

## Acratech Ultimate Ballhead

September 9, 2005

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Finally, after over 2 months of use in the field, I am ready to publish my review of the [Acratech Ultimate Ballhead](#).

I must first say that my experience with ball heads is limited; I have never owned the Arca Swiss or any of the other ultra expensive heads. Prior to getting the Acratech I was using a Chinese made head with its own quick release plate. I really have no qualms with how the Chinese head worked. In-fact I would recommend one for anyone on a tight budget. What lead me to wanting more, than what I had, was a mater of design limitations inherent to the Arca Swiss style. I do a lot of different types of shooting with medium weight lenses in all kinds of environments. My biggest complaint with my existing head was the limitation in angle either toward the ground or the sky. The Arca Swiss style heads are limited to about a 45 deg angle of movement unless one swings the camera down into usually one, or on some heads, two slots cut in the side of the cup that holds the ball. I find this cumbersome at best when trying to swing the camera skyward for a quick bird shot. Or, when I see some interesting flora on the ground close to me, finding that I again have to pivot the mount so that it can drop into the slot. Some would say "why don't you use the Wimberley Mount"? The answer is cost and size. I do not use a large 500 or 600mm lens, so I do not need the facility of this type of mount enough to purchase one and carry it around. I just want a lightweight head that I can drop my camera onto and shoot. When I saw the Acratech I was immediately intrigued. Here was a very unique design that was very light weight and offered a larger range of motion, no slot and reported to have very good holding power.



Acratech

Arca Swiss

I decided to try this head out and gave Arcratech a call to help me decide what options and how I wanted my head configured. First, the people at Arcratech are wonderful to talk to and my dealings with them as a company rank as one the highest and most pleasant of any company that I have ever dealt with. There are several options available and based on my conversation with them I decided to get the head with the mounting plate and detent pin (a spring loaded brass pin which keeps the camera from sliding off if the clamp knob gets inadvertently loosened) I also got the left hand controls and the rubberized knobs. I debated about the left or right controls and as you will see later in my review, the position of the knobs is important to how I use the head.



Acratech uses a quick mounting plate and clamp with the same standard dimensions as the plate made popular by Arca Swiss. This makes any Arca Swiss style plate also fit the Acratech. I ordered two plates for my canon lens mounts as well as a custom fitted plate for my Canon 1D Mark II body. Acratech makes a plate custom fit for various camera bodies which molds around the camera to prevent the plate from rotating. Their lens plates are also made to fit, however they also have a generic plate with a cork face for use on anything flat that they do not make a custom plate for.



When I received my order, just a few days after placing it, I was anxious to put my new tool to use. The first thing one notices is how finely made the Acratech is with a beautiful precise degree scale, and then how light it is, the whole thing is just 1 pound. The elegance of the design is significantly more striking when holding it in your hand then when seen only in a picture.



### Elegance and beauty are nice but how does it work?

#### Holding Power

When I am out in the field on nature shooting hikes I often have my camera and lens mounted to my tripod and carry it over my shoulder. One of the important issues to me is if the head will hold my 1D body and my heaviest lens, without slipping, while hoisted on my shoulder. When carrying my gear this way it puts a lot of stress on the relatively small attachment point at the ball. The ball has to be able to hold the cantilevered weight of the camera against the jarring and bouncing while walking and hiking. You may wonder if this is not putting undue stress on the mounts and if it would not be better to remove the camera from the tripod before hiking to a new location. With my shooting style I often see a bird or other animal life and I want to have the camera ready as quick as possible. I want to set my tripod down and shoot.

The ability of the Acratech to support the camera and lens under these conditions is superb. The head needs a moderate amount of tightening to securely hold its load. I have only had it slip on me a few times when I had only minimally tightened the clamp. I have been very pleased with how smoothly the clamp tightens. The amount of pressure can be adjusted to provide completely free movement or the right amount of smooth friction to move the camera but still provide stability, then, an extra turn can completely lock the ball for a ridged hold. When mounted to my Bogen 443 carbon fiber tripod the Acratech and tripod are amazingly light and are a joy to carry.



#### Camera Movements Beyond 45 deg

Now, my main hopes for this head were to be able to tilt and have easy movement beyond 45deg skyward and also toward the ground. While the design of the Acratech allows a 90deg tilt from vertical in one direction it also only goes slightly beyond vertical in the opposite direction. If you were to take a normal ball head and mount it on a 45deg axis, instead of a horizontal tripod top, you would have something similar to the Acratech. With this design you are allowed more freedom to pivot the mount around without having to slip the ball stem into a slot to get past 45deg. However this also has a drawback when trying to go the opposite direction, in that, you are now limited to going just slightly past vertical unless you rotate the head. The main benefit of the Acratech here is more motion without a slot. (more on this later)



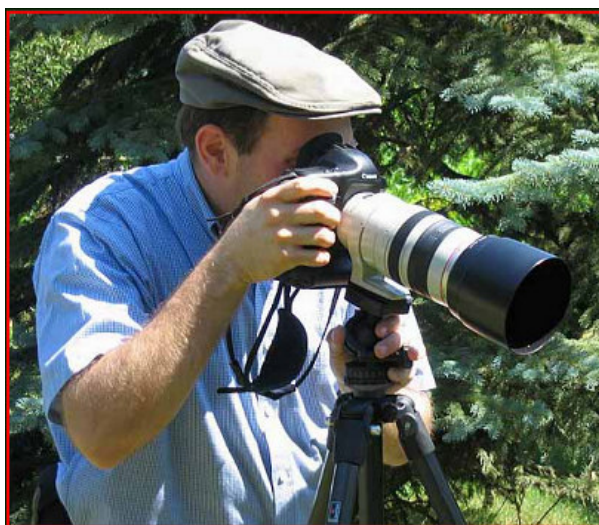
### No Dirt Here

This is a good time to point out another brilliant design feature of the Acratech. You will see from the picture that instead of the ball being mounted in a closed cup Acratech has mounted their ball in a band that wraps the center of the ball leaving the ball open and self cleaning. Any dirt or debris has no place to collect and build up but falls clear of the ball. This is a major benefit to the design because in outdoor use a ball head is often exposed to dirt dust and rain that can collect in the bottom of the ball socket. The Acratech further improves its ability to function in dirty conditions because it needs no grease. The ball clamp is lined with a Teflon bearing providing a smooth and lubricant free joint.



Well now, in actual use does the design of the Acratech provide any benefit to the standard socket and slot when it comes to positioning the camera for various shots?

Yes! In my opinion it does. I was not sure in the beginning if this was the case, but now after using it for almost 3 months I find it much more natural to use than the standard design. The key comes in positioning the high side of the clamp toward the left of the direction that you are shooting. This allows lots of movement up and down and toward the right side. If I am going to try and follow a moving object, as I often do, I loosen the panning clamp and the ball clamp which allows rotation of the head and movement of the ball. With my hand wrapped around the ball clamp I can rotate the clamp while gripping the camera with my right hand. This gives me complete support of the camera while allowing me to move the camera in any direction either pointing overhead or down close to me near the ground. Because I do not have to contend with any slot this movement is smooth and fluid. Here is where the controls on the left are important so you can grip the camera with the right hand and rotate and operate the clamp knobs with the left. See my pictures below.





### **The mounting plate clamp**

With the clamp design that Acratech has used, the clamp screw can be opened or closed in about 1 ¼ turns making it very quick to drop the camera into the clamp and tighten, or loosen it and pull it off again. This makes it great for those times when you just want to grab the camera off the tripod and use it hand held for a shot that you need complete freedom from the tripod. Or the other way around when you need to get it mounted up quick. You don't have to turn a long screw out to get the plate clear of the clamp. The only caveat here is that when I have a Canon long lens mounted up and I go to loosen the knob to rotate the lens for a portrait shot I often grab the plate clamp knob and loosen it instead of the lens knob. This problem could be fixed by mounting the lens the other way so that the plate clamp is on the right but then it is not as easy to release the clamp to remove the camera from the head. I guess you can't have your cake and eat it too.



## Conclusion

The Acratech is one of my favorite accessories. It is light, sturdy and precise. I am completely pleased with its performance and find that it meets my every need. I highly recommend that anyone looking for a ballhead consider the Acratech. It has won on every count for me.

At the current price of \$279.95 it is a bargain. You can visit the company online at [www.acratech.net](http://www.acratech.net)

**HIGHLY RECOMMENDED**