

Is the professional horse show photographer an endangered species?

Posted by [Liz Goldsmith](#)

It seems like the easy access to high quality digital cameras, FaceBook and what you could call the iTunes mentality are conspiring to make the professional horse show photographer a thing of the past.

It used to be that when you went to a horse show or event, a few days later you'd receive an envelope full of photographic proofs. I can remember eagerly awaiting those envelopes and sending off my check for prints. No one else ever took pictures of me and I appreciated those pictures.

It's different today. To begin with, the images are digital. Photographers generally post the photos on their site and hope that riders purchase prints. But they are competing with any number of amateurs who are armed with Digital SLRs who are willing to give away the photos that they take.

In addition to competing with friends and family, professional photographers are now competing for sales with themselves. See, the problem is that you can now copy photographs off of a website with just a few clicks. Sure, a photographer can prominently display proof across their photographs and disable the download function, but it's dead easy to copy the image. In fact, it's increasingly common to see photographs with "Proof" across them on people's Facebook pages, on ads and referenced in Internet forums. For many uses the low resolution proof is "good enough" quality for these applications and many riders feel no obligation to purchase the images. I mean really, look at the photo above, why would anyone feel justified in publishing an image that says Proof all over it?

Unfortunately, just because you are in a photograph it doesn't mean you own it. In fact, you don't. The copyright holder for the image is the photographer. You can purchase the rights to use a specific copy of the image but unless you negotiate it with the photographer, those rights are limited. You cannot, for example, take an image, scan it, and use it in an ad.

To address image theft (because that is what it is), some photographers are now charging to view on-line galleries or are suggesting to riders that they view images at the event where they can be seen at no cost. After all, once someone gains access to an online gallery, they can copy that photo.

The backlash against this practice has been loud and widespread. Some people don't want to pay to look at proofs (since there may not be a photo they like), some people think photographers should suck it up because it's part of the cost of doing business, some think that photographers should move toward the iTunes model with inexpensive downloads of low resolution images.

Here's a sampling of the comments I read on the Chronicle of the Horse forum:

I would NOT pay to see proofs, since I would be unhappy to waste the money if none of the shots from that show happened to be good, for whatever reason.

I don't know the solution, but I imagine this could make photographers lose lots of business from people who feel the same way I do.

Paying to view proofs would get a laugh out of me. I think that's ridiculous.

Sounds like a good way to put yourself out of business. I have bought pics several times while perusing online galleries. I would never have done that if there was a charge for the viewing!

Add the outrageous cost for even just a 5 x 7 print, running around \$20 from our local photog, they are definitely putting themselves out of business. I can get just a good a picture by handing my nice camera off to someone with good timing.

I've sold some of my own photography in the past, so I KNOW that professional prints shouldn't cost that much, even if you aren't printing in house. Most good horse show .raw pictures don't require that much tinkering, so there shouldn't be that much time involved. I could see \$10 for a 5 x 7.

Anyway. I think the whole thing is price gouging.

No surprise that the last poster doesn't make their living taking pictures! She is, actually, an attorney. Unfortunately, pro photographers can't make a living selling individual low res shots at a buck or two a piece. Or even a 5x7 for \$10. They simply can't afford to show up and shoot for those prices. Unlike music, they aren't going to get thousands of people downloading a single file — they are lucky to get just one. The costs for being a horse show photographer are higher than the average person might think: a pro camera with a variety of lenses will cost between \$3k-5K, they often have to pay the show for the opportunity of taking photographs (HITS charges vendors more than \$1K/week) and they spend a long day taking photos on spec.

And while it's annoying to pay to look proofs and discover you don't like any of the pictures, a small fee to ensure that a photographer is on site doesn't seem out of line. It's not much more than a competitor paid for lunch and certainly is less than a competitor might have paid to have a horse's mane professionally braided. Much of the time the problem doesn't lie with the photographer. Rather, the rider or the horse doesn't look picture perfect.

What raised my hackles about the thread I read on the Chronicle of the Horse Forum was the assumption that there is little skill involved with being a professional photographer.

See, I don't think I agree that horse show photography is a professional skill like writing copy, or lawyering (my trade) for that matter. I say horse show photography in general, because while snapping pics over a jump takes practice, eye, and timing, it isn't really art. Some are, but I would say most aren't

As a matter of fact, I would argue that most of the pictures taken by the "professionals" are NOT as good as those taken by amateurs focusing on just one friend from their barn. With a nice DSLR + lens and good timing, and a good eye for photoshop, I see no difference. Maybe I am just lucky to have very good photographers surrounding me.

Maybe I don't believe that a photographer's time is worth \$20 per 5 x 7. I get about 3-4 photos taken of my 3 minute trip, so if I bought just one that would be \$20 for 3 minutes. If each person on a 3 minute trip bought 1 photo, that would mean the photog made approximately \$400 per hour.

Maybe that is a weird formula, but I have never met any horse show photographer anywhere that was worth \$400 an hour just for time. The time + proofs for my wedding pics was only \$1500 for the 8 hour day!!

I don't think this person "gets" it. Sure, photographers would be rich if each person bought a photo but it doesn't work that way. I don't know what the percentages are, but I doubt that they are in the double digits. It's completely different to hire a photographer for an event such as a wedding because they are guaranteed a set fee.

I suppose the bottom line is that the market has changed irrevocably. The standard of quality has shifted downward (both among purchasers and, perhaps, among some photographers) so that people are willing to accept photos of lesser quality so long as it's free. Perhaps it's because the economy has made people scrutinize every extra purchase or maybe it's just that some people feel entitled.

To the pros: I am not very interested in purchasing actual print photos, nor are most people anymore. What people want is digital images. That's why they steal proofs - they want to stick something up on FB, email it to everyone; they don't want a physical picture that can't easily be shown off. If they can't buy digital images from the pros, and can't convince their friends to shoot some at the event, they steal proofs.

My prediction is that it won't be long before people have to rely on their friends and family bringing their digital cameras to the show. And that's when they'll bemoan the fact that they no longer have the choice to buy professional images. However, the pros will have moved on to serve an audience that values what they offer . . . and is willing to pay for it.