

# Steadicam Pilot



**BEN ALLAN ACS GETS HIS HANDS ON ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING STEADICAM MODELS TO EMERGE, THE PILOT VERSION DESIGNED TO HANDLE CAMERAS IN THE 1-5 KG RANGE.**

Since the Steadicam was introduced in 1977 it has become one of the favourite tools of many filmmakers. The Steadicam allows for a freedom of movement that often cannot be achieved using any other means.

It is also popular because it allows directors to often get many different shots within a single take or to move naturally with the action. Over the years there have been many versions of the Steadicam designed for different purposes but new owners Tiffen (of Tiffen Filters fame) have recently ramped up development of new designs.

The Pilot is the lightest and lowest cost Steadicam to ever share the same basic design as the full sized models. Compared to the simpler JR and Merlin models, the Pilot looks and feels more like a “real Steadicam”.

It has a vest, 2-stage articulated arm and what in Steadicam-speak is called the “Sled”. The sled consists of the battery and monitor at the base of a centre-post, on top of which sits the camera platform. The sled is connected to the arm via a free-floating “gimble” and the combination of the gimble, the arm and careful balancing creates the unique Steadicam movement.

These elements are the same on all Steadicams from the Pilot up and basic operating principles are also the same. The

biggest difference with the Pilot is that it is so small and light that instead of arriving in a number of bags and cases it lives in one large backpack and is very easily portable, even if it has to be packed in the same car as the camera gear. (Something not possible with a full size Steadicam and full size HD kit!)

I have been using the Pilot with the Sony PMW-EX1 and the two are quite simply a perfect match for each other. The EX1 sits neatly in the middle of the Pilot’s weight range and balances easily on the rig.

## **THE SETUP**

Setting up the Pilot begins with attaching the docking bracket to a stand. Although the genuine SteadiStand is not the cheapest option, it is well worth the minor expense for its stability and ease of use. The docking bracket also includes the Balancing Stud, which we will return to shortly.

Once the sled is docked the camera and battery are mounted on the top & bottom of the rig. The V-Lock Swit batteries that Lemac recommends work exceptionally well and a kit of 2 of these will easily get you through the biggest day of shooting you can imagine.

One unique feature of the Pilot (and one that I expect will quickly make its way up through the Steadicam range) is the



*"Once you start to get the feel for the unit, it is easy to understand why it has been labelled the Pilot. The sensation of flying is quite strong and good Steadicam operating has more than a little in common with good aviation."  
- Ben Allan (Watch Ben fly through the job of shooting some test footage on the Pilot at <http://www.steadicam.benallanacs.com>)*

small metal weights that can easily be added to various points around the rig to help balance and create a solid, stable feel.

With lighter cameras these can be added to the top near the camera, or with something like the EX1 they help balance the front of the rig against the battery at the back. Mounting the camera directly onto the Pilot mounting plate is relatively simple but certainly not something you would want to do several times a day.

At the recommendation of Lemac's Scott Backhouse I added a Manfrotto quick-release plate and I would say that for most users this is an essential add-on for the Pilot. If, like me you want to be able to move freely between Steadicam and tripod mounting a second quick release unit is a valuable addition allowing the second base to be left on your tripod and the camera almost instantly moved between the two supports.

Balancing the Steadicam is at least half the struggle and is an art form in itself. This process begins with mounting the gimble handle onto the balancing stud to that the sled is "floating" but not attached to the arm.

While achieving Static Balance or making the Steadicam sit level when untouched is relatively easy, Dynamic Balance is a bit more difficult even though the Pilot has been specifically designed with Dynamic Balance in mind.

It took quite a few years after Steadicam became popular for people to properly understand dynamic balance. The short explanation is that a dynamically balanced Steadicam will want to stay level even when the centre post is spinning. This is crucial if you want to be able to do whip-pans or quickly sweep around a tight corner without looking like you are suddenly on a boat. Luckily the process of dynamically balancing the Pilot is simple, if a little fiddly and there are some good tutorials available to help guide you through the process.

Now that the rig is nicely balanced it is time to "suit-up". The vest that comes with the Pilot is similar to bigger Steadicam vests at first glance it relies far more on Velcro, not only for adjustments but also for connecting the main parts of the vest. The good thing about this is that the vest is incredibly lightweight and surprisingly comfortable. Getting the vest to fit just right is well worth the extra few minutes it may take initially because of how much better it will treat your back at the end of the day.

The arm is one of the magical elements of the Steadicam and the Pilot arm really is a mini-me to the big ones. The arm is stowed in the backpack in two pieces but is put together in a matter of seconds.

### **LEARNING TO FLY**

After the arm is attached to the vest comes the moment of truth ... you bow before the rig to show your respect (more importantly to get the only angle that will allow you to attach the arm to the gimble!) then bend your knees and lift the rig clear of the stand. If you have balanced up well and your vest is fitting nicely this will be a genuinely thrilling moment.

Then comes the realisation that actually getting it do what you want is harder than the experts make it look! You don't control a Steadicam the way you do a tripod or even a jib.

The process is more like gently suggesting what you want and then enjoying the ride. Over-controlling by holding the unit too tightly is one of the hardest instincts to overcome.

As a new operator you should expect to do massive amounts of practice before achieving a good level of proficiency. But if you think this practice is not going to be fun, you should think again. This is an immensely enjoyable way to move a camera around and with such a lightweight kit it is possible to wear the rig for long stretches of time without exhausting yourself.

Getting to the level of proficiency of great operators like Harry Panagiotidis, Phil Balsdon or Martin Lee is certainly something that takes years. But for low budget productions to suddenly have such freedom to move the camera, with such a portable kit is a great addition to the creative process not to mention the workflow advantages of such a versatile kit.

*Ben Allan ACS is a freelance Director Of Photography based in Sydney. He has won many awards for his TV commercials, music video and TV drama photography and is currently preparing for the feature film "Rivals". Ben has been working extensively with HD for over 7 years.*

### **IN SUMMARY**

**AVAILABILITY**> [www.lemac.com.au](http://www.lemac.com.au)

**PRICE**>

**VERDICT**> The Steadicam Pilot is a powerful tool when combined with the new breed of lightweight HD cameras and great fun to use.