

## Photo Contest Tips for Better Pictures

**Are you the competitive type? Someone who enjoys putting your skill in front of the world for judging? If these skills include photography, then the world of photo contests is just for you!**

*By Sharon P. Fibelkorn*

The first step in any contest is to understand the rules and comply in order to actually get in the running. It has been said that most entries never make it into a contest because people fail to follow the directions. Now, I don't know if that's true with the recent Horse Illustrated photo contest because the entries I saw were all very nice with the correct information. With that said, let's begin our journey into the world of taking pictures and entering contests.

### A Little History

When photography finally appeared in Western industrialized society, let's say around 1839, it arrived to fill the cultural and sociological need for a more accurate and real-looking representation of life. Up until then the world was blessed with great (and not so great) painters, whose view of things was very idealized.

Let's also keep in mind that photography is an art form that we are all capable of performing, just like painting, singing and dancing. Photography not only gives us a way to document our lives, but also to express ourselves. And just like any art form, some of us do it better than others.

### On To The Show!

You've followed the contest directions. You've made it into the contest. So now, what will the judge really be looking for?

"Horses in Harmony" was the theme of Horse Illustrated's photo contest this year sponsored by those fine folks over at Horsecare Ireland! So let's talk harmony.

One definition of harmony is "a consistent, orderly or pleasing arrangement of parts." So that's what I was looking for when I reviewed the submissions in this contest, and I found a ton of great pictures to choose the winners from.

As a photographer, I personally like to see pairs and groups of things. I'm attracted to arrangements. So for tips, let's take some of the contest entries and talk about why I love them. I'll start with Brittany Clevenger's entry, "Ed Carter's Appaloosas at Sunset." This is an informal grouping, meaning that the horses are scattered and not evenly spaced. The sunset adds interest to the scene and Brittany shot the herd at the top of the hill for maximum interest – they are on display and are the main focus of this picture. But with today's cameras it is very difficult to get everything in focus and I would have loved the herd to be crisp in focus. Yet overall it's still a beautiful picture.

For a more formal composition, I looked to Tess Joy's entry of Buck and Duchess. Here we have two really beautiful American Quarter Horses grazing in tandem on a grassy field blooming with flowers. It's a very peaceful and harmonic scene with tack sharp focus on the horses. Overall, it's a perfect picture.

Then we have a lot of wonderful entries showing harmony with nature. Lois E. Overton's Morgan, GV King's Ransom, stands atop a hill grazing while autumn colors explode behind him. It's a great seasonal shot!

We can also look at time of day pictures such as Stephanie Utegg's registered Paint, Stranger,

grazing by a river with morning mist all around. There seems to be a little bit of distortion, as his butt looks a little large, so that's probably due to lens choice. But the overall picture is very quiet and has great color.

There's also harmony with people. The photo that stands out for me in this category is Miss Kelsey Van Ackeren's Appendix Mare, My Graceful Way, whom they call "Gracie." It's clear that the pair is at a horse show. That's the beginning of the story, but the way Gracie wraps herself around Kelsey shows such love and companionship. Kelsey isn't holding Gracie's head there, at least not that I see. Gracie's ears are up and she looks very happy. So overall, this picture is very harmonious with the pair happily together at the horse show. I see them as a team and as close friends.

The digital entry, True Love from Bergen Lancaster, was also a strong favorite of mine. Even though Lancaster is holding onto the lead rope of her Appendix Quarter Horse, Honey, it's a very light hold. Honey's ears are up and she looks happy to be receiving that kiss.

So, while we're on the subject of ears up and such, let's talk some about expression. The expression on you and your horse can play a HUGE role in how well received a picture is. For the longest time I worked as a photo assistant and part of my job was to stand up horses for pictures. I enjoy doing this type of work because I feel that getting a lovely, happy expression on a horse for a picture is one of the most wonderful things a person can experience. Ears up is the first step. Then start looking for the body to soften or relax a little; maybe catch the light swish of the tail and just wait for that beautiful expression to appear. Yes, they're often distracted and want to eat or they're doing their job and those ears are back, ready for work. But the expression on your horse's face did play a big role in whether your picture made it into the final judging.

Then there are the wild cards. Sometimes pictures take the road less traveled. I speak of abstract and art prints. Such was the case with William & Julie Yates' entry of Spanish Mustangs in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I feel this is more of an abstract view of harmony. Even though I know the silhouettes are horses, they are washed in this great evening orange light and dust that gives them a transparent quality. It's a very arty shot. All of the entries from William and Julie had a feel of artwork about them, but this one jumped out at me for many reasons. Sometimes it's great to capture something and not make it so real; sometimes it's just fun to play and create.

And The Tips Were?

I know, I know, I tend to speak more in stories than lists. But then, I am a storyteller.

1. Always read and follow the contest directions.
2. Think about the theme of the contest and how your picture will fit that theme.
3. Watch your focus – tack sharp will usually win over fuzzy every time.
4. Watch your film grain and exposure. Less grain and good light is best.
5. Watch your pixels. More is always better and will be sharper.
6. Clean, beautiful backgrounds get high marks – look for the best place you can shoot.

7. Know your equipment. Taking a 'snapshot' isn't the same as consciously 'making' a picture. So read your manual and learn about your camera.

8. Go have fun! Photography is your chance to explore your world and to give you memories that will last a lifetime in print. I swear to this because even as a professional who takes countless photos, I keep each one and I treasure them all equally.

#### Honorable Mentions

With these tips in mind, here are the runners up from the Horse Illustrated 2007 Photo Contest, Horses in Harmony:

##### "Perfect Pals" from Hanna Knowles

Cute expressions and composition! Good choice to shoot down giving your background that clean, uncluttered look.

Knowles said: The photo, entitled Perfect Pals, features Lewis (bay) and Kozmo (chestnut), taking a break from eating. Lewis is a school horse that is used at the boarding facility where I board my own horse, Kozmo. I have just recently purchased my first horse, Kozmo, and when I put him out in a paddock with many other horses, he immediately became best friends with Lewis. They can always be found together in the field. Kozmo is an 11- year-old Thoroughbred.

##### "Don't Leave" from Karen Souter

I love that all three horses are almost identical. Very cute expression; it fits the picture description of "Hey, wait! Come back!" perfectly.

Souter said: We had gone to visit the horses (Cowgirl, 8, Tarzan, 2, Dixie, 4) on a fall afternoon in 2006. As we were about to leave, my daughter Lindsey and son Jake, walked up to the fence to say goodbye and all three horses came up, side by side, to get some love. As the kids walked away the threesome just stood there as if to say, "Hey, wait! Come back!"

##### "This is Harmony" from Lea Michaud

Both horse and human seem in harmony with each other. I'm not a fan of the horse 'eye shot' but this one is very special and inviting.

Michaud said: My horse's name is Roman. As far as I know he is a 6- year- old Quarter Horse. I got him from a rescue organization and I don't know much about him except that his hoofbeats, the squeak of a saddle, the swish of his tail, the soft huff of breath on my hand, all harmonize together to make music to my ears.

##### "Spanish Silhouette" from William and Julie Yates

This is my favorite abstract of all the entries. I love the color and the feel of the photograph.

##### "A New Day" from Stephanie Utegg

And, again, I just love the feel and the sense of place that this picture gives me.

Utegg said: Stranger is a 12-year-old registered American Paint Horse.

**Judge's Favorite:**

While this picture did not say harmony to me--it has a very strong story. I see this one more as 'stand up and be counted' but no matter what the intent, it's just a wonderful picture caught at a super neat moment! That foal is the star of the shot and possibly the star of the farm as well. (Daniella Krena print)

Krena said: A new foal trying to stand on a spring day with the help of her mother. Friends watch and encourage in the next pasture.

See the September Issue of Horse Illustrated for the First, second and third place winners.

**Meet the Judge:**

Sharon P. Fibelkorn is one of a handful of elite photographers specializing in horses and equestrian sport. An award winning photojournalist whose work has appeared in numerous books and magazines, Fibelkorn recently launched a boutique stock agency, HorseStock.biz, to not only showcase top photographic talents, but to also educate and help newcomers who want to pursue a career in photography.