

# Labs offer technology tutoring

*Search for added winter revenue spawns e-sports division for PhotoWave; Natural Color Lab shows photographers how to use new equipment*

All-digital sports photography is making first-quarter sales a whole new ball game at **PhotoWave Inc.** ([www.photowave.com](http://www.photowave.com)), Warrendale, Pa. The company's line-up has been 100 percent digital for some time now; but, as happens so often in sports, a rookie supplied the winning play.

PhotoWave's three portrait studios converted to digital more than six years ago. This enabled them to offer such new services as executive portraits shot, digitally enhanced and delivered in just 30 minutes.

Then, four years ago, the PhotoWave getDigital Training Center opened, as gradually more and more portrait and wedding photographers in the area began to realize the benefits digital photography offered, but were unsure how to begin.

The Training Center schedules various three-day "A Foundation for Success" classes, which cover not only digital cameras and equipment, but also the full spectrum of skills needed to create and maintain a profitable digital studio, such as marketing and promotion, spending and pricing, outsourcing decisions, etc.

Tuition for three-day classes is \$599, and the Training Center allows pro students to apply their **Kodak ProReward Points** to the cost. Supplementary two-day Photoshop classes, and one-day marketing and sales classes also are available to students with prior digital experience.

With the number of digital photographers on the rise, the PhotoWave e-Lab was the next logical step. The lab offers clients three levels of digital enhancement and silver-halide prints made from digital files on a Kodak Pegasus printer. Maximum print size is 20-by-32 inches, printed at 250 dpi. The e-Lab also features a 26-inch-wide **Accutech** coating machine for applying a protective coating to finished prints, and mounting services.

Three digital studios, a digital training center and a commercial digital lab certainly positioned PhotoWave as a leader in the portrait/wedding industry's long conversion to new digital technology. The problem was that digital technology, per se, did nothing to ameliorate one of the oldest problems in the business — the first-quarter slump in sales.

The All Sports Photo Network (ASPN) is proving itself to be the answer. "The sports division is the most exciting thing

we've done since we went digital," says **Kirk Russell**, vice president of marketing and sales for PhotoWave.

The company used the same formula it employed with its portrait studios to attract customers and to increase the average size of print orders; that is, to offer clients a whole new product line and services.

"Let's face it, sports photography is nothing new," Russell explains. "If we gave a presentation offering the same old products, the only reason a sports league would have to change is a much lower price. We didn't want to go that route."

Instead, PhotoWave used its digital experience and facilities to differentiate itself from the competition. All events are photographed digitally, and action shots were added to the standard team photo fare.

Because the photos are both shot and printed digitally, PhotoWave can deliver finished print orders in far less time than a



*The PhotoWave getDigital Training Center offers students intensive three-day classes to teach them not only the hardware end of digital photography, but the business end, too.*

conventional studio. Not only does quick turnaround make for happy customers, it permits the studio to vie for more bookings because, traditionally, team photos often are shot during the first two weeks after players receive uniforms, to ensure the photographs arrive by season's end.

Digital technology also made it easy for PhotoWave to generate a number of photo products — calendars, trading cards,

stickers, bag tags, magazine covers, etc. — in addition to standard team portraits, and to deliver them more speedily than their tradition-bound competitors. Finished orders also are placed online, so families can continue to place orders via the Internet.

PhotoWave also expanded the traditional bounds of “sports” photography. They shoot photos for band, dance and cheer-leading competitions, as well as less-known sports such as lacrosse and water polo. Add these events to basketball, football, volleyball and karate, and cameras are no longer gathering dust from January through March.

The initial success PhotoWave’s studios enjoyed with sports photography led to the launch last summer of **ASPN.com** ([www.aspn.com](http://www.aspn.com)), which essentially is the franchising of PhotoWave’s digital sports program.

“The training program we created for our dealers is end-to-end business in a box,” Russell says. “We not only train people in digital photography, but provide them with a major marketing program. Our dealers can’t succeed if we fall short in our ability to market successfully.

“We offer a proven program that features very sophisticated presentation and marketing materials, which are on the level of what one would expect from an advertising agency.”

PhotoWave makes its profits from order fulfillment only; training and marketing materials are free, though dealers must purchase their own high-end digital cameras. The program also provides a protected sales territory to each dealer and, when warranted, will assist a dealer in negotiating for a major event contract. Territories vary in size, depending on whether a dealer is working at sports photography full- or part-time, and whether it’s a solo operation or a dealer who purchased more than one camera for additional shooters.

PhotoWave employs 40 people to provide support services to dealers, and the certification process required to become a dealer can include off-site training for distant participants, depending on a favorable skills evaluation. (Dealerships are available nationwide.)

As of early last November, dealers numbered 21; Russell expected that figure to reach 60 by January. Though most dealers come from a photo background, it’s not a prerequisite. One dealer was a frustrated real estate agent, who has two sons in organized sports programs. She completed her dealer training, which includes shooting actual events, and then bought two cameras, which she now uses exclusively to equip the photographers who shoot for her.

“Our dealers can live anywhere,” says Russell. “They call us when they book an event, and everything they need to promote and market their products shows up on their doorsteps automatically.”

Though PhotoWave is reaping significant rewards from its various digital enterprises, a portrait lab can grow its business using digital technology for more modest endeavors.

For instance, **Natural Color Lab Inc.** ([www.natlab.com](http://www.natlab.com)), Stoughton, Mass., created a file transfer protocol (FTP) site to give each wedding-photographer client a page to which image files can be sent without having to worry about jamming up an electronic mailbox.

Each photographer’s page is password protected, and simple on-screen buttons enable photographers to tell the lab what they want done with each image. “More than 280 photographers have signed up for a page, and we receive about 20 orders per day,” says Natural Color Lab President **Charlie Poole**. “It’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

In fact, since the lab went online with its bridal website in May 1999, from which customers can order prints from

electronic proofs, the site has logged more than 250,000 hits.

“Normally, it takes a year, if ever, for some people who attended a wedding to see the proofs,” Poole says. “With digital technology, they get to view the proofs 10 days later, and are placing orders.”

Poole says it’s hard to tell if the website has increased the number of print orders, but says it definitely has motivated photographers to shoot a lot more film.

That, too, will slowly change as additional wedding photographers make the transition to digital. Natural Color Labs has begun offering photographers one-day seminars in digital photography. The lab, which owns two **Fuji** Frontier digital minilabs, teaches the classes using the new Fujifilm FinePix S1 Pro 3.5 megapixel camera, which accepts the majority of **Nikon** F-mount lenses.

“The S1 is a wonderful camera,” says Poole. “We take photographers by the hand, and show them the quality of output and what others are doing using digital cameras. They are simply amazed. We are seeing an increasing number of orders shot with high-end models. It’s very exciting.” **PM**

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