

JUDGING by Joe Thomas

2006 - 2007

Part 1 of 6



At the request of Nancy McMurtrie, who rides editorial shotgun over this newsletter, we're going to begin a series of articles on the intricacies of our judging system. What do the scores mean? Who are the judges? How are they selected? Are scoring systems the same from club to club? With each EPC meeting bringing new members, this is an opportune time to explain a system seemingly as arcane as Olympic gymnastic judging.

Let's start with what happens on competition night. Ruth Hager and I arrange for the judges, completing the schedule by June with selections from a list provided by the New Jersey Federation of Camera Clubs. On arrival, whether the judge has been here before or not, he or she is given a written summary and an oral briefing on our system, which is as follows:

We do not provide a preview of some entries (some clubs do, but more on that at another time). We have two scoring rounds. The first round has a range of four to seven; the second has a range of seven to nine. We want a comment on all entries in the first round, but no commentary in the second unless necessary. The purpose of the first round is to identify above-average work. In the second round an honorable mention is given to any photograph achieving a final score of seven. A photograph elevated to an eight receives a merit award. A photo elevated to a nine receives a top award. A best is chosen when there is more than one nine-rated photograph or even if there are no nines at all.

Although there are standards (again, more later), judging is obviously subjective; therefore, if you receive a score of four, five or six, and you disagree, you are entitled to reenter the work another time.

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Part 2

What Do the Scores Mean?

Now that you know a little bit about our scoring system and the briefing we give our judges, the question arises, "What do the scores mean?" Alas the question has no definitive answer because the scores might mean one thing objectively to us as a club, another thing to the judge we have that night, and a third thing to the photographer who submitted the picture. For instance, if you consider a score of six a disaster for your particular submission, we're not going to be able to convince you otherwise even if you accept the notion that a six really isn't a bad score.

Our standard (one that we explain to our judges) is this: six means a photograph is average – one that is reasonably decent but could be improved. Seven means "above average", and that's why we call it an Honors score and your work is recognized with an Honorable Mention.

A score of eight under our system is called a Merit Award and is given for "superior effort". Nine is reserved for Top Award and indicates an "outstanding effort". As for five (and some judges do give fives) in our system it stands for "below average", while four indicates that to succeed this picture "needs more work". It stands as a reminder to be more careful in composition, exposure, simplicity or sharpness. It ought not be taken as a cause for indignation or hurling oneself off a high place.

Some judges, wishing not to offend sensitive souls, do not give fours or very many fives. Others take the approach that if your scoring range is four to nine, it stands to reason that some photos on any given night will be rated a four or five in relation to other entries that night. However, should you receive a five or a six when in your heart you know even Ansel Adams himself would have liked this picture, then there is this remedy open to you: you can always reenter any non-honors photo (six or below) one other night.



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Part 3
Objective Standards vs. Subjective Aspects

Even though photographic evaluation (“judging” in our terms) is subjective, that is, based on the personal likes and dislikes of a particular judge, this does not mean it is without objective standards. Talk to any judge and it becomes clear that all are applying the same standards even though one may give more weight than another to a given standard in a particular set of circumstances.

What then are judges looking for in a photograph that you enter in a club competition? First, the judge is looking for technical proficiency: Is this picture sharp? If there is a blur, is it deliberate and creative, is it due to camera shake, or is it just out of focus? Is the depth (or narrowness) of field appropriate to this subject? Is the picture underexposed or overexposed? Admittedly, exposure is often a matter of individual interpretation – one judge’s overexposure is another’s creative high-key presentation.

The competent judge will then evaluate composition. Is there a clear-cut center of interest? Where in the frame has that center of interest been placed? Are there distracting elements at the edges? Is the eye being held within the picture or directed out by placement of the various elements? Where is the horizon line? Is it straight? If traditional compositional “rules” have been broken, does this add to or detract from the photo? (Here, let’s make an important point: if you are not familiar with composition techniques, perhaps it is time to learn them.)

Your photograph is also going to be evaluated on its creativity. What is the quality of the light and how have you utilized it for effect? What about the perspective you have chosen? Are the visual lines (both real and implied) dynamic or static? The real question the judge is asking is this: what, if anything, have you done to differentiate your picture of this scene from every other picture of the scene?

Finally, and most importantly, there is that most subjective of all factors – the impact your picture has on the viewer. Camera club competitions being what they are, if your picture hasn’t gotten the attention of the judge within seconds of being shown, it may not score as well as you think it should. Let’s face it – it’s hard to compete against an owl with a rodent, a spectacular mountain sunset, or a volcanic eruption with an artistic presentation of colorful lichen on a rock!



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Part 4
What are the Qualifications?



Up to now in this series on photographic judging, we’ve been discussing the essentials of judging, the basis for evaluation, scoring systems, and why it is that one judge might differ from another in his/her view of a particular entry. All of this assumes that the judge is a knowledgeable and qualified person. The question arises: how does one get to be a judge? What are the qualifications?

To answer the second question first, the only hard and fast qualification is your willingness to be a judge coupled, of course, with the confidence that you know enough to discuss the work of others with authority, fairness, and consistency. This is not a job for timid souls or for those lacking a solid grounding in photographic principles or various forms of the photographic arts.

As to how one becomes a judge, there are three possibilities: (1) someone is familiar with your work and asks you to judge at their club, (2) someone who knows your background and skills nominates you for the office, submitting your name to the New Jersey Federation of Camera Clubs (NJFCC) for inclusion on their list of approved judges, (3) you submit your own name to the federation.

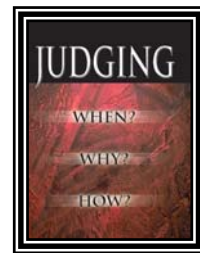
Basically, those who come to judging via the first method have fallen into it. (That is how I first started judging some 25 years ago. Clubs where I had given programs asked if I would come back as a judge. I now judge about 15 Federation, PSA, club, and juried exhibits a year.) As for nominations, those of us on the NJFCC's "judges and program list" are asked to submit suggestions annually and several years ago, after discussing it with them, I offered the names of Gordon Emrich and Howard Knauer. As for submitting your own name, not too many judges have taken that route, but it is an avenue open to all, albeit without any guarantees that you will receive assignments. Whatever the case, judging is not a road to riches: fees range from \$15.00 to \$50.00, with the average being about \$25.00. Judges who come to Essex receive \$35.00.

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Part 5

Inconsistency! Not Really!

One question that has popped up frequently since we began this series on judging is this: Why is there so much apparent inconsistency from one judge to another and sometimes even on the part of one judge in the course of an evening? It's a topic on which a book could be written (one which nobody would buy), but we will try to address it anyway. Here are some answers:



- (1) This club (Essex Photo) demands an awful lot of its judges. We expect them to be authorities in all aspects of photography (nature, pictorial, digital, slides, and prints, including black-and white) even though most judges specialize in only one or two fields at best. By way of contrast, most other clubs judge prints, slides, and nature separately and select judges accordingly.
- (2) Some judges score on a curve, that is, they will make allowances in the beginner class, for instance, and will judge an entry in relation to the overall quality of the class. Others take the approach that a rose is a rose is a rose - - that is, a seven is a seven is a seven under any and all circumstances. So a "curve" judge might score an entry high on a night of low quality while another "curve" judge will score it low on a night of high quality.
- (3) Judges have preferences. Some will rate snowflakes higher than raindrops, castles higher than chicken coops. That doesn't make them inconsistent; it just means they are like the rest of us.
- (4) Time is a killer. With about 100 images to review (half of them twice), and 90 minutes to do so (less when you deduct time for image changes and handling), a judge has about 20-25 seconds to score an image and comment on it. Some things said or unsaid might well leave an impression of inconsistency where inconsistency doesn't really exist.
- (5) Even though most judges basically use the same standards, one might value background, exposure, or sharpness for instance, more highly than another in a particular image. That's more a question of values than consistency.
- (6) Every judge is human and so are club members. Both make mistakes, but judges are more likely to be objective about our work than we are.



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Part 6

The 9 Has It!

To conclude our series on judging we will discuss the scoring system in use at Essex Photo and how it evolved, keeping in mind that almost every club in this country uses some variation of the 1-to-9 or 1-to-5 standards used by PSA and New Jersey Federation competitions.

Some clubs permit judges to preview a certain number of photos so the judge can get a feel for the competitive level. Some permit first-place ties. Some do not choose a picture-of-the-month in any category. Some limit commentary to only beginning and intermediate groups. We do none of those things. Our members ask for a commentary on every entry and want a "win" in every class even if there are no nines or there are two or more nines.

The old Montclair club permitted previews and had a 4-to-9 system. The West Essex Club started with a 6-to-27 system (as if there were three judges instead of one), switched to a 3-to-9 standard in the 1970s and adopted the two-tier system (first round 3-to-7, second round rescoring the 7s as 7, 8 or 9) which Essex, the successor club after the merger, now uses.

We do not permit previews for two reasons: one is time (our club has more entries than most other clubs so there is a need to speed things up), the other is that by having the judge identify all honors entries (seven is an honors score) in the first round and then having him review all those entries a second time we avoid the possibility that an early entry will be given a low score in the absence of a preview. Judges tell us they like the system (also used in Ridgewood) because it is less likely to result in judging errors. Interestingly, the system results in higher average scores overall.

In our annual competition we use three judges (as do all other clubs). Voting takes place without commentary unless there is a need for judges to discuss the merits of a couple of photos in choosing one as best of the year.



3 4 5 6'S

BUT, YOU CAN SUBMIT YOUR PHOTO AGAIN!

