

Short Takes

Steadicam operator Andrew Mitchell captures singer Carrie Underwood's performance for the opening sequence of NBC's *Sunday Night Football*.



Game On

By Andrew Fish

If your Sunday nights are reserved for the gridiron, you're well acquainted with the work of Chuck Ozeas. This year marks the cinematographer's fifth time shooting NBC's *Sunday Night Football* open, his fourth with country sensation Carrie Underwood, and his first with a fully revamped format. The spot features a new theme song — closing out the previous tune's decade-long run — and gone is the montage-style visual structure in favor of a behind-the-scenes football fantasy sequence presented as a simulated single take.

When AC stepped onto the set at Universal Studios last summer, Ozeas and NBC Sports Group vice president and creative director Tripp Dixon — the latter of whom was helming the production — were overseeing a shot of Underwood swaggering past an NFL tour bus. An Arri Alexa Mini was mounted to a Pacific Motion Control Gazelle crane, and an Arri Amira was tracking the singer via Steadicam. Both cameras were recording to CFast 256GB cards. Fourteen 960-watt MacTech LEDs with silk diffusion were serving as space lights overhead. Lightning Strikes 8K Paparazzi strobes were flashing under the supervision of Ozeas' longtime gaffer Chris Conway, as digital-imaging technician Dylan Johnson monitored the shoot in Rec 709 with Blackmagic Design's DaVinci Resolve.

Assisted in prep by an animatic and in post by prolific visual effects — both provided by Soho VFX — the *Sunday Night Football*

intro was shot in ProRes 4:4:4 at 3.2K resolution and framed for a 1.78:1 aspect ratio. The cameras, which shot at 800 ISO and at approximately a T2.8/4 split throughout, were rented from CamTec in Burbank. "Kavon Elhami and Scott Travers at CamTec have always been very supportive of my work and each new project," says Ozeas. "I'm always confident that the gear they provide will be in perfect running order." The production employed Angenieux's Optimo 17-80mm (T2.2) zoom on the motion-control rigs, 15-40mm (T2.6) for Steadicam and 28-76mm (T2.6) for the opening shot.

During AC's set visit, we rubbed shoulders with NFL stars Russell Wilson, Kam Chancellor and Earl Thomas III of the Seattle Seahawks; Tyrann Mathieu and Patrick Peterson of the Arizona Cardinals; Antonio Brown of the Pittsburgh Steelers; Clay Matthews III of the Green Bay Packers; and Khalil Mack of the Oakland Raiders. Other prominent players featured in the finished spot include Odell Beckham Jr. of the New York Giants, Dez Bryant of the Dallas Cowboys, and DeMarcus Ware of the Denver Broncos.

Far from immune to the rush of working with the sport's top talent, Ozeas reveals in his chat with AC both his techniques and his zeal for the job.

American Cinematographer: What shooting philosophies did you have in mind when you first began this project?

Chuck Ozeas: I've done this open for five years, and every year I have the same mantra: Keep it as real as possible. Because we

Unit photography by Paul Drinkwater, courtesy of NBCUniversal Media, LLC.

shot so much blue- and greenscreen — this year in particular, but even in years past — and we're working on such tight time schedules with the players, if you're not careful everything is going to end up feeling very digital and post-heavy. So every year, no matter what the concept is, it's always my personal challenge to keep it as real as possible, and that's one of the things I think we achieved this year.

What equipment was helpful in achieving that realism?

Ozeas: Arri's SkyPanel has been one of my favorite lights for the last six months. It's such a versatile unit. On one set, Carrie is walking up to the concourse — where the greenscreen will be replaced with the whole stadium preparing for *Sunday Night Football* — toward a studio that Al Michaels and Cris Collinsworth are in. For this sequence, we created three huge soft boxes that we hung from the perms, creating a large, open, soft skylight for an interior late-day stadium. They were 30 feet long by about 10 feet high, and we put five SkyPanels in each. I added golden hues to seven of the 15 SkyPanels — scattering them randomly throughout the three boxes — and we'd then dissolve back and forth between the regular skylight that was 4,000K and this golden hue to give the feeling of late-day sun and moving clouds.

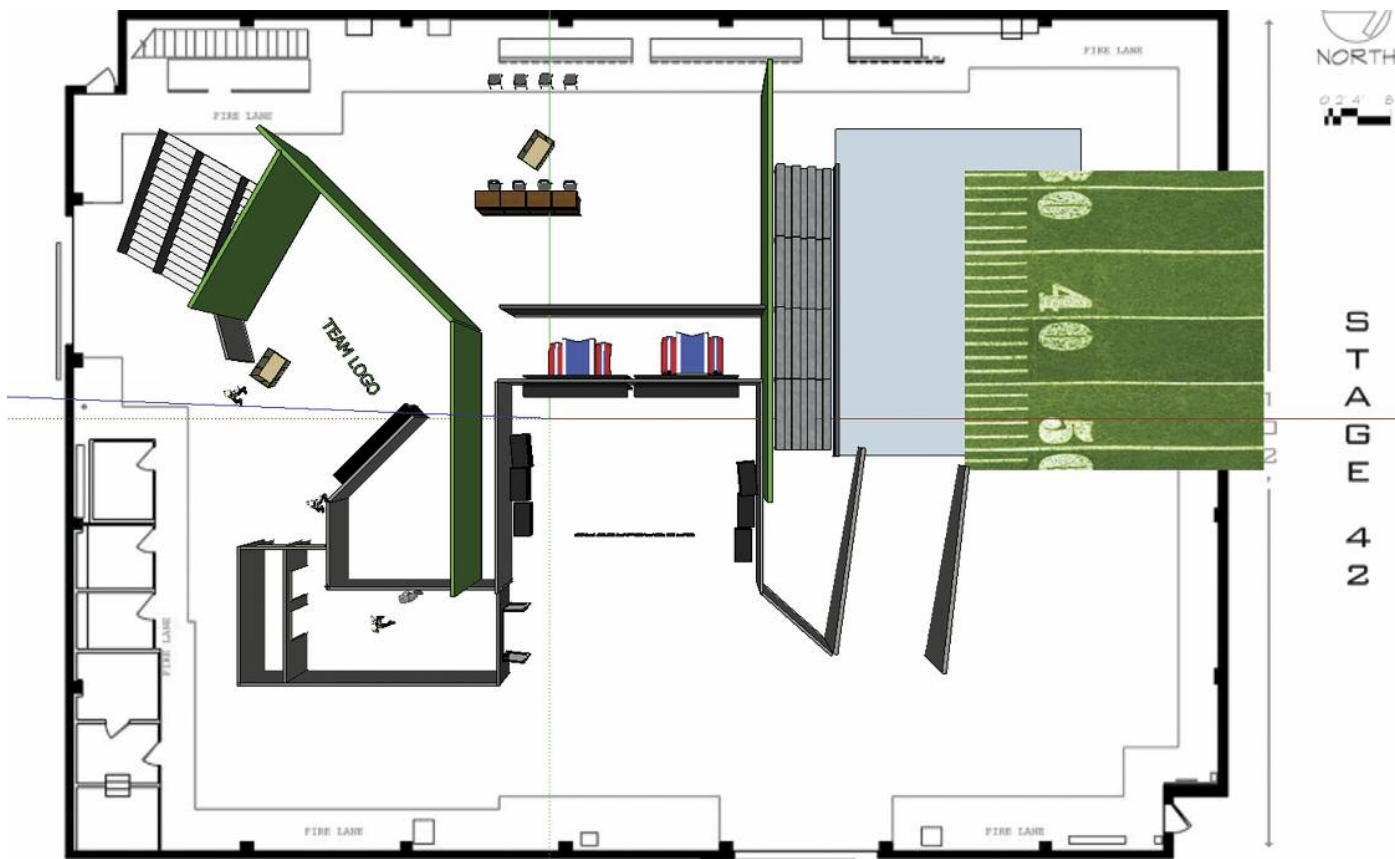
The second place we used the SkyPanels was outside of the stadium when Carrie walks out beneath the fireworks. Lighting-console programmer Gideon Markham fed footage of a fireworks show into our High End Systems Full Boar 4 board, and it automatically created the colors and the decay that you would see at a real fireworks show. I was amazed at how realistic it felt just standing there looking at the light on your hands. I loved it.

What kind of planning was involved in shooting each scene such that they would stitch together for the appearance of a single take?

Ozeas: The timing really became the main issue — making sure that the transitions from one scene to the next would be exactly timed out to the song — and that's where the animatic from Soho VFX came in handy. Because the song is created before we shoot, if we extend one scene too long, we're kind of stuck. In years past, you could change the narrative of the edit after we shot



Top: Players from different NFL teams hit their marks while Underwood performs the opening song. Middle: Soho VFX created a full animatic of the spot to show how much ground Underwood had to cover within each shot. Bottom: Cinematographer Chuck Ozeas monitors a scene.



Top: Ozeas worked closely with production designer Evan Rohde to devise a plan for fitting nine sets into two stages. Bottom: Many sets included significant visual-effects extensions, such as this locker room set — where Underwood did multiple takes with different players from different teams so the sequence could be traded out week to week as the season progresses.

— it was kind of up for grabs — whereas this year we could have probably edited our dailies together on set and basically seen a first cut. I have to give a shout-out to our Steadicam operator, Andrew Mitchell. I don't know if I could have done it without him. He has impeccable musical timing, and was amazing during our long choreographed takes.

Production designer Evan Rohde created an artistic rendering of the sets as well during preproduction, which helped with lighting and camerawork. We worked closely together to problem-solve and come up with creative solutions to enhance each shot.

How did the use of pre-programmed motion-control cranes help you on this production?

Ozeas: One of Tripp's edicts is that we don't want to make 'characters' out of the extras. Because it was motion control and the camera is always in exactly the same position during each pass, we were able to shoot Carrie first with her hero light — which was a Briesse Focus 180 [mounted to



Above: For the extended choreographed takes, five electrics and two grips had their hands full as they kept things running smoothly. Right: Ozeas measures the light on set.



the underside of the basket on a 65-foot articulating arm] — and then turn that key light off and use the SkyPanels from above to toplight the crowd with the fireworks effect. And because we tiled the audience, there were about eight to 10 takes of the crowd in different positions so visual effects could clone them and make it a much deeper scene.

In addition, the NFL players' schedules are pretty unpredictable, so I knew the motion control would come in handy in order to return and shoot players by themselves and place them in later. We used tape marks on the ground and each player had his own lane to follow so they wouldn't overlap each other and the whole shot would work together as one. [In addition to the Gazelle crane, the production employed Pacific Motion Control's Graphlite crane.]

What other lights did you use on this production?

Ozeas: [Gaffer] Chris Conway designed an 8-foot-by-4-foot soft box called

a Monster Box, and I used two as backlights and one as a hero light for Carrie as she walks down the stadium stairs. The unit contains 32 500-watt nook lights and is heavily diffused with 129 [Heavy Frost], so that it's an incredibly soft, contained light that doesn't have to be bounced and is really easy to move around. A large percentage of the lights on the production were rented from [Conway's] Monster Lighting.

All four of the cameras had ring lights on them to serve as beauty lights; the two motion controls had the larger 19-inch LitePanels Cinema-series ring lights and the Steadicam had a regular LitePanels ring light onboard. We were able to dim all of these remotely, adjusting on the fly during the takes. Another unit was the Brieze Focus 77 that we followed Carrie around with during the bus and locker-room scenes and parts of the field scene. One of our electrics, J.P. Brennan, carried the Brieze on a pole all day and he did an amazing job. The 77 was pretty heavy, but Chris came up with the

idea of using a fishing-pole holder that went around J.P.'s waist.

At one point, J.P. led Carrie with the 77 into the 180 Brieze hero spot [at a simulated loading dock] in front of the L.A. Rams cheerleaders. We had two semi-trucks on which we replaced the headlights with Philips SL Nitro 510C LEDs. Carrie did a little dance move with Antonio Brown, and we cycled through the NBC peacock colors in the background with the Nitros as if they were coming from the headlights of the truck. I'm a lifelong Steelers fan, so being able to give Antonio Brown a little extra love was nice.

Tell us about the final grade.

Although it's a bit of a sticking point for me, the grade was handled in concert with the effects work. Working this way I find that I am not able to finesse the shots and add the final touches that I would in a traditional color session, which make projects look as good as they can. It's a bit frustrating, but with everyone having access to color correctors these days, this workflow has become more prevalent.

What do you most enjoy about your work in general and about this project in particular?

Shooting spots and short-format projects provides an exciting opportunity to create something new with each successive job. A couple of days before *Sunday Night Football*, I was shooting a spot for *Ghostbusters* — scary green lighting and all. How different can you get? I work with different directors every week, so I find one of the most important first steps is listening closely to what that director's goals are and specifically where they need my support.

I really enjoy developing the *Sunday Night Football* concept with Tripp each year. For several months, we go over what the concept is and how to develop it visually and make it interesting. On most of my other jobs I'm brought in a couple of days before the shoot; on this project I have much more responsibility regarding scheduling and the overall logistics. This is my favorite shoot of the year. It's complex and high profile. Having grown up in Pittsburgh, I'm also a huge football fan, so getting to shoot something that I'm going to watch every Sunday night is an added bonus! ●