptism by fire for anyone new to live events. My role as a camera assistant was to help the camera operators manage their cables, keeping everything clear of the performers. Sounds simple, but in a room full of rock fans, this quickly became a challenge.

It was tough work, but it made me realise that television production is not just about the technical side; it's about adapting to every environment and working seamlessly with the team, even in the most unconventional settings.

**Industry Camaraderie.** Over the years, I have built strong connections across the industry. Television is unique; you might work closely with someone, not see them for years, and then pick up right where you left off. This camaraderie and shared experience make each project rewarding. From sports finals to live concerts, the real reward lies in the teamwork and pride of delivering something exceptional.



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**Camaraderie and Networking:  
Building Connections that Last.**

In this industry, connections are everything, and the camaraderie built with fellow crew members often opens doors to new opportunities. The television world is an interconnected one, where the people you work with today could be the ones recommending you tomorrow. I have found that jobs frequently lead to more work, as conversations on set turn naturally to upcoming projects and potential collaborations. This field is very much one where work begets work—if you are actively engaged, dependable, and easy to work with, people take notice and remember.

Many of my most meaningful professional relationships began on set, often in intense and challenging conditions that fostered a strong bond. Some of these connections started with a few weeks of work and have grown over the years, creating a network that is not just about professional support but also a sense of belonging

that is unique to our line of work. These shared experiences, the late hours, and the unspoken teamwork required to pull off a seamless production build a trust that is hard to replicate elsewhere.

Over time, these relationships become a part of your career foundation. You rely on your network not just for work opportunities but for advice, collaboration, and support in an industry that can be both unpredictable and highly competitive. The shared highs and lows, the last-minute adjustments, and the satisfaction of a job well done build a strong sense of camaraderie, one that I consider as vital to my career as any technical skill or piece of equipment I use.

**Personal Growth and Industry Realities.** Reflecting on my career, I have seen the television industry evolve in ways that make it both exciting and challenging. With larger companies downsizing and smaller ones emerging, budget cuts have often led to smaller crews and a greater emphasis on individual versatility. This shift

has required everyone on-site to be more adaptable, contributing creatively and technically to ensure each production meets its high standards.

In sports broadcasting and live events, for example, delivering a complex production with a reduced team can mean stepping into roles that require more hands-on involvement. When working on a smaller crew, I have learned to be more self-reliant, troubleshooting technical challenges and adjusting in real time to maintain the quality viewers expect. I always bring my Steadicam kit at a full, reliable setup, knowing that my consistent rig and familiarity with my equipment will be essential in adapting smoothly to any production's unique demands.

Through these shifts, I have come to understand that delivering top-tier results is not just about having the latest gear or the largest team—it's about honing technique, maintaining a focus on precision, and finding solutions in the moment. Keeping up with advancements in camera technology has also helped me stay competitive and adaptable, ensuring I can meet the demands of modern productions. This ongoing growth, coupled with resilience, has reinforced my commitment to delivering excellent work despite changes in the industry's structure.

In the end, these experiences have underscored the value of flexibility, continuous learning, and a deep-rooted dedication to the craft—qualities that have allowed me to meet challenges head-on while remaining focused on the art of storytelling.

**Advice for Newcomers.** For those just starting, the television industry can seem daunting, especially with the influx of new talent entering an already saturated field. But despite the increased competition, there are ways to stand out and build a lasting career. I often tell newcomers not to panic. In the beginning, it is natural to worry about getting steady work, but in this field, your network truly is your net worth. Building connections can open doors, offer new opportunities, and provide support when you need it most. But most of all be adaptable and do not be too proud to turn down jobs that are not always as glamorous as you would like.

While the industry has grown more competitive, I have found that those who are adaptable, dedicated, and skilled at fostering professional relationships have a clear advantage. These connections often introduce you to unexpected opportunities and make your reputation a valuable asset. Remember, it is not just about breaking in but about creating a presence that endures, a brand that endures.

**A Vision for the Future in an AI-Driven World.** As technology evolves, I often find myself contemplating the future of camera operation, especially with AI and automation increasingly part of the conversation. There is talk of robotics replacing some roles, but from experience, I believe there will always be a need for the human touch in sports broadcasting. When filming a live football match, so much hinges on split-second decisions—moments that are hard to rationalise but often just feel right. This intuition and spontaneity are irreplaceable and make all the difference in capturing the game's energy.

That said, automation has proven useful in certain settings. Take the robotic head, like the Fletcher system, which I have used on the outside courts at Wimbledon. This system, with LiDAR-tracked cameras, allows me to oversee multiple cameras remotely, handling four angles at once without needing additional human operators. It's impressive and efficient, especially in controlled settings. But even with these tools, nothing quite matches the dynamic instinct of an operator making real-time adjustments that enhance each shot's storytelling impact.

**Finding Rewards in Every Project.** Many projects have been rewarding, and it's not always about the budget or the high-profile nature of the work. Often, it's the crew I am working with and the collective dedication to the task that makes a project memorable. There is a unique energy that comes from being surrounded by people who know their craft and are equally invested in the quality of the final broadcast. Driving away from a job feeling genuinely happy and satisfied is a frequent experience when I have had the chance to work with such a talented team. Those moments remind me that job satisfaction often lies in the experience itself rather than in external rewards.

**Handling Pressure with Perspective.**



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Television can be a high-pressure environment, but I have learned to put things in perspective. When things go wrong or tensions run high, it is important to remember, as many say, "it's only television." This simple reminder helps me stay calm and focused. People may demand perfection, and we strive for it, but when circumstances spiral out of control, sometimes you just have to take a step back, laugh, and keep moving forward.

**Looking Ahead: Embracing Every Opportunity.** Reflecting on my journey so far, I'm reminded of the many lessons learned, the connections made, and the constant evolution that makes working in this industry so rewarding. Specialising in Steadicam has opened up a new creative path for me, and I'm eager to explore it further. Each project—whether covering live sports, capturing intimate studio moments, or working on dramatic productions—continues to push me to refine my skills and adapt to new challenges.

For those just starting out, remember that

building a career in television isn't a straight line. It's about staying adaptable, learning from each job, and making the most of every connection. I'm grateful for the opportunities and support I have received from mentors, peers, and clients along the way, and I look forward to wherever this journey takes me next.

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