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REPRINTED FROM APRIL 18, 2005

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CAMERA SUPPORT

Frezzi's Stable-Cam

by Carl Mrozek

The proliferation of small-format digital camcorders has spawned a new generation of camera support gear specifically targeting these welterweight cameras.

This includes an assortment of shoulder braces, stabilizers, body-mounted stabilizers and even small, high-quality tripods and pan/tilt heads. However, small cameras invite the sort of mobility you can't get with a tripod and this may be even more critical for the new generation of mini-HD camcorders.

Although the lens stabilizers incorporated into many small DV camcorders does help, the camera's slight mass makes it difficult to get smooth pans and tilts, let alone stable establishing shots without a well-designed camera brace. One such device, the Frezzi Stable-Cam, also doubles as a power station capable of supplying most 1/3-inch CCD camcorders and a small light for at least a couple hours.

FEATURES

The Frezzi Stable-Cam consists of 3/8-inch square rods made of airplane-grade aluminum. The vertical support has two stages, with the bottom shaft sliding neatly between a pair of parallel shafts, much like a tripod leg. A rubberized grip knob locks the shaft in place when a comfortable operating height is selected.

The quarter-sized knob can be locked down and loosened quickly to suit the situation, including the possible need to float the camera over the heads of a crowd during a media feeding frenzy. Part of the genius of Stable-Cam is that it uses gravity and a rubberized bike handle to provide support



The Frezzi Stable-Cam holds the camera, light and a full-size battery.

at the base without connecting to a belt of some sort.

The horizontal shaft supports a generic camera-mount bracket with a tie-down bolt and the entire bracket slides about 12 inches fore and aft down the shaft. The angle of the horizontal and vertical supports can be adjusted precisely using knobs resembling miniature tires.

There is also a stabilizer bracket that mounts in the horizontal plane, perpendicular to the length of the horizontal shaft. It is controlled by a pair of handgrips and provides Stable-Cam with three-point balance

FAST FACTS

Application

EFP

Key Features

Hands-free support for small-format camcorders; provides mount for large batteries and accessories

Price

\$495

Contact

Frezzi Energy Systems
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and control. According to Frezzi, it also removes wrist stress and arm fatigue, and enables a more cinematic style of shooting.

One clear strength of Frezzi's Stable-Cam is its ability to deliver power from beefy broadcast batteries, enough juice to operate the camera and a low-wattage portable light for an extended period. The key is stepping down the 14.4 Volts required by big broadcast cameras to 7.2 Volts, the input required by most small digital camcorders.

To power my Sony VX 1000 with the onboard battery, I needed a proprietary adaptor cable. This had to be specially fabricated, since the DC power tap on the VX1000 differs from that of more recent Sony camcorders like the PD150 and PD170.

The power cable threads into the power tap at the front of the shoulder brace on one end and plugs into the DC power port on the camcorder. There is also a fuse between the two plugs to protect the camcorder from potential overload by the 14.4V

batteries. The battery bracket features a Frezzi-made Anton/Bauer mount, located at the base of the shoulder pad.

IN USE

I tested Frezzi's Stable-Cam using the Sony DCR-VX1000, an older DV camcorder with three 1/3-inch CCDs. The unit came with a compact one-battery charger and 45W Frezzi NiCad brick-type battery that snapped easily into the Anton/Bauer power bracket at the tail end of the shoulder pad.

I had no difficulty threading the 3/8-inch bolt into the camera-mount bracket and finding a sweet spot for it along the two-inch track. As the VX1000 has no flip-out screen, I positioned the camcorder near the base of the horizontal support rail to take advantage of its eyepiece viewfinder. Although I made some minor lateral adjustments to the camera's position and angle, most of the time the camcorder bracket was locked down at the rear end of the horizontal shaft.

I used this setup to shoot some interviews, several of which were in tight quarters inside a rustic maple sugar shack where using a tripod would have limited my background options during the interviews. With Stable-Cam though, I had a broad selection of shots and was able to reverse my angle of view quickly and easily—literally with my back against the wall.

One of my first and strongest impressions of Stable-Cam was how comfortable and stable it felt even with the base of the vertical shaft merely resting on my hip instead of being fastened to a belt. With the vertical post attached to a pair of rubberized bicycle handles that grabbed the fabric of my pants, the camcorder was quite stable and upright.

I was equally surprised at how easy it was to grab establishing shots when partially zoomed out and even close-ups of the

sugar-making operation without switching to a tripod. Moreover, I was able to conduct interviews while holding the shot and could do slow push-ins and -outs, even during interviews.

On top of that, I managed to get some fairly useable wide tracking shots of the interviewees tromping through the snowy woods, from maple to maple, with the help of the two-handled stabilizer bar. The dual grips provided a strong handle on the camcorder and could compensate for bumps and jolts, especially while moving.

My biggest frustration with the Stable-Cam was the difficulty in adjusting the camera's horizontal plane, such as you might do with a tripod's leveling ball. My only recourse was to tilt left or right as needed. Another minor inconvenience was coping with the slack in the power cord without getting snarled up in it. This was an inevitable result of the camcorder being quite close to the power port most of the time; the power cord was long enough to work with the camera 12 inches forward of where I had it positioned.

Energy-wise, the ability to draw from a much bigger power reservoir enabled me to keep the VX1000 powered up between takes, letting me grab shots I would have otherwise missed. With a fully charged 45W Frezzi NiCad brick, I was able to power the VX1000 fulltime and Frezzi 18W HMI Sungun part-time for more than two hours.

Although this is slightly less than the maximum run time with an internal NiCad Sony battery, the addition of a muscular portable light normally creates a heavy draw.

Stable-Cam, with its onboard power system, solves both the stability and power supply problems in one fell swoop, and is also a neat spot to hold the Frezzi MA-18 HMI Sungun.

Although it's difficult to quantify the gain in comfort and performance that comes

from using a hands-free camera brace like Stable-Cam, the benefit is unmistakable. Among other things, it makes it possible and even convenient to perform other key functions like making phone calls, eating, drinking, scratching, using a restroom, all without removing the support rig.

This can boost efficiency greatly when shooting news, events and especially documentaries, where the great moments always seem to come when you are least prepared to capture them. With Stable-Cam, not only is your camera always poised and positioned to grab great shots on the fly, it can also be kept powered up and ready to shoot as quickly as eye and trigger finger can respond.

SUMMARY

For the most part, Frezzi's Stable-Cam delivers what I expected: a comfortable platform for handheld and hands-free shooting. It does it in a way that permits other essential activities without having to remove it.

Nevertheless, I also found it easy to remove, collapse and set down safely, whether on a table or in the backseat of a vehicle. One factor is the long locking lever for adjusting the angle of the shoulder pad. It both locks and unlocks securely yet quickly, and collapses the Stable-Cam into a tight, portable package. In addition, I found it a great, even if not perfectly safe way to get on-the-road shots—through the windshield—while motoring!

Stable-Cam's flexible camera-support features may be even more helpful as pro DV and now HDV camcorders become ever better and hence get used for a broader spectrum of events. This could be a handy piece of gear for those planning to use the new generation of HDV camcorders with 24p to shoot digital dramas, documentaries and even events like weddings—wherever mobility is paramount and stability is a necessity. ■