

Horse Photography Tips From A Pro

Anyone Can Improve Their Skills!

By Nicole Cranford



Taking a good conformation/sale photo is not that hard. See some secrets for success on the next page.

Taking great photos of horses is not easy, but I am happy to share some of the things I’ve learned that will help you take amazing horse photos and impress your friends and family!

Choose a quality camera with an optical zoom lens

Most people use a smartphone that’s typically equipped with a pretty decent camera, but it probably won’t result in a photo you would want to hang on your wall. Instead, go for a ‘point and shoot’ that has an OPTICAL zoom with a minimum of 200mm.

Pay attention to the light and the direction of the sun

Some of the best photos can be taken in early morning right after sunrise, when the sun is close to the horizon and the light appears warmer and softer. If you’re shooting during the middle of the day, move to a position where the sun is behind you and directed at the horse. If the sun is straight overhead, look at the angle that the shadows are and move yourself to be at the opposite angle. Always take practice shots to test the lighting.

The photo of Elliewood’s Duchess Fergie, owned by Williams Instruction and Training LLC, displays positioning your horse to a barn door so that the sun illuminates the horse while shooting into a shaded area. Want



Elliewood’s Duchess Fergie poses for the camera and demonstrates how to position your horse to a barn door so that the sun illuminates the horse while shooting into a shaded area.

to take it step further? Create a stunning black background portraiture by shooting at an angle to eliminate light coming from the back-barn door or simply close the door to get a head on view.

Create the correct composition.

Composition is how your subject appears relative to any other objects in the photograph. I always try to keep the center of the horse level with my camera. Depending on how far or close I am to the horse I may need to lower my position or stand a bit taller. This will fill the frame with more depth of the horse and rider. I follow the rule of thirds. The scene can be cut into thirds up and down and side to side. Balancing the image within the thirds helps to tell the story. For movement photos, take your photos from the front and at a slight angle so you can catch the horse’s chest and the rider’s face.

Timing is everything to capture quick movements!

Learning how to time your shots perfectly to capture a horse mid-air over a jump can be very tricky but gets easier with practice. I know my equipment and lag time very well, so it’s become easy. Set your camera to burst mode, also called continuous shooting mode, sports mode, or continuous high-speed mode. In burst mode, you’re able to capture several photos in quick succession by either pressing the shutter button or holding it down. It also pays to buy a memory card that can record images very quickly and perform faster processing. I use the Scandisk Extreme PRO memory cards.

Capture animals with ears up

Ears up, and forward! This is true for many types of animal photography and makes all the difference with horses. Ears up make the horse look alert, happy, and engaged. Ears forward on a horse also compliments the composition of their heads and shows the horse as being confident. You can use a candy wrapper, dollar bill or noises from your smartphone



The red lines illustrate the movement you want to capture. Time your photos so you have the legs in an “M” form.

to get their attention. Although these can gain a horse’s attention, be cautious as they can also cause them to spook.

Learn how to edit to get a professional look

An important step to produce outstanding horse photos is to learn about photo editing. The Adobe Creative Suite is a great way to take advantage of Lightroom, Photoshop, and other creative applications to enhance your photography skills. Adobe provides a user-friendly interface to quickly color correct images, crop, and add color grading with simple sliders. You can also clone, heal, or use the adjustment brush to fix blemishes or the background. During editing, crop the image to get rid of distracting elements like stray people or unnecessary poles and power lines in your background. Soften some edges, add ‘burn’ to areas that the eye doesn’t need to focus on, and add sharpening to the horses. I can add a pop to the color of the horse or remove stains on a gray with saturation levels. Another neat technique is to move the Highlight and Shadow sliders in Lightroom to allow the shadows to have a blue tone, and the highlights a slight yellow tone. This helps to create warmth and depth in naturally lit photos.

How to take a good conformation photo

- Taking a conformation photo is not that hard, but here are some tips that will give your horse an advantage right out of the starting gate.
- Make a left-side profile of your horse.
 - Place your horse’s entire body, including its head, at a 90-degree angle to the camera. This, and standing your horse on level ground, will ensure that its proportions appear accurate in the photo.
 - Consider banding, braiding, or combing your horse’s mane over if it falls on the left side and is particularly long. This will give the viewer a clearer view of the neck.
 - Place your horse in a well-lit, simple setting with no distractions.
 - Fit your horse’s entire body in the picture, but make sure your horse isn’t so far away that it’s hard to see.
 - Try to keep the person holding the horse’s lead rope out of the shot.
 - Make sure your horse is clean and well-groomed.
 - Put your horse in a well-fitted halter, preferably a solid color.
 - Try your best to get your horse’s ears up and alert.
 - Be intentional. A candid shot of your horse in the pasture won’t follow these guidelines. You want your horse to look its best!

Horse photography can be challenging! Hopefully, with these tips, you’ll be well on your way to taking some fantastic horse photos of your own.

About The Author: Nicole Cranford’s love for horses began in Denver Colorado at the age of 9 with western riding, rodeos, and the annual family trip to Wyoming for Frontier days. When she moved to northern Virginia, she became reacquainted with the horse world after enrolling her kids in a horse camp. Soon after her daughter began regular lessons that Nicole decided it was time to get back on a horse, but this time it would be riding English. From taking photos of her daughter and becoming reunited with her love of horses, she combined the two into Nicole Cranford Photography, LLC.



Editing can be used to provide either a warm tone (top) or a cool tone (bottom) to a photo.

