

TEST DRIVE

The Best Feature of Every Nikon Camera in One

F4

by Jack and Sue Drafaahl

Each time we do a test report on a manufacturer's latest camera, we discover that each new model usually has one feature that makes it stand out from all the others. Why doesn't at least one manufacturer make a camera that embodies the best of all their cameras on the market? We're talking about the best autofocus, most accurate metering system, fastest motor drive, and most importantly, a camera that doesn't require special lenses. Nikon boasts it has done just that, and we have to agree. Hip, hip, hooray for the long awaited Nikon F4 pro AF camera.

FOCUS SYSTEM

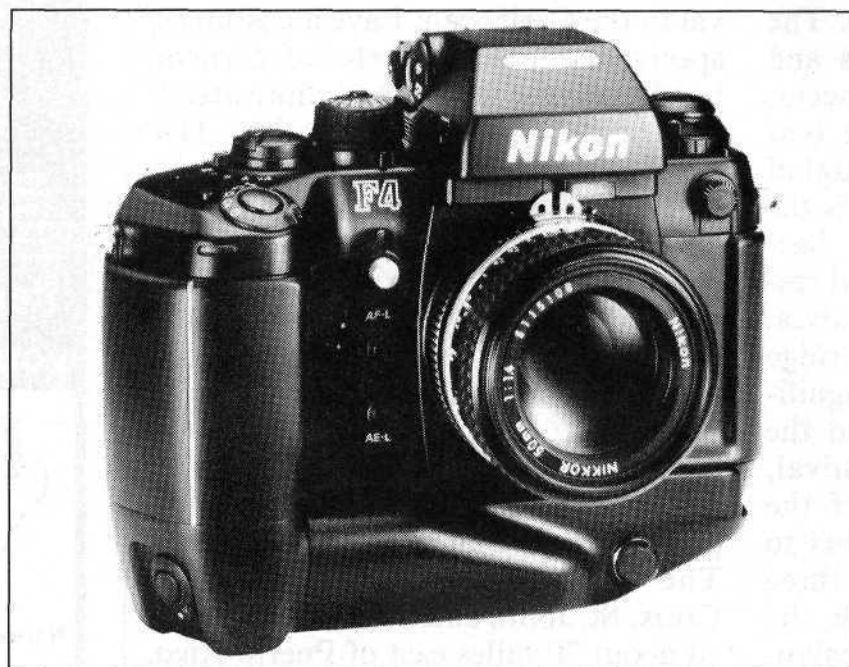
For the professional photographer, the F4's autofocus system is by far one of the most useful tools in photography. The system is extremely fast, and performed like a champ in light so low we could not see what the camera was focusing on.

Previously, special lenses that had a long throw, such as the 55mm macro, were somewhat slow when traveling from infinity to minimum focus. The stronger focus motors on the F4 have eliminated this problem, ensuring fast and accurate focus.

One test that caused most autofocus cameras to fail was when an object was so small in size that it fit just inside the focus brackets. Most autofocus cameras usually failed to lock in on the subject, but not the F4, no matter how small the subject.

The single-focus mode became very useful on a trip photographing ice

sculptures on the Columbia River. In many of the scenes, the primary focus was near the edge of the picture, which required panning the focus brackets to the side for a second, pressing down the shutter button halfway, and then panning back and shooting the picture. All this was complicated by slippery ice and 40-mph winds resulting in a



wind chill factor of -50° F. We had to brace ourselves against the ice and hold the camera with our other gloved hand. We sure uttered a "thanks" to Nikon for providing an autofocus system that we could count on. The last thing we wanted to do was to hug the ice with one hand, hold the camera with a second hand, and focus with a third hand (especially when we had next to no feeling in either hand).

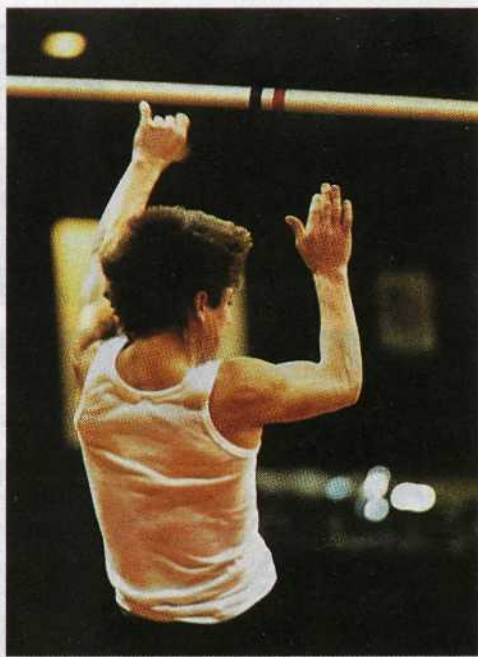
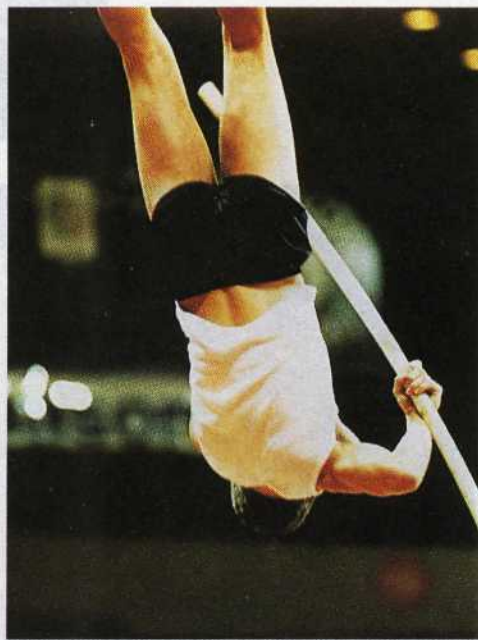
The most remarkable part of the focus system is evident when you slip the F4 into continuous-focus mode. The camera continually readjusts focus as you pan or zoom your subject. At first

this may seem frustrating, but remember that this mode is strictly for photographing moving subjects. If you combine this function with a CI setting on the motor drive (continuous low), you kick the F4 into computer tracking. This enables the F4 to track a moving subject, compute its change in speed and angle, and keep the lens in focus, even when the mirror is up.

Sounds great, doesn't it—but does it really work? We loaded a fresh roll of Ektapress 400 and headed for the airport. A twin-engine prop plane appeared, and when it was about the size of the focus brackets, we depressed the shutter button. We centered our concentration on just keeping the plane in the film frame, while allowing the F4 to compute exposure and focus. By the time the plane's wheels were overhead, 24 exposures had passed quickly through this computer with a lens. As we viewed the results, we found

that not only had the F4 focused all 24 frames tack-sharp, but it had also frozen the props in every shot with its $1/8000$ shutter speed.

We were so impressed with this tracking, we decided to try an indoor track meet. Here we had very low light levels and fast-moving athletes. We loaded the F4 with Ektapress 1600, rated it at EI 6400, and stood ready to track a pole vaulter. As the vaulter started his run, the shutter button was depressed, and another 20 frames passed from left to right. The action happened so fast we were sure that we had missed some of the shots. Wrong



Matrix metering, aperture-priority mode (f/2.8), -2 stops exposure compensation (to rate ISO 1600 Ektapress film at EI 6400), 1/50, computer-tracking autofocus mode.





Matrix balanced flash with SB-24.



Matrix metering, aperture-priority mode, $\frac{1}{250}$ at f/11.



Spot metering, shutter-priority mode, $\frac{1}{60}$ at f/11.



Matrix metering, $\frac{1}{8000}$.

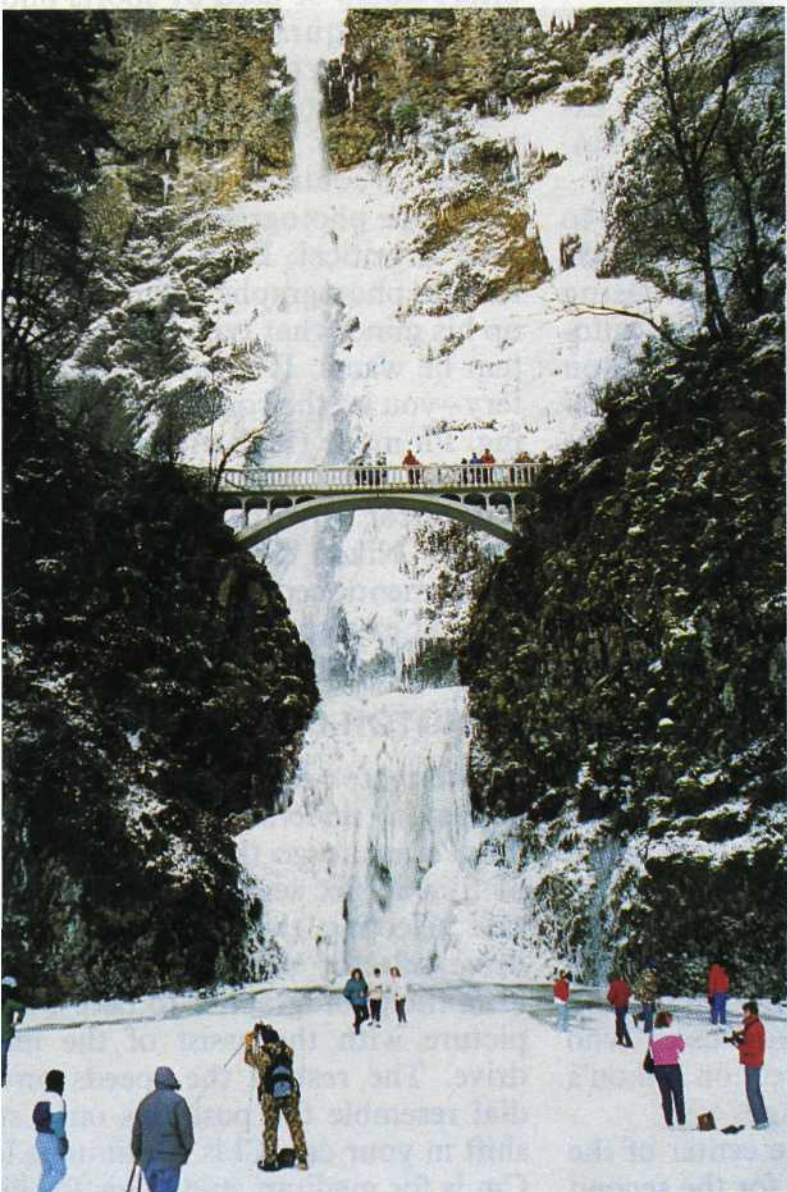


Center-weighted metering, -2 stops exposure compensation to push film speed two stops, aperture-priority.



Matrix metering, program, exposure of $\frac{1}{250}$ at f/8.

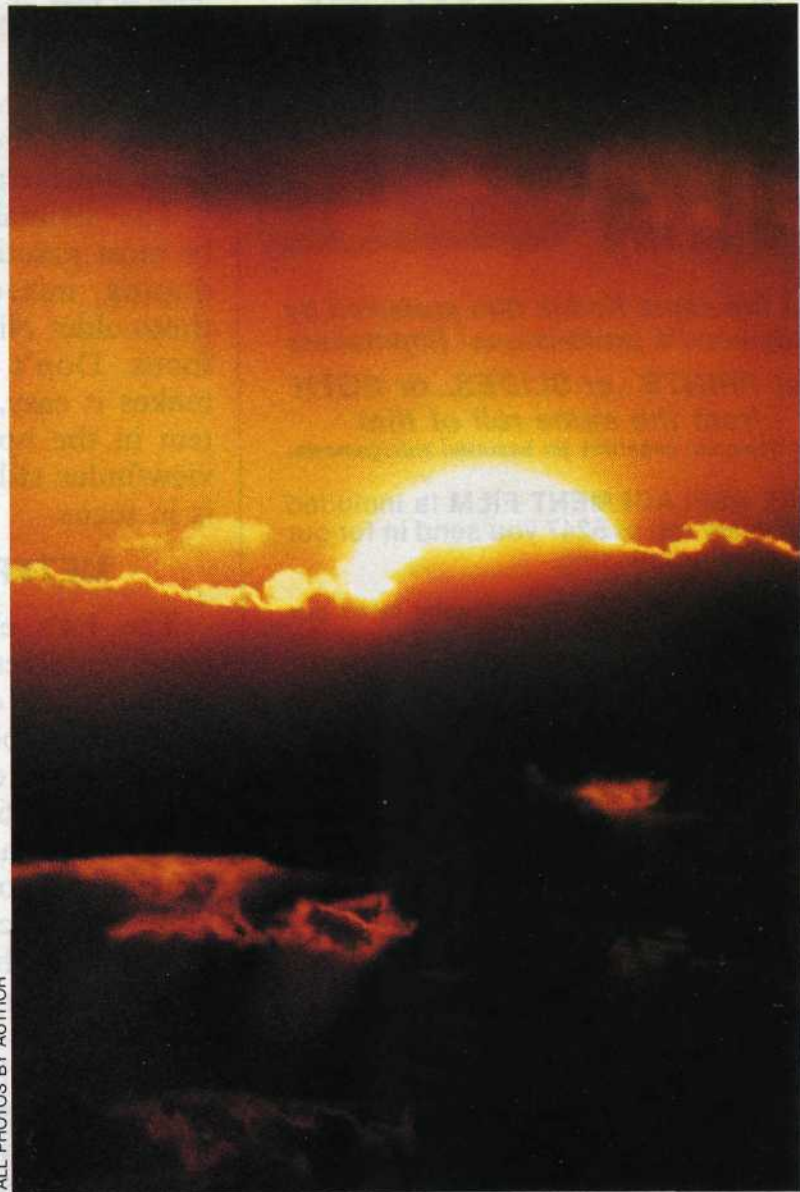
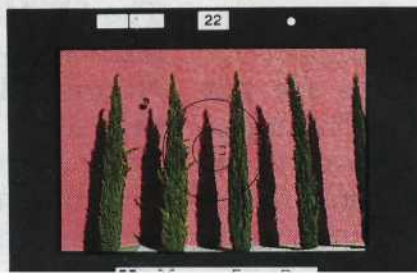




Matrix metering, manual mode, +1 1/3 stops compensation, 1/250 at f/5.6.



Matrix metering, program mode, 1/250 at f/11.



ALL PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

Spot metering, aperture-priority mode, 1/1000, aperture not shown because lens with no aperture ring was used with TC-16A tele-converter.



Matrix metering, aperture-priority mode, 1/250 at f/11.



NIKON F4

again. All were sharp and correctly exposed. (See the User Report on Ektapress films, elsewhere in this issue.)

The manual-focus mode seemed to be most practical for copy work, slide duping, microscopes, and for using those older Nikon lenses lacking autofocus. Don't worry, though; Nikon makes it easy, as the focus-assist system in the upper right section of the viewfinder still tells when the subject is in focus.

METERING SYSTEMS

The F4's exposure system has so many variables that at first it's hard to decide which combination is the best. Let's take a look at the three metering modes. The center-weighted meter concentrates 60% of the meter sensitivity in the larger 12mm circle in the viewfinder. To be perfectly honest, we found no practical use for this mode, as we were already so spoiled by the other two. We think Nikon left it there for those die-hard Nikon users who have come to love and rely on Nikon's center-weighted metering.

The 5mm circle in the center of the 12mm circle is the basis for the second metering system. This highly selective spot meter is very effective for the professional photographer who likes to base the overall exposure on a very small part of the picture. We found this meter function especially handy when taking pictures in snow country. From previous tests we know that snow requires a +1.3-stop correction from 18% gray. It becomes very easy to put the spot on a section of snow and overexpose by 1.3 stops—works perfectly every time.

The third and most complicated metering mode is the now-famous Nikon Matrix metering system. This meter first breaks the scene down into five segments, analyzing each for brightness and contrast. From there the scene is further broken down into 25 matrix boxes where a complex computer analyzes the data and determines the proper exposure. We found this meter most helpful when analyzing some of the more difficult scenes, such as high key, low key, backlighting, and about 90% of everything else.

EXPOSURE SYSTEMS

If three metering systems are not enough, multiply that times five exposure modes, to make 15 different exposure systems. Each exposure mode leans towards a specific type of photography. For instance, S (shutter-pri-

ority) would be used by sports photographers requiring specific shutter speeds to stop the action. On the other hand, the A (aperture-priority) mode would be for the photographer who wants to control the aperture, as in landscape photography where depth of field is critical. P mode (program) is for the photographer who can't make up his mind what type of exposure system he wants. It's sort of like the lottery—you let the computer do the picking. Ph mode (high priority) is for the photographer who wants to bias the computer towards higher shutter speeds. Nikon didn't forget those die-hards mentioned earlier; they still have manual exposure mode with its shutter speeds from 4 seconds to 1/5000.

MOTOR-DRIVE FUNCTIONS

The motor-drive functions are pretty easy to understand and use. If you don't want to go through a whole roll of film in six seconds, you would be safe selecting the S function on the drive selector dial. This function allows the photographer to take a single picture with the assist of the motor drive. The rest of the speeds on the dial resemble the positions on a stick shift in your car. Cl is continuous low, Cm is for medium, and Ch is for high-speed motor drive (5.7 frames a second). You select the speed depending on how fast the subject is moving and how many frames you need to document each movement.

CONFIGURATION OF EXTRAS

In the true Nikon tradition, the F4 has the same complement of professional extras. Mirror lock-up, self-timer, depth-of-field preview, eyepiece shutter, PC flash contact, motor rewind, multiple-exposure device, eyeglass correction, and over/underexposure compensation are just a few of the standard features that grace the F4.

Another useful feature is a second shutter release designed for ease when shooting verticals. Instead of reaching over the top or under the camera to depress the shutter, you just press the shutter release located on the side of the camera. This button also has a lock to prevent accidental release.

Full-function operation of the SB-24 flash is possible with the Nikon F4. The SB-24 and F4 work the same as the N8008/SB-24 combination (see the Nikon N8008 report beginning on page 38 of the November 1988 issue). Other accessories include three different backs, dozens of Nikon lenses, filters, finders, screens, and the list goes on and on. ■