

# FILMMAKERS' FORUM



The HBO series *Ballers* focuses on retired football player Spencer Strasmore (Dwayne Johnson, left), who now works with Joe Krutel (Rob Corddry) as a financial manager for younger players.

## Shooting *Ballers*

Moderated by David Heuring

Season 4 of *Ballers* premiered on HBO in August, with the action now predominantly set in Los Angeles rather than Miami. The show is presented with a unique blend of locations, writing and visual style, stretching the conventional half-hour comedy format beyond recognition. Anthony Hardwick was behind the camera on Seasons 3 and 4, following Rodney Taylor, ASC (Season 2); Jaime Reynoso, AMC (Season 1); and Tobias Schliessler, ASC, who shot the pilot. Production was initially located in Miami, and shifted to Los Angeles from Season 3 onward.

Hardwick shoots the show primarily on Alexa Minis with Leica Summilux primes, along with a pair of Fujifilm Fujinon 19-90mm Cabrio (T2.9) zooms and an 85-300mm Cabrio (T2.9) as well. Most episodes are accomplished in six-and-a-half or seven days, working 12 or 13 hours per day, on average.

Much of the production team — including Hardwick, head writer Rob Weiss and creator Stephen Levinson — worked together previously on the HBO series *Entourage*. Hardwick and Weiss, the latter of whom has also directed three episodes over the past two seasons, recently sat down for a conversation about the intersection of cinematography and the other creative and logistical aspects of making *Ballers*.

**Rob Weiss:** From your perspective, what's the main difference between *Ballers* and *Entourage*?

**Anthony Hardwick:** It's rare to be able to alternate, as a DP, on shows — and on a half-hour show it's very rare. *Entourage* was actually one of the few that I've ever worked on that was a half-hour with alternating directors of photography. That affords you the time to prep with the incoming director, to see all the locations before the shoot, and to be that much more prepared. Obviously, that's a huge advantage. But on *Ballers*, we make up for that with a top-notch team. I've got great representatives from my electric and grip departments who can cover me, and be my eyes and ears on the scouts, and we confer and make plans, and things go pretty smoothly. Our team is wonderful throughout. Ryotaro Kinno is the best first AC I've ever worked with. The producers are wonderful. We get all the support we need in terms of accommodation — whatever might make the show better and the shoot more efficient in the end. If a location seems like it might be really tricky, for example, they'll bend over backwards to work it out and allow me to see it.

**Weiss:** This season, we're on-stage at SportsX a lot. You obviously know the setting, but then you're tasked with trying to find a way to make that location fresh every time. You don't want to go through the same movement, the same angles, just utilizing the space the same way. So there are always challenges. Season 3 was probably a little trickier with the locations because we were still

*Ballers* unit photography by Jeff Daly, courtesy of HBO.

shooting Los Angeles for Miami. When we moved the [show's setting] to L.A., it opened up a lot for us because we could shoot anywhere, provided we could make it work within the schedule. One day we added a scene at Malibu Pier with Joe [Rob Corddry] and Spencer [Dwayne Johnson] on the walk-and-talk, and it was all about the light, which meant we were trying to coordinate with the sun.

**Hardwick:** Yes, we scheduled those scenes and shots to keep them mostly backlit, which lent a really nice look — not to mention that we could work faster. This show is heavily location-based, which is what's great about it. When you're doing a show like *Ballers*, which is largely about the glitzy side of the sports business, Los Angeles has a lot to offer. It's all about seeing these places — restaurants, beaches out in Malibu — visually stimulating locations that create a backdrop to those characters. Jim Gloster, our production designer, did an amazing job designing the SportsX set. There are so many nooks and crannies that help us keep it fresh throughout the season.

**Weiss:** Obviously, it's a little bit clearer when you can show up at the actual location, as opposed to shooting things against bluescreen and trying to visualize it, which we did more of on previous seasons set in Miami. It's much easier to shoot L.A. for L.A., especially since the show is about three-quarters locations.

**Hardwick:** One similarity between *Ballers* and *Entourage* is that they are both about a glamorous arena and a group of guys who are trying to achieve something. And I think in both cases, we're trying to bring the audience in, to feel a part of that. You're there with these guys. In *Entourage*, you were the fifth member of the group. In *Ballers*, you're just one of the guys tagging along, seeing life through their eyes and experiencing it with them. And I think the handheld aspect is critical to that. You don't want it to be rough handheld, but you want to be right there with wider-angle lenses, and not like an observer that's removed or omniscient in any way.

**Weiss:** Part of it is pacing. We script so that the episodes have that kind of drive to them. You want that energy to be onscreen as well. In the writing, we trust the team to take that to the next stage, to prep



Head writer and executive producer Rob Weiss (left) regards a setup alongside cinematographer Anthony Hardwick during production of the Season 3 episode "Ricky-Leaks," which Weiss also directed.

and then to production. When I'm writing, if I don't see it, I can't write it. That doesn't mean we're going to shoot what I imagine there, things change. But I think that's where the collaboration comes in. You're working with a team of people who are in that creative zone, feeling the show. And as a result, the answers come fairly quickly once you're out there and looking at the locations.

**Hardwick:** We move quickly. We shoot almost 100 percent on prime lenses. Primes are not slow to work with; I feel like they are very fast to change. I have an absolutely top-notch camera crew, and if we're going to change lenses between takes, it takes all of 30 seconds. I don't think it's a factor, other than a few situations where you might want to resize within a shot. But to me, the benefits of working with primes outweigh those minor inconveniences every now and then.

**Weiss:** I rely solely on you for lens questions, Anthony. Me telling you about the lenses would be like you telling me how to write it. We may have a suggestion or two, which is nice, but when we're behind the monitor, I rely on you when it comes to lenses.

When I'm directing, I like to go into

editing with as much coverage as possible. Obviously, the schedule affords what it affords. But if we want a scene to settle for a moment, we can do that. I would typically shoot it wider and move in on it. It goes to the tone of the show. Despite the fact that it's a half-hour comedy, it still has those dramatic moments where we know we want tension. For a recent episode, we referred to the films *Heat* and *The Godfather*. I'm not trying to compare our show to them, but the spatial element of the way we shot took some cues from them.

**Hardwick:** Every location is unique. An example that comes to mind was a bridge location, where Spencer Strasmore, Dwayne Johnson's character, was talking about the loss of his brother, who committed suicide from the bridge. We're down in Long Beach with this giant bridge, and it's just such a beautiful visual. So we did a lot of low-angle and wide shots, showing Rob Corddry and Dwayne Johnson driving up in this beautiful Jaguar. But it's also an intense conversation that they're having; Dwayne's [character is] opening up about something very personal. So we shot with telephoto-length lenses to cover the conversation between them when it got into that zone. This was one of the rare instances where we used the Fujinon 85-300mm Cabrio on the



Strasmore and Krutel meet with Lance Klians (Russell Brand), the CEO of extreme-sport agency SportsX, in the Season 4 episodes "Rough Ride" (top) and "Forgiving Is Living" (above), the latter of which was directed by Weiss.

longer end for one camera, and I put the 135mm Leica Summilux with a 2x extender on the other. I also had A camera on a dolly and B camera on sticks. We try to maximize lenses and choose positions for the camera to give a scene the best scope we can, but always in service to the story. Sometimes there are those moments where you want to be on longer lenses and utilize that compression.

**Weiss:** In last week's episode, Joe and Spencer are making all these [phone calls to] legendary athletes. We wanted it to have that anxiety, that fast-paced, frenetic feeling. There was definitely a conversation about how to cover that, because we wanted these guys crossing paths and all that movement, and yet we knew we had

to be cutting from phone call to phone call.

**Hardwick:** Rob and Dwayne are talking on the phone with their various clients and trying to save the business, basically. They're in SportsX on their side of the conversation, walking around. We were trying to keep it kinetic, to maintain some movement to it, because it can get very static on a phone call. On the other end were famous athletes like Tony Hawk and Laird Hamilton. We tried to ground these characters in iconic locations that highlight what they're known for, and every one has its own motion and action.

**Weiss:** We knew what we had to do. It was a lot of running and gunning. We didn't have a ton of time to do it, but I think we blocked it out first with the actors, found

out what felt the most natural for them, and then started to move them. Then we figured out where we were going to be and how we were going to cover it. But every scenario is different. The unique nature of every location will lend itself to highlighting the scene and the actors in a certain way. And sometimes your options are limited.

**Hardwick:** Dwayne is a pleasure to shoot. You can't find a bad angle to shoot him from. His face is just chiseled out of granite, with great features. For the most part there's very little you have to do. Obviously, we do what we can to make him even more heroic, but he's an excellent subject to shoot. And when you're right there with him you feel that — his intensity and his power. Rob Corrdry is one of the funniest people in television. Their rapport is fantastic.

**Weiss:** They both have incredible charisma that's just going to transcend whatever the options are [for] shooting them. We let them banter back and forth in their relationship, and with the addition of Russell Brand, the dynamic is potent. They bring it to life.

**Hardwick:** This show is definitely about movement. It's a world of people who are making moves and trying to make something, and they're active people with no time for small talk or chitchat, unless they're trying to hide something. There are scenes where you'll have two people just seated that are a little slower — but they are fewer, and have more impact as a result. It's a very New York vibe. Rob is a New Yorker, and that's the way he writes. 'Let's cut to the chase and keep the show moving.'

Having the head writer of the show direct is a pleasure. Coming up with answers and solutions is instantaneous. You're very fast on your feet — you see things in your head very quickly. One advantage of *Ballers* is that we have only a handful of directors who do the show, maybe three or four. We don't have 10 different directors coming in. When you've got a small, tight-knit group, everybody's on board and everybody knows the style of the show very well. I love working on the show. It's the most fun show I've ever worked on. ●