

Horse Photography – How To

By Jerry Tardif

THE BASICS

Taking photos of your horse is not difficult. You just need to know how to compose the photo, focus properly, and pay attention to backgrounds. In the past, you also needed to know about exposure, colour of the light, and other technical issues. But today's digital cameras handle most of these concerns with complex algorithms processed by an on-board microprocessor leaving you available to focus on the photo itself.

The Photo Goal

First, consciously understand your photo goal. Is this a photo of your horse, or is it a photo of a friend and horse? Or is it a photo of a friend or loved-one competing for a ribbon? Knowing the goal will affect your photography decisions, such as choosing a good shooting location and selecting the proper lens. Conversely, if you don't specifically identify the goal in your own mind, you'll just think you're getting some pics, and that's all you'll actually get rather than some impressive photos. With a clear understanding of the photo goal in your mind, you'll make conscious decisions to get a better shot.

A Good Shooting Location

Second, pick your shooting location. If at an event, it should provide a close enough distance so people won't get in front of your camera, but far enough away so you can take in much of the arena for some shots. If possible, you also should select your location so it has a pleasing or neutral, non-busy background. That will reduce your need to either accept or remove clutter from the image in post processing. You don't want the background to draw the attention away from your subject when viewing your photos.

Careful Camera & Lens Selection

Third, choose the camera and lenses carefully. If all you have is a "point and shoot" camera, you're limited to "making do" with what you have. But if you have an SLR with removable lenses, you want to select a zoom that covers the desired range so you can zoom in and pull back to follow the action. You DON'T want to be changing lenses during the shoot. Not only would that make you miss some shots or risk dropping and damaging an expensive lens, but riding horses stirs up dust and sometimes dirt — you don't want any of that going into an expensive camera while the lens is off and being swapped.

AVOIDING BLURRED IMAGES

One of the biggest disappointments to anyone shooting photos is when you receive or make prints and really love a photo, decide to make an enlargement, and in the process, observe that the photo is now "soft" (slightly blurred) at the enlarged size. This can happen for several reasons:

1. The lens was dirty or smudged;
2. You didn't properly focus on your subject;
3. You depended on the camera's auto-focus and didn't notice it focused on some other object in the field of view rather than your subject;
4. The subject moved during the exposure;
5. You moved the camera during the exposure.

The first problem is easy to solve — clean your lenses.

The second and third are not much harder. You must pay enough attention to assure you've focused on your subject and it is crisp in the viewfinder BEFORE tripping the shutter. If focusing manually, that may mean pre-focusing on the area where you want to shoot your subject before it gets there so you'll be ready for it when it arrives there.

Pay Attention to Automatic Focusing

Even though most cameras today will auto-focus for you, it's important to assure they're focusing on the right object in the image: your intended subject. If they're focusing on the background or another object, you could find your intended subject is blurred while the background or the horse next to it is crisp and sharp.

Learn what your camera focuses on. It's usually whatever is in the centre of your viewfinder, but it could be something else, like whatever is moving in the viewfinder. It will depend on the camera and its settings. If using auto-focus, you want to make sure you're placing your camera's focus area or zone directly on your subject before you press down the shutter button to activate auto-focus. If you want to "lock in" the focus, you press the shutter button down halfway after you've placed your focus zone on the subject. But you want to assure you do that when the zone is on the subject and not another object — people will sometimes blur a photo doing this by accident.

Stopping or Capturing Motion

If the subject is moving and you want the entire scene to be sharply focused, you can use a faster shutter speed and a smaller F-stop for greater depth-of-field if you have sufficient light. The faster shutter speed will stop the action and the greater depth-of-field will assure that the entire scene is sharper. If you don't have sufficient light, such as within

an indoor arena, or you prefer to better highlight the subject, you can pan with the moving subject while tripping the shutter. This will render the subject sharp and the background blurred. The sharp subject against the blurred background will definitely draw the viewer's eye.

Tripods

If camera movement is the bugaboo, you should consider a tripod. If you ever look at a group of photographers, you can always tell the professionals and serious amateur because they will be the ones carrying a tripod. They do this because they know how unsteady we humans can be when hand-holding an exposure, but more importantly, they want to capture an image that will look great small, medium, or highly enlarged. They put a lot of effort into scouting the best shooting location for view and optimum lighting, and then learning to optimise their timing skills. They can't afford after doing all that to get a wonderful photo that really works great at 3 x 5, but then fails when they blow it up. So they use a tripod everywhere they can to assure all their photos will be in sharp focus at any size.

Sharp Hand-Held Images

HOWEVER, some establishments will not allow tripods on the premises, such as race tracks. That's because some horses are easily spooked by a photographer carrying a tripod, especially young, teenage, high-strung, stallions. In this case, the next best solution is a camera or lens that uses gyroscopic stabilization. If implemented in the lens, each manufacturer has their own name for the technology. For example, Canon calls it "Image Stabilization" and "Nikon" has its "Vibration Reduction". Nevertheless, it is the same technology and works by having motion sensors and small servo motors in the lens quickly move a glass element to compensate in milliseconds for any movement or shaking by the photographer.

It's interesting to experience in that the image is very still while you can see the camera, lens, and your hands moving slightly while your eye is looking through the viewfinder. This technology provides the most benefit with zoom and telephoto lenses because it is with them that slight movement is most magnified and noticed.

This article covers the basics of a shoot. There are more things to consider, but just following the suggestions above will help you get better photos of horse events. And if you're just shooting photos of your horse or a horse and rider, there will be no needed rush to avoid missing the action, but the other suggestions still apply.