

Going it Alone: Video camera trained on success

•Thursday, December 21, 2006 ••By DUNSTAN PRIAL•STAFF WRITER

Gene Samuels' big break came at the expense of Nancy Kerrigan's knee.

While making a documentary on the 1994 Winter Olympic trials, Samuels, a freelance cameraman, filmed the attractive young figure-skating gold medal favorite as she left the ice and disappeared behind a curtain.

seated on the ground, screaming and holding her right knee, her face contorted in agony.

Samuels captured the images on video, even catching a glimpse of a hulking figure fleeing in the distance. It was later learned that Kerrigan's rival Tonya Harding was linked to the conspiracy in her attack.

The video played again and again and again on newscasts around the world, and Samuels was briefly something of a celebrity.

"I was in the right place at the right time, and that really helped my career. You can't buy that kind of publicity," said Samuels, a Franklin Lakes resident and sole owner of EFP Video Productions Inc., an independent video production company.

Nevertheless, as the 51-year-old Samuels describes his two decades as a one-man operation it becomes clear that luck had very little to do with his success.

Indeed, to keep up with the rapid technological advances in his industry and to stay ahead of the competition, Samuels has never been afraid to reinvent himself. Along the way, he has combed the world shooting sports, travel and food pieces, and picked up an Emmy Award for his coverage of the X-Games for ESPN in 1995.

After graduating from Ithaca College in upstate New York in 1977 with a degree in broadcasting, Samuels went to work part time at ABC Sports. He parlayed that into a full-time gig with WOR-TV (now WWOR) as a cameraman at Mets games. In the winter he worked the camera at Knicks and Islanders games.

Sports offered entree to WOR's news desk, and Samuels worked nights covering the New York area throughout the early 1980s.

Samuels said the notion to go out on his own planted itself in the mid-1980s, when WOR's engineering staff went on strike, and he realized he would always be at the mercy of union contracts and big corporations unless he forged his own path.

"It really opened my eyes. I had no control over my own destiny," he said.

So he gave up his health benefits, the company car with the New York Press license plates and all the safety and comfort that goes with a full-time job, and went out on his own as a freelance cameraman.

Having already earned extra money doing sporadic freelance jobs, Samuels had a handful of potential clients lined up.

But now he needed all his own equipment, so he took out a bank loan for \$150,000 and bought nothing but top-of-the-line technology.

Samuels is adamant on this point: "If you're going to go out and buy equipment for your own company, buy the best. It pays off in the end. The best doesn't break down. The best has warranties."

Working primarily for ESPN, it took Samuels just three years to pay off the loan.

Business thrived for 10 years as Samuels benefited from the explosive growth in cable television networks. He worked for the fledgling Food Network, for instance, scouring the globe with flamboyant television host Robin Leach on a show called "Gourmet Getaways."

Aspiring cameramen should "always try and catch a network early," he advised, because that's when the network has a lot of money.

The Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan scandal in 1994 was like icing on the cake. The work rolled in, and he won his Emmy in 1995.

"It was all word of mouth, I didn't need to do any marketing. It was beautiful," he recalled.

In the late 1990s, however, everything changed.

Networks like MTV introduced reality shows shot in a grainy style with inexpensive cameras, Samuels recalled. And the film was edited haphazardly, infusing the entire effort with a seeming lack of professionalism that viewers apparently found attractive but left professionals like Samuels unimpressed -- and looking for work.

Around the same time, many television networks were slashing their budgets as advertising revenues fell, further reducing work for cameramen.

"It was looking very bleak," said Samuels.

Americans returned to television news after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and his work picked up again.

A few years ago Samuels looked into the future and saw it in high definition. So he took out another \$150,000 loan, bought all new equipment, and enrolled in a three-day workshop of intensive training sessions to learn how to use it.

He was now a producer exclusively of high-definition programming.

"When you're in business for yourself you have to constantly reinvent yourself. And it's not always fun," he said.

In recent years his high-definition credits have included a documentary on pitcher Roger

Clemens' 300th victory for Major League Baseball Productions, "Biography" segments for the A&E Network, "Monday Night Football" for ESPN and a concert video of singer John Mayer, among many others.

Samuels is philosophical about the need for a one-person business owner to adapt to change. There is no one else on board to pick up the slack, he acknowledged matter-of-factly.

"Most people, at this point in their careers, they want to relax. By this time I should be on autopilot. But when you're in business for yourself that world doesn't exist," he said.