

Horse Show Photographers Are Facing A Crisis

By: Shawn McMillen

If a photo has a photographer's watermark splashed across the image, it's an unpurchased proof, and any use by anyone other than the photographer is unauthorised.

The author explains why many equine photographers are packing up their cameras.

Was there a show photographer at your last event? Was there someone at every ring taking photos of you and your horse? If you're an eventer, did you get cross-country, show jumping and dressage photos?

If you're one of the few and the lucky, you can answer yes to these questions. However I suspect you're part of the majority, who is asking, "Where did the show photographer go?"

The full-coverage equestrian event photographer is becoming a dinosaur. We all know about the expenses professional photographers incur—the cameras, the insurance, the employees, the hotels, the gas, the fees, etc. To be a photographer (and do it right) on a grand scale (at multi-ring and multi-week shows) costs a ton. My company, Shawn McMillen Photography, is doing 28 fewer events this year than last year. That's right, I walked away from 28 weeks of guaranteed work.

Several years ago, we could go to a show and break even as a worst-case scenario. We don't have an advertising budget like a traditional business. I figured that if we were out there getting our photos in front of the customers and exposing them to our brand name and our customer service, even if we weren't putting money in the bank, we were winning. But in recent years, we've been losing money at show after show.

Why? There are several issues. The biggest—and the one people don't fully comprehend—is that of copyright theft.

The word "theft" should signify that this is wrong. We have disclaimers on our website that tell in vivid detail which laws are being broken when our photos are taken. Yet, we (photographers) are the bad guys for confronting someone when such offences occur.

I know that the theft exists. I would be an idiot if I didn't; all I have to do is look at Facebook and find thousands of my and my fellow photographers' proofs stolen. So far, I've chosen to concentrate on the paying customers and not worry about what can't be stopped.

The only way that Internet theft will stop is if the equestrian community polices itself. I've tried limited posting of proofs, pay for posting, no posting, etc., and everything that I do only punishes the good customers. The photo thieves just work quicker, smarter and faster.

They Just Don't Realise

When we snap a photo, it's usually of a horse or rider or some combination thereof because equestrian event coverage is all we do. When we take photos, they're technically "our photos," but they're also "their photos" because it's them or their horses in the images. But the rights to use those photos remain with the photographer.

The problem is education. I don't think the majority of photo thieves really understand what they're doing. I don't think that when they download a proof off of our website, they're taking into account that we stand there for hours on sore feet and knees waiting for that one moment, often in extreme conditions—cold, wet and heat for upwards of 10 hours plus a day.

I don't think they take into account how many employees we pay, how much our gear costs, how much we drive, how late I stay up manually alphabetising thousands of photos, how much of a normal life I don't have, how many family outings, anniversaries, weddings, holidays, reunions and homecomings I have missed to be ringside to make sure they have photos.

Every aspect of our business, with the exception of our printing lab, is done internally. We take, crop, correct, send off for printing, re-examine, address, ship out, and put online every photo we sell, all the while going to and from and photographing another event.

I don't think photo thieves realise how much of our life is consumed by the photos that they are so quick to take without paying. I don't think they realise they're putting people out of work. I don't think they realise I stay up late at night trying to figure out how to employ our staff with diminished sales due to theft. I know these people don't steal from tack shops, that they pay the braiders and the blacksmith and their horse show bill, or their trainer. So I don't think they really know what they do.

When they come into the trailer and ignore the "no camera phone" signs and wait until they think we're distracted and then "click," take a photo of our photo and laugh, I think they must just not know what they're doing. They don't think of this as theft, but it's no different than going to the tack trailer and stealing a saddle. The only difference is the saddle costs more, but theft is theft.

I have to think they know not what they do. Because if I did think they knew what they were doing, that would mean they were just soulless, evil people. I have to have more faith in humanity.

Quality Is Worth The Price

We did shows in the Aiken, S.C., area for several years, and the first years were profitable. We didn't make a ton of money, but enough to pay the bills and upgrade our equipment.

Over the years, we've only gotten better in our ability to capture "the moment," and yet sales are on a downward spiral. This year I gave up 12 shows less than 10 minutes from my home in Aiken. It no longer was a matter of breaking even—it became an issue of hemorrhaging funds. I needed to figure out how to stop the bleed. It's a sad testament to the state of things when I can save more money sitting in my house than by going to a show and doing the job that I love.

I have to admit that I share some of the responsibility for my own demise in Aiken due to my preferred business model. We were the exclusive photographer at the shows we shot, and we shot everyone all the time. We then posted proofs on the Internet, identified by horse name and number.

When we first started posting proofs online, there weren't many other photographers doing the same thing. Posting proofs to the Internet isn't just to sell—almost as important to me is the ability to blow you away. I want you to come into our trailer and have so many good photos that you can't decide between them and want to buy them all.

I would rather have you be so overwhelmed at your photo selections that you could not make a selection than be so underwhelmed that you can only find one or two that are just OK. Being average is the worst of the best and the best of the worst. We're not content being either.

As a result, I've had a very lax policy about putting the photos online. I know people aren't going to buy every photo we take, but I thought maybe they would want to go back and watch the journey they took over the course of the show year.

This was a great idea in practice but a terrible business model. By giving the customer the liberty to purchase a photo at will and not forcing them to buy, the customer more often than not will not make a purchase or will make a single purchase from the entire season. This was ultimately what caused me to walk away from Aiken. I don't care if steak is your favorite food—if I feed it to you 60 days in a row, you're going to beg me for macaroni and cheese. We started out as steak and became that mac and cheese.

So now I find myself doing shows further and further away from home. I still haven't changed my posting policy, because while they're my photos, they're also your memories.

It's Unfair Competition

The next issue I want to address is the scab photographer, or poacher, or faux pro. This is the photographer who shows up with nice or not-so-nice camera equipment, with little to no expense involved in being there. They have full-time jobs outside photography and just show up for fun or for the weekend.

They shoot photos of an entire class or division and post them for sale at a reduced rate. They can sell their product cheaper because they have no overhead expense. It gives people a choice between a professional photo for a price that compensates the professional's effort and investment and a "good enough" photo. It's filet mignon for \$25 or a greasy burger for free. The greasy burger is the "good enough" photo, and that works for more people than you would think. This has been a huge issue in our industry.

Look at the *Chronicle's* Horse Show Issue and the many sub-par quality year-end awards photos that were in it. That truly was a testament to what is out there right now. At many shows, Uncle Bob and Dad are replacing the professional photographer. The weekend warrior camera guy is very content being average. We're not.

So yes, in a nutshell, we as your photographers are going the way of the dinosaur. Some of the equine photographers are branching out and doing weddings and corporate events. I don't really care much for either, so what will our fate be? I'm sure you'll find us in a tar pit somewhere along with the other dinosaurs that thought they could hold out a little longer.

The industry is in a sad state, and the perfect storm is upon us. No doubt the Internet, Facebook, cheaper pro-quality cameras and the bad economy have all combined to help create the situation. Some equine photographers are out of business, some will be, some will hang on, some new ones will crop up.

While we might lose our livelihood, ultimately the equestrian community will lose out. You won't have those cherished memories that so many of you frame and value. You won't have those sale photos that help you get extra dollars for your well-loved animal when it's time to move up in division. So we all lose.

We in the photographic community have seen this coming for a while now, and the customers are now seeing it as well. If you want to help photographers, ask your friends to quit doing what's wrong. Or better yet, tell them that their thoughtlessness is now starting to affect you.

Shawn McMillen and his fiancé, Melissa Pomerleau, operate Shawn McMillen Photography based out of Winchester, Ky., and Aiken, S.C. McMillen has been a professional equine photographer for more than 25 years.