

the quick start guide to
EQUESTRIAN
PHOTOGRAPHY



by Shelley Paulson



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FOREWARD



Me with my heart-horse Maggie Sue. Photo by Lindsey Williams

About me

As a Minnesota-based equestrian photographer, I have combined my deep love of horses with my passion for creating heartfelt images into a thriving business.

My work has been published around the world in magazines like Horse Illustrated and Young Rider, as well as in marketing collateral for major equine brands such as Nutrena, Farnam and SmartPak.

I have traveled extensively my work, but my favorite place is at home on my farm with my husband, horses, schnauzers and barn cats.

A note about sharing

A great deal of work and many years of experience have gone into writing this eBook. **I would ask that you do not share it with others.** You purchased this book, and you have a right to read and apply the information you find here. Others who have not purchased this book do not have that right. It is the sales of eBooks that make this and future eBooks possible. Please respect my copyright as you expect your clients to respect yours. Thank you!

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INTRODUCTION



Picture this...

...you're standing in a field awash in golden evening light. In front of you is a girl and the horse she dreamed of owning her whole life. You are holding a camera in your hands and it's your job to create the most beautiful, memorable images possible for her.

Now what do you do?

This eBook is all about answering that question. I'm going to give you the knowledge and tools you need to consistently create strong, powerful images of people with their horses. I'll cover equine behavior, safety considerations, optimal gear, camera settings and more.

When you are finished reading this, you should be able to stand in that field with confidence, knowing you can make great images your client will love for a lifetime.

UNDERSTANDING THE HORSE

Understanding how horses differ from other animals is critical to the safety of everyone involved in an equestrian photo session, including you! Even though I have been riding horses since I was 10 years old and have owned horses for 24 years, I have still had people and horses get hurt at photo sessions.

My worst session accident happened a few years ago. I had found the perfect location and light where I photographed a high school senior with her horse. I wanted to take advantage of this location and make some photos of her without her horse.

I asked her mom if she would be comfortable holding him, and she said she would. She was a rider herself, so she was confident about handling him.

Minutes later I looked over my shoulder to see the horse dragging the mom across a

field at a full gallop. We ran to her, where she lay bleeding from her head in the tall grass. Her daughter ran back to the farm sobbing to get her dad and call 911. The mom had a concussion and laceration behind her ear. I was absolutely devastated and felt responsible for what happened. I drove home not just crying, but sobbing.



What we could piece together was that the horse was bothered by gnats and had rubbed his head on the mom's shoulder, where she had a halter draped for use later in the session. He got his head caught up in it and panicked. The family

was incredibly gracious toward me, and we finished the session another day at another location with just the girl.

I share this story so you can understand that working with a 1,000 pound flight animal is nothing to take lightly.

Predator vs. Prey

I find it remarkable that we have been able to domesticate and train horses to do such a wide variety of activities and sports. Horses fall into the category of "prey animal," which means they are a target for large predators, but they don't prey on other animals. So for horses to allow a "predator" like us to catch, handle and sit on their backs without running off is really a testament to their adaptive nature. However, because horses are prey, they are extremely sensitive to their environment. They pick up on sounds, smells and sights on a level well beyond human experience. When they sense anything that hints of danger, their instinct is to run from it.

EQUINE SAFETY

In the context of a photo session, we have a person who is usually a little nervous, several locations where the horse doesn't go on a daily basis, and unusual sounds or strange props to get their ears forward (which I'll cover later). To top it off, we are asking the horse to stand still, which also goes against their nature.

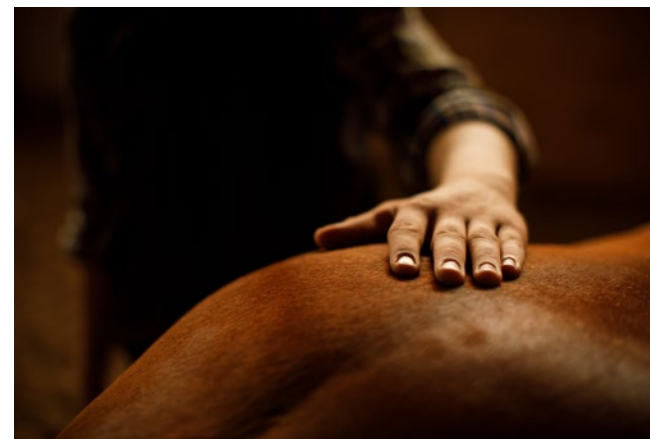
It can be a recipe for disaster, but there are ways to avoid trouble and give your client a great experience.



Session Safety Tips

1. TAKE RIDING LESSONS

If you are not an equestrian yourself, my best advice is to find a local stable and take some riding lessons so you can become familiar with horse behavior. Riding is also incredibly fun and a good way to relieve stress and add joy to your life.



If you see that a client is getting frustrated or upset with their horse, have them take a break and go for a walk with the horse, or have them put their horse away for a few minutes until they can relax and get control of their emotions.

4. EXERCISE THE HORSE

Horses are great at getting dirty, so it's understandable that once clients get them nice and clean for the session, they don't want to let them out of their stall. However, if a horse is sitting idly in their stall for hours before the session, they will build up excess energy that will make them more difficult to handle. Ask your client ahead of time to make sure the horse has some exercise on the day of the session.

2. FOLLOW BASIC HANDLING RULES

It's best to approach the horse from the front at first, where they can easily see you approaching. If you need to walk behind the horse, do it by walking close to them. If a horse should kick (which is very rare), and you are close, they will only be able to make contact with your shins and not your face. Touch a horse's rump before walking behind to let them know you are there.

3. BE PATIENT AND CALM

Horses are very sensitive to human emotions. They can feel if we are anxious and will reflect that behavior. No matter what happens at a session, you need to be able to control your emotions, staying calm and relaxed, while encouraging your client to do the same.

Signs of Stress

There are some clues to look for that will tell you when a horse's stress level is rising.

1. Pawing at the ground
2. Pacing or circling
3. Whinnying
4. Tail swishing
5. Biting
6. Kicking
7. Teeth grinding

If you see these behaviors, have the person take the horse for a short walk or put it back in its stall for a few minutes so everyone can calm down.

Session Safety Tips (cont.)

5. DON'T WALK IN FRONT

Between locations, I try to walk behind the horse and person. If a horse spooks, they are likely to run or jump forward rather than backward. If you are in front of them, there's a better chance you will get run over.

6. ALLOW NO LOOSE HORSES

If you are taking photos in a pasture, make sure your client's horse is the only one in that pasture. When your eye is up to the camera, you might not see another horse coming from behind, about to run you over. If you are photographing multiple horses at liberty, have a bodyguard who will be your eyes and can keep horses from running you over.

7. KNOW WHEN TO QUIT

I have had sessions where the horse was just not going to cooperate for one reason or another. It's better to stop the session before it escalates to the point of someone getting hurt. In these cases, I return a different day, usually with some discussion about how to better prepare the horse to be photographed.

8. HAVE LIABILITY INSURANCE

If something does go wrong, you need to be covered or you could lose your business or worse. Liability insurance is an umbrella to provide protection against legal actions arising from injuries, accidents and other claims.

9. USE AN EQUINE-SPECIFIC CONTRACT

In addition to having liability insurance, you want to have a contract that specifically covers issues that can arise during an equine portrait session.

I use the [Equine Photography Contract Template](#) from The Contract Shop. This contract was prepared by an attorney who is also an equestrian. It covers everything from payment details to liability to model releases to state-specific laws and more. It's a bit of an investment, but what it could save you in legal fees if you don't have a contract like this is exponentially higher.



Helmet or No Helmet?

No discussion of safety is complete without a discussion of helmets. I wear a helmet 98% of the time when I am riding. Do you know what the 2% is when I don't? It's when I am being photographed on my horse.

I do not require my clients to wear a helmet when they are on their horse at a portrait session. I believe it is a personal choice, and I understand not wanting to crush the hairstyle you spent hours on. I won't encourage more risky riding like jumping or galloping through a field, but I know anytime you are on a horse you can fall and hit your head. If someone does want to wear a helmet for riding photos, I make sure we do those photos last.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Tamron 150-600mm F/5-6.3 Di VC G2



Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS II USM



Canon 5D Mk IV



Canon 1Dx Mk II

I'm going to admit right here, I have GAS! Before you think I'm stinky, **GAS** stands for **G**ear **A**cquisition **S**yndrome. In other words, I'm a gear head. I love learning about new gear, and I have far too much of it! But when it comes to equestrian portrait sessions, I really only need a camera with a 70-200mm lens on it. Ninety percent of my portrait photography is done with this combination.

DISTORTION

Horses are different from most subjects we photograph in that they are long. They have long necks and backs, and that makes them prone to distortion if you are not using the right lens.

If you use a short lens (like a 50mm) to photograph a horse facing you, their head will appear disproportionately larger than their body. Sometimes this can be comedic, but it's not ideal for meaningful portraits.

THE PERFECT LENS

I love the [70-200mm](#) range for portraits of horses and people because even at 70mm, distortion is low. And in that short moment when I get the horse and person in the perfect light, location and pose, I can make 3-4 different compositions by zooming.

OTHER LENSES

I will use a wider focal length at times in order to take in an entire environment, or capture close-up details. I also use a [150-600mm](#)

lens for photographing equine sports and wild horses who are far away.

CAMERAS

I use Canon cameras - the [1Dx mk II](#) and the [5D mk IV](#). I'm not a Canon snob, I just started with Canon and have had no reason to change brands. I do believe the camera industry is in the middle of a slow shift from shutter-based bodies to lighter, more feature-rich mirrorless cameras. I have a [mirrorless Fuji camera](#) for personal photography, but am keeping a close eye on Canon's mirrorless line.

I believe all the major brands are going to give you great cameras and lenses for doing equestrian photography. The vision you bring to the shoot is far more important than the gear you use.

Horsey Things to Bring

Plain Leather Halter

While some people will choose to use a bridle when being photographed with their horse, many prefer a halter. I always bring a plain, adjustable leather halter. It fits most horses and has a classic look.

Leather Lead

Most leather leads come with a chain attached. The chain is going to reflect light and can pose a safety hazard. Because of this, I use a leather lead without a chain. Note: If you have a client who wants to use a lead with a chain, do not loop the chain under the halter. Horses have gotten their hoof caught in the loop leading to severe injury and even death.

Short Black Lead Rope

In the event someone wants to use their nylon halter, I keep a shorter black lead rope on hand. Many lead ropes are brightly colored and very long. Black will disappear in the photos and a shorter length will be easier for the person to hold in one hand.

Towels

I buy bulk rag towels at Costco and keep them handy for quick cleanups. Horses who are photographed in their bridles have a tendency to drool a lovely green slime, and that's a lot of work to photoshop out of the image later.

Bug Spray

The mosquito is Minnesota's unofficial state bird. I make sure to bring enough horse and human repellent so we don't all get eaten alive during a session.

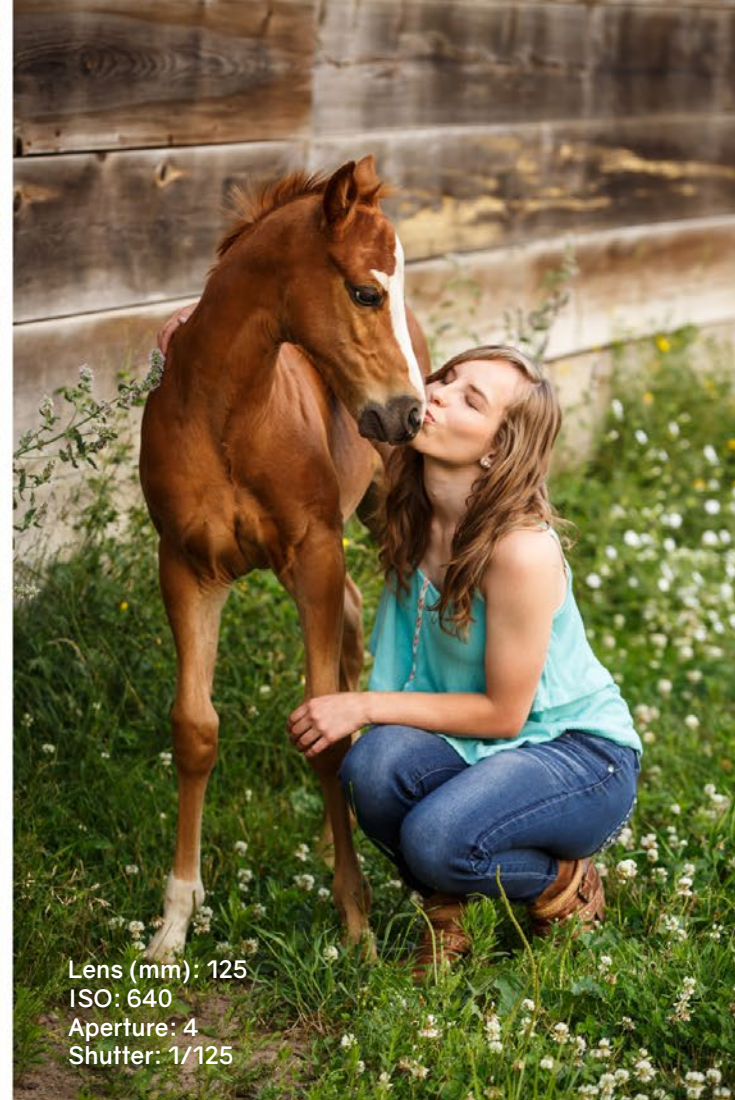
Lens (mm): 70mm
ISO: 1000
Aperture: 4.5
Shutter: 1/320



Lens (mm): 182mm
ISO: 640
Aperture: 4.5
Shutter: 1/500



Lens (mm): 125
ISO: 640
Aperture: 4
Shutter: 1/125



Lens (mm): 170
ISO: 1250
Aperture: 4.5
Shutter: 1/1250



Lens (mm): 182
ISO: 320
Aperture: 4.5
Shutter: 1/1000



CAMERA SETTINGS

You could probably ask 15 different equestrian photographers what settings they use for portraits and get 15 different answers. I will share here what works for me, but feel free to experiment and find what works for you.

APERTURE

I like to work between f3.5 and f4.5 for portraits. I like to have a shallower depth of field to throw the background out of focus. However, if the person is not standing on the same plane as their horse's face, I will go to a higher setting in order to get them both in focus.

Keep in mind that aperture isn't the only thing that determines depth of field - focal length and proximity to your subject do as well. If you are zoomed in at 200mm, an aperture of f4 may mean you only get the person in focus and not the horse.

SHUTTER SPEED

The general rule about shutter speed is that you can safely hand-hold your camera and lens at 1/focal length. This means you should have a shutter speed of at least 1/70th when shooting at 70mm, 1/200th when shooting and 200mm, and so on. However, horses tend to move around a lot, so you want to set your shutter speed to at least 1/250th for a static portrait, or 1/640th+ if the horse is in motion.

ISO

You should always try and use the lowest ISO possible for the situation. Lower ISO will always give you cleaner looking photographs. That said, I'm not afraid to crank my ISO up as

high as I need to in order to get a sharp photo. Images have less noise if you get a correct exposure in camera than if you underexpose and correct it later with editing. Even at high ISO, most photos will print and display without noticeable noise.

Manual Camera Setup

So how do I set up my camera? I shoot mostly in manual, so here is my process:

STEP 1: I pick the appropriate aperture and shutter speed as outlined above.

STEP 2: I guess at the ISO I think will work. Leaving the aperture and shutter where they are, I adjust the ISO to get close to the exposure I want.

STEP 3: I check my exposure by taking a photo and then looking at the back of the camera. I use a setting that makes highlights blink in the display when they are completely blown out (no detail being recorded). It's okay for the sky to blink, but not skin or the whites on horses. If I see things blinking that shouldn't blink, that means I need to make an adjustment to lower my exposure.

STEP 4: Finally, I adjust my shutter speed or ISO to get the best exposure in camera.



Lens (mm): 135
ISO: 800
Aperture: 3.5
Shutter: 1/640

FOCUS

I use back button focus on my cameras because I like to be able to lock in focus and then make small adjustments to my composition without the camera re-focusing as I push the shutter button. Because of this, I usually leave my camera on predictive focus (AI servo for Canon, AF-C for Nikon).

For portraits, I use a single focus point so that I can lock focus in on the person's eye. I will either use the center focus point, lock focus on the eye and then recompose, or I will move the focus point over to where the person's eye is in the photo.

Newer cameras now have eye detection, which makes getting eyes in focus a breeze!

It's human nature to first look at a person's eyes when viewing a photo, even if there are many other elements to a photo, such as a beautiful horse! Because of this, it's important to always focus on the person's eyes. If the horse's eye ends up slightly out of focus, it won't distract from the portrait.

When photographing horses at liberty without a person present, I often expand to multiple focus points, as it is difficult to track horses in motion with a single point.



Lens (mm): 80
ISO: 800
Aperture: 4.5
Shutter: 1/800

SESSION PREPARATION



Before the session, I send my client a style guide to help them prepare themselves and their horse for the session.

For the person, I recommend against wearing white. No matter how hard we try to keep them clean, horses are just dirty animals. They drool and snort, and in no time we get dirty too.

I also ask my clients to bring a helper who can handle horses. I do this for three reasons:

1. There may be times during the session when they will need to make an adjustment to their outfit or tack, and they will need someone other than me who can safely handle the horse on their own.
2. I need someone to help get the horse's ears up. I've done it on my own, but it's difficult because by the time I get ready to take the photo, the horse is usually done putting its ears forward.
3. They will have someone present at the session they know well to help them feel relaxed. When photographing minors, it's also good from a liability standpoint to have another person present.

For the horse, I ask that they bathe the horse, as well as give it some exercise and a good meal before the session. I also ask that in the weeks leading up to the session, they brush up on their ground handling so that the horse is willing to stand still next to them for several minutes at a time.

GROUND RULES

Before the session, I lay out a few short ground rules to help the experience go smoothly.

NO EATING GRASS

Horses love to eat and spend the majority of their time doing so. If you let a horse eat grass during a session, the horse will try to eat grass for the rest of the session. If a horse absolutely won't stop eating grass or the handler is too small to control the horse, I will put the horse on gravel or pavement to remove the temptation.

NO CIRCLING

As I've already mentioned, it's not natural for horses to stand perfectly still, and yet that's what we need them to do when we take portraits with them. What most horses will do

when they get tired of standing still is circle in front of their handler. If you allow this, the horse will simply keep doing it and will not stand still.

When this happens, the way to stop it is to back the horse back into place. It's more work for the horse and will serve as a deterrent.

STAY POSITIVE

It's important for everyone involved in the session to stay calm and positive no matter how the horse behaves. Patience is the most important virtue to take with you to an equestrian session!



EARS UP!

Why are horse people so obsessed with having a horse's ears up for photos? That's like asking a mom why she wants her kids smiling for photos - they want them to look their best!

When horses are happy and curious, they put their ears forward. It's like the horse version of smiling! But it's not as easy to do as it might look. And because each horse is a unique individual, what works for one might not work for another.

Knowing this, you want to have an arsenal of options so you don't end up going an entire session without getting a horse's ears forward in at least some of the photos.

There are times when I'm okay with a horse's ears being relaxed, most notably when they are interacting with a person or being ridden. While I would still prefer ears forward, these are times when it's natural for them to have their ears in a more relaxed position.

If all else fails and a horse won't put its ears up, you can take photos close up where the ears don't show.

Note: Some of the following techniques may initially frighten a horse, so it's best to warn the person holding the horse that they may have a strong reaction. If a horse gets overly stressed or upset, change methods.

HORSE WHINNY SOUNDS

The sound of strange horses whinnying is a sure fire way to get a horse to put their ears forward. They immediately become curious where this new horse is and will put their ears forward to listen for it!

I use a [small speaker](#) which plays horse whinnies off an SD card. I prefer this to my phone because I don't have to worry about unlocking my phone, incoming calls and messages, and the possibility of my phone getting lost or broken. If you do want to use your phone, there's a great app called "[All Ears Selfie](#)" that has lots of interesting sounds you can tap to play.

The main thing to keep in mind is to not overuse this method. Most horses eventually realize there is no horse in the distance and stop reacting to it.

OTHER METHODS

- Have someone walk another horse around behind you.
- Show the horse its reflection in a mirror.
- Shake a small plastic bag or walk toward the horse with a large garbage bag.
- Shake a jug with rocks in it.
- Throw rocks/dirt/sand in the air.
- Open a light reflector.
- Drive a remote controlled car in front of the horse.

FOOD

Using food is my last resort. I prefer not to give horses grain or treats during a session because they can become very distracted and sometimes quite pushy about getting more. I prefer the horse and person make a connection that's not food-focused. However, if all else fails, food will work for most horses.



POSING



POSING HORSES

When posing horses in the context of a portrait session, I don't have as many rules as I would if I was posing a horse for a conformation or sale photo.

It's a good idea to talk with the horse's owner ahead of time to find out what breed of horse

they have. Breeds often have their own standards of posing that you can research before the session. For instance, Quarter Horses should be posed with their heads lower than Saddlebred horses. The owner should be able to give you some insight as well.

Here's what I look for when posing a horse:

1. The horse's feet to be fairly square when they are in a standing pose.
2. The horse should be putting weight equally on all four feet.
3. Horses generally look better when they are posed on flat ground or slightly uphill.



POSING PEOPLE

When it comes to posing people, I like to keep it simple so I can work quickly and keep my client looking relaxed. I give people posing direction whether they need it or not because it builds their confidence and shows them that I am working to make them look their best. If someone asks you "what do I do?" that should be a signal that you are not giving enough direction.

My general posing rule is if it bends, bend it. If a person stands with locked knees and arms, they will look uncomfortable and tense. Think about your posture right now - I am guessing your arms and legs are likely bent, and that's because it's comfortable.

The following are my "go-to" poses for equestrian portraits...

Facing You

I like to start each session with a basic pose that will sell nearly every single time. This is the one where they stand next to their horse and they both face the camera and smile!

To get people into this pose, I ask them to turn slightly toward their horse, put their weight on their back foot, bend their arms slightly, look at me and smile."

Having them turn toward their horse causes them to twist at the waist, creating a more flattering line. It also makes them look more connected to their horse.

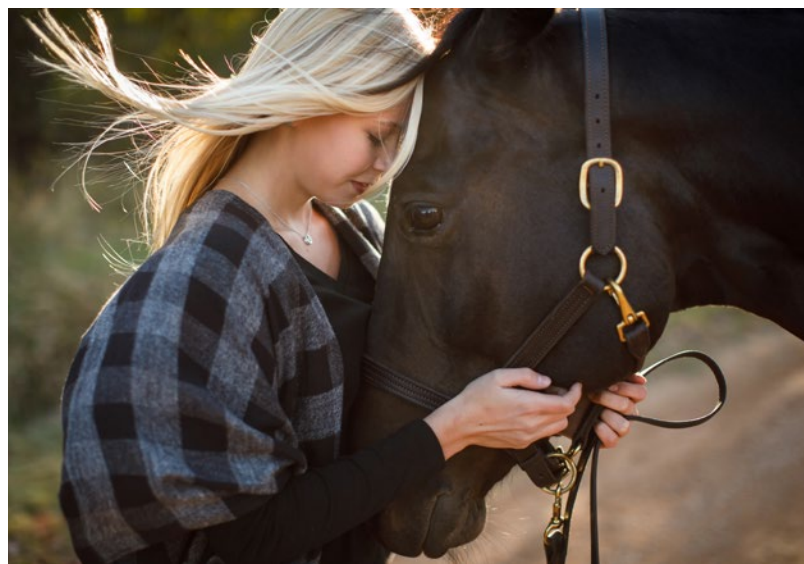
Putting their weight on their back foot will cause them to bend their knee shift their weight slightly away from the camera.

You can get a lot of variety from this pose. I like to start with a full body shot, then zoom in for a waist up shot. I usually start by having them look at me for a series of photos, then look at their horse and interact with them.

I will often go back to this pose throughout the session when we go to a new location.



POSING (CONT.)



Facing Each Other

Most people will want you to capture the bond they share with their horse, and this is my favorite pose for doing that. I have them turn their horse so it is parallel to me and then stand in profile to me facing the horse. I ask them to pet their horse, look in their eyes, give them a kiss...all the sweet things we humans love to do with our horses!

From this pose, I can also have them put their cheek on the bridge of the horse's nose and look at me or in my direction, or put their forehead on the horse's forehead for an intimate moment.

POSING (CONT.)

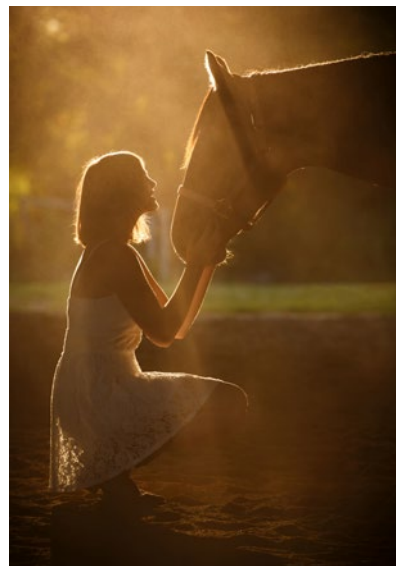
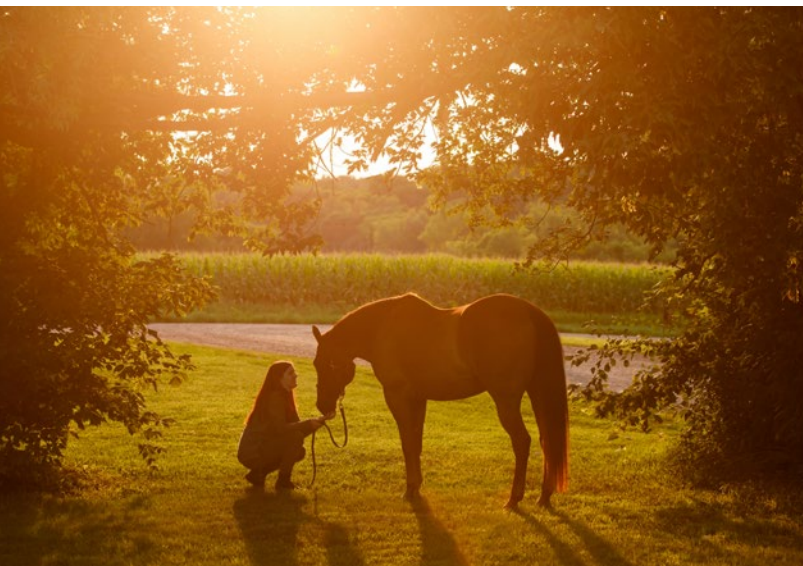


From Behind

This is a pose I just happened to capture in a session a few years ago, and now I see it everywhere! For this pose, I have them face the horse's hindquarters toward me. Then I have them stand at the horse's shoulder and look back at me. Have your "ears up" person stand on the side of the horse where the person is posed so the horse will look in that direction.

You can vary this pose by having the person face their horse, turn with their back to the horse, or look off in the direction the horse is facing while touching their neck or shoulder.

POSING (CONT.)



Squatting

I love this pose because the horse will almost always drop their head down to the person to see what they are doing down there! The way I direct people into this pose is to have them keep both feet on the ground, legs together, one knee higher than the other. About half the time, I model the pose, because it can be tricky to understand just from words.

Note: The reason I have them keep their feet on the ground is so they can stand up and move out of the way quickly if the horse startles or walks into them.

POSING (CONT.)

Walking

I like to give the horse and person frequent breaks from posing by having them walk together. When they walk away, I ask the person to look at the horse. The first time they walk toward me, I have them look at me as they walk. After that, I have them walk toward me a few more times, directing them to either look at their horse or off into the distance.

Note: This is a situation where I will move my focus point to where the person will be walking in the frame so I can maintain my composition and still get their eyes in focus.

POSING (CONT.)



Horseback

Most people will like to have a few photos on horseback, as riding is generally a significant part why they have a horse. I will photograph them sitting on the horse looking at me, doing light riding, and sometimes leaning forward on the horse's neck, hugging them. I used to dislike that pose because it is such a cliché, but I actually love to do this when I'm riding my own horses, so I have come to realize it's part of capturing how people are with their animals.

POSING (CONT.)

Genuine Expressions

I believe that photographic skills can get you only so far in this business; people skills are the true key to success. Being a kind, caring, energetic person is going to allow you to capture genuine expressions from your subjects.

Here are my secrets for getting genuine expressions:

1. Care about the person.
2. Ask them questions about themselves and their horse.
3. Share a little about you, but don't talk about yourself too much.
4. Smile, laugh, and HAVE FUN!

Don't let a lot of time go by without some kind of conversation. Silence makes people uncomfortable. And don't forget to put the camera down once in awhile and strengthen your connection with your subject!

Camera Angle

When photographing horses by themselves, we tend to photograph from a lower angle because it makes them look more majestic. However, this is not a flattering angle for people (hello nostrils!). When I photograph people with horses, I generally shoot from standing height.



CAPTURING THE CONNECTION



Within any pose, the opportunities for variation and capturing unique moments are endless. I tell people at the beginning of the session, "If I have you posed and looking at me and your horse turns in to interact with you, feel free to break the pose and respond." Horses are unpredictable, so we want to seize those opportunities when they are inviting us into a moment of connection.

My approach to capturing that connection is simple. Encourage the horse and owner to interact, and then photograph it as it unfolds.

When I give people direction to pet their horse, I have them put the lead or reins in one hand first and use the other to interact with the horse. Petting a horse with a handful of leather just looks messy.

When the connection is taking place, I stop talking. This is their time - I'm just an observer with a camera.

Encourage the Connection

Here are some things I might say to encourage people to connect with their horse:

1. Pet your horse on the nose.*
2. Touch your horse on the neck.
3. Give your horse a hug/kiss.
4. Give your horse some love!

**Note: if they pet the lips, the horse may start to get silly because that's their "play button!" It's best to have them pet the long part of the nose.*

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

I have a bachelor's degree in singing. When I was in college, practice was necessary in order for me to grow as a singer and was a required part of the program. I spent nearly every day singing scales and working on songs for my next recital. What would have happened if I only sang in lessons and at recitals? I would have received a bad grade and embarrassed myself!

I often think back to this when I contemplate how to grow in my photography skills and help others do the same. Most photographers, once they reach a certain level of mastery and stability in their business, stop practicing and only take photos when someone is paying them.

I even saw a comment on Facebook once where one photographer gave another the advice to never take photos for free.

I about fell over because I take photos for free ALL THE TIME.

It's called practice. And it's the number one way I grow as a photographer - and it's the best way for you to grow as well.

If I only picked up a camera when I was paid to do so, I wouldn't push myself to try new things. A paid session where I'm working for my client is not the right place to experiment. That's the time to produce as many great images as possible. I'm not saying I don't experiment a little during a paid session, but my focus is on my client and not on my own growth as a photographer.

Studies show that we retain only 10% of what we read, but 90% of what we physically do, so my recommendation to you is that you don't wait until someone hires you before you go out and use what you've learned in this eBook. Grab a friend, or maybe someone you know who can't afford photos, and put into practice what you have read.

Give yourself specific goals for what you want to try and make sure they know to you'll be experimenting. Bless them with the photos, and bless yourself with new skills and confidence!



FINAL THOUGHTS



I hope you have enjoyed this eBook, and, more importantly, that you now feel equipped with the necessary knowledge and confidence to give your client images they will love for a lifetime. Creating images of people with the horses they love is a deeply fulfilling experience, and I am excited for you as you start your journey in Equestrian Photography.

All my best,

Shelley Paulson



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