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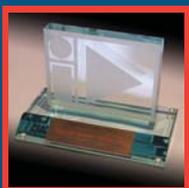
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READY STEADY GO!

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READY, STEADY GO!

Colin Riddle and Joshua Richards take the Easy Steady rig from IDX for a spin

CR... This review very nearly didn't get written. Joshua and I arrived for our training session with IDX at Slaughter with minutes to spare after a frustrating, accident induced detour across country, guided by a Satnav that inexplicably, but clearly working within the boundaries of Murphy's law, had decided to speak to us only in Afrikaans. If it ever happens to you, it is worth knowing that "Het opnieuw berekenen" means "you are going the wrong way". It was worth it though!

From total beginners to enthusiastic Easy Steady users in under four hours is some sort of record. Easily understood when you know that the session was conducted by the guys who designed and manufactured the Easy Steady camera stabilization outfit marketed in the UK by IDX. Fabrizio Minuz and Riccardo Filippini's enthusiasm for their baby was infectious and their technical and user knowledge vast. Within minutes steadycam operation was methodically demystified, and, with our confidence boosted, practical demonstration began.

To demonstrate the Easy Steady's almost magical properties Riccardo Minuz did a fairly energetic piece of free form dance around a heavy broadcast camera - attached to him by a bionic arm. The camera remained motionless and pointing in the same fixed direction the entire time. Impressive!

The build

But hey, all steadycams do that don't they? Well yes, but the Easy Steady does it for a lot less money than most of the others and when you start to look closely at the build quality, the tolerances and the materials used it is quite obvious that the Easy Steady is not just a cheap version of a other makes, but in another class altogether.

Take that bionic arm again, actually the Stabilisation Arm. It is just one part of a modular system but its workmanship and finish have more in common with aircraft engineering than with film and TV grip equipment. Those isometric arms are machined out of solid aluminium bar. Other makers use presses to build their arms, a cheaper but less robust solution. Attention to detail is impressive. The whole modular system - and there is a lot of it (if you can think of an extra part you need, chances are it is already in the catalogue) - can be assembled with two star drivers and a flat head screwdriver! And the vest that supports the whole thing is built like body armour from Cordura fabric, with satisfyingly durable looking fittings and fastenings.

But what is the Easy Steady like to actually set up and work with? I don't know because due to a recurring back problem I only managed about ten minutes strapped inside the thing, but camera assistant Joshua Richards does and here's what he thinks.

Operation

JR... I would like to say firstly that I have many years experience with camera stabilisation systems and that I am familiar with other rigs such as Steadicam and GPI. But, I haven't and I'm not. In fact, this has been my first experience of a camera stabilisation system of any description. So to those of you well versed in the dark art of smooth movement, please forgive my layman approach.

To start with, a steadycam rig has three main components: the vest, the arm and the sled. The arm is where the real magic takes place. What is four springs in a twin parallelogram setup to some, is the exploitation of a natural (or possibly supernatural) phenomenon to others... or at least me. As we wanted to use our Panasonic AG-HPX500 camera with matte box and onboard mic (totaling over 7kg) we were given the 'Kit Free' to take away. This is the third setup in the IDX Easy Steady 'Lite & Go' range.

The Range

Now is probably a good time to explain the differences between the three rigs on offer from Easy Steady: 'One', 'Too' and 'Free'. To start with, the differences between the three systems are only found with the arms and the sleds. The basic arm, with its four light springs, is capable of handling cameras up to 4.5kg (9.92lbs). Replacing these with four heavy springs upgrades the arm to handle a weight of up to

8.5kg (18.73lbs) and it is also possible to use two light and two heavy springs to get just the right amount of support. As for the sleds, these all have the same telescopic centre post (65cm - 1.35m; 25.59" - 51.96"), 7" LCD monitor, gimbal, head and camera plate.

Kit 'One' uses the basic arm and a sled which has a single V-lock or Gold Mount (optional) battery pack and a lightweight monitor and bracket. Kit 'Too' uses the upgraded arm and features a double battery pack on the sled. The double pack not only extends the battery life but also helps to counterbalance the weight of the larger cameras that the rig can now tolerate, with the upgraded arm. Kit 'Free' uses the same upgraded arm and the same sled as kit 'Too'. The difference is that the sled has an extra connections box below the head with additional 12V power and video in/out sockets. This allows for accessories such as a light or radio mic to be added to the sled. A more substantial monitor bracket is also fitted with the standard 15mm rods capable of taking larger HD monitors with HDMI connectivity and other accessories. The sled is internally wired too so there are fewer trailing leads. Nice touch!

Transport

The rig comes in a Pelican-style heavy-duty trolley case and there are a couple of problems with this. First is the fact that there is no foam padding around the sides of the case which results in an unhealthy clunk when the case is closed and moved to an upright position for transportation. Secondly, you still have a BNC video cable, monitor, monitor hood and key adjusters to store in the case, and you could reasonably assume that some would wish to carry a different weight spring set and even a spare battery. All this results in a lot of expensive and sensitive kit loose in the case. Ideally I would have liked to have seen a lot more foam inside, and with the shapes of the different components cut out so as to provide a snug and secure fit.



Set-up

From opening the case to being ready to press the red button is an acquired skill in itself, requiring practice. The rig works beautifully - but only if set up correctly! Every time the camera is put on the sled, the balance needs fine-tuning. It is quite remarkable how the slightest of changes to the camera - for instance the position of the view finder or on-board mic - affects the balance of the rig.

Something that many of you experienced steadycam operators will be aware of, but that I certainly wasn't, is the issue of balancing a rig in the open. It can be done, but even in a light breeze it requires greater effort to balance and control, as the rig is not working with you to stay upright, like it is designed to. Even if set up precisely though, on a breezy day the camera acts like a sail in comparison to the rest of the rig making it seem top heavy. A problem, I imagine, with steadycam rigs in general. However it requires very little effort to correct and fine movements can be achieved very easily.

When balancing you have several options. You can extend or contract the centre post (which directly affects the amount of effort required to keep the rig upright when moving forward or stopping suddenly). Then you can angle the batteries closer to or further way from the centre post and finally slide the batteries and/or monitor in or out from the post on their rod brackets. Then for fine-tuning the balance there are two screws below the camera plate which move it forward/backward and left/right.

CR... Balancing the camera and sled was perhaps the most demanding part of setting up. The levelling screws need very slight adjustments to affect the camera's position on the sled and have no calibrated markings or direction arrows to help you decide which way to turn them. We resorted to diagrams drawn on post-it notes eventually and this simple device speeded up the process considerably. When balance has been established the camera is spun ninety degrees from the horizontal and allowed to return to the upright position. It should take about four to six seconds to do this and this time is used as a guide to the response of the rig when moving.

A shorter time gives more control for novice users but also means less damping effect. A longer time means smoother movements - less reaction to starts and stops, but requires expert handling to achieve it. This is where you discover if your balancing efforts have been successful as the camera SHOULD return to the vertical position perfectly aligned. If it leans one way or the other then it is out with the post-it notes again and more tweaks on the knurled knobs.

Vesting up

JR...With the sled and camera in perfect harmony the rig is parked off on the C-Stand - a wide based tripod - whilst you get the vest on. The Cordura vest is built to a very high standard and is extremely well tailored and comfortable in use. It comes in one of four sizes (Steadycam themselves only supply two vest sizes). Ratchet buckles at the waist and under the arms provide a fast and secure fit. The cut allows for comfortable movement from standing, down to a squat and the top half also takes into account the female form. Whether you prefer keeping the arm on your dominant side or if you prefer to swap it - the choice is yours. Four screws are all that stand between you and swapping sides, or raising/lowering the arm connection point.

Attaching the arm to the vest is simple as you have two thumbscrews that need minimal effort to lock it in place. If you find that when set up, the sled has a tendency to move toward or away from you then these same two screws can be adjusted to bring the arm up to a more neutral position. The only problem with this method is that there are no markings to indicate to what degree you might have made an adjustment. So every time you attach the arm you need to re-establish that neutral point. Again some form of calibrated scale would have been very useful here.

Ready to go

Ok, so the sled is balanced and the vest and arm are fitted - how does it feel?... Surprisingly comfortable. Weight is something that Easy Steady are proud of keeping to a minimum, with the Kit Free weighing in at under 10kg (22lbs). Of course depending on your camera and



setup you could still be carrying about 15-20kg (33-44lbs), and after a while your legs will remind you of that fact.

Once you are ready to go the first thing you find is that you instinctively move your upper body to keep the camera in balance. Indeed as you become more accustomed to the Easy Steady the more you realize that the rig dictates your posture and not the other way around. You react as you move to keep the camera from flying away from you and as a result the rig becomes an extension of your own body working in harmony with it.

Practically, as an operator, if you want to concentrate just on framing then an assistant watching your step is essential. The design of the kit allows for front tracking shots to be taken without the operator walking backwards but your attention cannot always be on obstacles and tripping hazards - chances are if you are watching the monitor, you won't be watching your feet, so it is really a two man job.

Switching from front to back walking shots is simply a matter

of reversing the monitor at the base of the sled and spinning the camera, but as this upsets the balance of the rig it is not something to undertake lightly as re-balancing takes time.

Putting it to task

CR... As we were going to be taking the Easy Steady away with us after our initial training session, Riccardo, himself an experience steadycam operator, offered to set up our own camera on the Easy Steady and balance it for us. To give us a bit of an advantage later, when we would have to do this without his help, I used my little FlipCam to record the entire balancing procedure. I was surprised when we played back the recording the next day to discover that it had taken him only six and a half minutes from start to finish.

Our own efforts were a little less successful but we did manage to get it down to about eight minutes by the time it was due to return the rig. Not bad!

But what about results? We used two local events and a shoot at a fire and rescue unit to give the Easy Steady a workout. 



Two were in crowded public places with the usual logistic and health and safety problems and the other involved a lot of fast tracking and movement. Picture stability was uniformly rock solid and extremely smooth on all but a very few shots – usually the unrehearsed ones, and we were particularly impressed with the fluid look of the fast tracking shots at the fire and rescue unit.

We soon learned that the best results were achieved by shooting in wide angle with the focus set at mid range as obviously manual focusing is out of the question. (However it is possible to hold reasonable focus when tracking if your assistant keeps you and your subject at the same relative distance throughout the track). To be fair, the lads at Easy Steady have already come up with a solution to this problem and a radio controlled follow focus unit will soon be available, with a wireless HDMI monitor for the focus puller.

The shots from both public events were excellent and the Easy Steady really came into its own for shooting both stage work and open air performances. When shooting stage performers the rig's ability to go from well above the operator's eye line to a

low shot whilst crabbing is beautiful to behold! As were the shots we did of street performers weaving in and out of the audience. The combined movement of both performers and camera creates a dynamic that is impossible to achieve any other way.

Conclusions

JR... To sum up: Easy Steady has succeeded in producing a rig capable of giving the competitors a smooth and steady run for their money. Fabrizio and Riccardo have certainly met their goals of producing not only a lighter rig than most, but one that is in general at least £1,500 less than the cost of the camera it is capable of supporting. The Easy Steady is a fantastic piece of engineering that is capable of incredible things. There are things it can do that cannot be done with anything less. If for example you want to follow a child on a tricycle through the halls of a hotel (Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining", by the way, was one of the first major films to use this technology) without making the audience nauseous, then the Easy Steady is just what you need!



CR... I have to say that the Easy Steady acquitted itself well in the hands of us beginners. Once set up it was a pleasure to use and produced stunning results that belied our inexperience. The build quality is surprisingly high for what is essentially a low cost version of a very high priced piece of kit. Do not confuse the Easy Steady with some of the cheaper steadycam copies coming from India and China. The Easy Steady is the real thing, designed by an experienced operator and engineered to a very high standard. We were particularly impressed by the quick and

simple set up procedure and the well thought out and rugged modular construction of the system. But it was the pictures from this versatile unit that impressed us most: simply stunning I think sums it up! ■

**Colin Riddle M.M.Inst.V.
Joshua Richards**

Notes: Our thanks to Robert Holland at IDX (www.idx.tv) for arranging the loan of the Easy Steady, Riccardo and Fabrizio (www.easysteady.com) for their enthusiastic training session and Mark Richards of Aurora Imaging (www.photowales.com) for taking the pictures.

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