



EQUINE PHOTOGRAPHY FIELD GUIDE | BY SCOTT TREES

Equine Photography Field Guide

Seeing the light. Understanding the horse. Making the photograph your own.

A note from Scott

My approach to photographing horses begins with taking in the scene, considering the light, the surroundings, and the horse itself before I ever raise the camera. What caught my attention? What is the light doing? How can I make a photograph that captures what I see and feel?

My work as an equine photographer has taken me to horses, people, and places around the world. The experiences behind those photographs are part of what I enjoy sharing in my workshops, online classes, and photo tours, along with hearing the experiences of the people who join me.

This guide brings together some of the things I pay attention to in the field. Use it to help you make decisions, develop your timing, and become more deliberate about what you include in a photograph. Then experiment. Your way of seeing is what makes the picture yours.

“The camera is a tool. It’s the eye behind it that creates the image.”

Use it in the field.

Start with the idea, make your settings serve it, and pay attention to the horse.

Learn with me.

In my workshops, online classes, and international photo tours, I create photographic opportunities and share how I approach them. We work with light, timing, backgrounds, and the horses themselves, with room to explore your own ideas. I want you to come away with photographs you are proud of and a clearer sense of how you made them.

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It all begins with a question. What captured your attention?

Every photograph begins with something that makes you stop and look. Before you reach for the camera, ask yourself what that was.

WHY? Decide the purpose of the picture.

What do you see or feel? It may be the horse's expression, the energy of its movement, or the way light falls across its body. Expand upon the idea that first pulled you into the shot. Let that guide the choices you make.

WHERE? Choose your background.

The background is part of the photograph. Look for a location that supports the horse and the idea. Move around before you settle into position. A few steps can remove a distraction or give you a much stronger picture. Light also influences your background: notice what becomes bright, what falls into shadow, and what draws attention.

WHEN? Light is your paintbrush.

Learning to see light is critical to taking your photography to the next level. Look at what the light is doing before you think about camera settings. Light gives your photograph its emotional tone. It can reveal the shape of a horse, bring life to an eye, or turn a familiar scene into something that makes you stop. Notice its direction, its softness or hardness, and what it does to the horse and the background. Move around and watch how it changes. Choose when to photograph by the light you need for the idea.

“I’ve always felt that an emotionally powerful photograph outweighs a technically correct one.”

Don’t get so wrapped up in being technically perfect that you lose what attracted you in the first place. Learn your camera and get the best exposure you can in camera. Those skills help you express what you see.

The camera is a tool.

It’s the eye behind it that creates the image.

Make the settings serve the idea.

You are not filling in a technical worksheet. You are deciding how the photograph should feel.

Choose the mode for the picture.

If you are not comfortable shooting manual, use shutter priority when freezing motion is the priority. Use aperture priority when controlling depth of field matters most, such as a portrait. I recommend these over Program or full Auto so you control the setting that matters. Always check what the camera chooses for the other settings.

Lens, focal length, and perspective

On full frame, I find a zoom setting around 135-150mm a good starting point for body photographs. For portraits, I also use an 85mm fixed focal length lens. Choose deliberately, then position yourself for flattering proportions. Moving changes perspective; zooming from the same position mainly changes framing. A wide lens used close to the horse can exaggerate the parts nearest the camera.

Focus and exposure

I generally use a central focus area and center-weighted metering. Focus and metering are separate choices: one determines what is sharp; the other measures light for exposure. For movement, use continuous autofocus to follow the horse. For portraits, make sure the eye is sharp.

When the coat dominates the meter reading, I may start with +1/3 stop for a white horse or -1/3 stop for a dark horse. These are starting points. Light and background affect the reading too. Check the result, protect detail in white coats and markings, and get exposure as good as you can in camera.

Freeze motion

Start at 1/1000 second or faster for action, then check the result. Faster movement may need a faster shutter. Look at the legs, mane, and eye for unwanted blur. Raise ISO if you need to maintain that speed in lower light.

Depth of field

Aperture controls how much is acceptably in focus. With other conditions unchanged, a smaller f-number gives less depth of field; a larger number gives more. Distance and focal length matter too. For a portrait, check that the parts of the horse you want sharp actually are sharp.

ISO

Today's cameras handle higher ISO well. Don't be afraid to raise it in lower light. Some noise may be a better compromise than unwanted motion blur. Learn what your camera can deliver, and avoid underexposing simply to keep ISO low.

White balance

Auto white balance serves me well most of the time. At sunrise or sunset, I use Daylight to preserve the color of that light. Auto may neutralize some of the warmth. Check the result and adjust if it does not look the way you intend.

Anticipate the moment

Don't count on the motor drive to find the right stride. If you start on the wrong leg, even a fast burst can miss the position you want. Watch the horse, learn its rhythm, and time your release. Use a burst to support your timing.

Don't spray and pray. Learn to see the moment and try to capture it instead of holding the button and hoping something happens.

Let the choices work together.

Motion, depth of field, and exposure are one conversation. Balance shutter speed, aperture, and ISO around the photograph you want to make.

Photograph the horse, not just the pose.

A pleasing picture should also represent the horse well. Know what you are looking at, and pay attention to how your position changes its appearance.

Three kinds of photographs

Head shots: Look for expression, a flattering head and neck position, and a clear eye. Watch both eyes and ears. They tell you a great deal about how the horse is feeling.

Body shots: Pay attention to stance, balance, proportions, and the placement of the legs. A beautiful setting does not make up for a position that misrepresents the horse.

Action shots: Horses at liberty, under saddle, or working all require a sense of timing. Learn the gait and watch for a moment that shows the horse at its best.

Shoot at the heart line

For a side-on body photograph, I generally aim toward what I call the “heart line,” near where the front leg meets the chest. Most people shoot stills and video from their standing height, but bending over and shooting into the heart line can make a subtle yet important difference in how the horse’s proportions appear. I usually kneel on one knee to get this lower viewpoint. Use the heart line as a starting point, then consider how your position and camera height influence the image. I use this same reference for liberty and action shots, while keeping a safe distance and room to move.

Choose a flattering angle.

Profile: Shows the outline and is useful for assessing conformation. Keep the legs distinct and the stance deliberate.

Three-quarter: Can reveal form and dimension. Watch whether the nearer parts look too large or the legs overlap.

Eye level: A useful starting point for a connected portrait. **Lower angles:** Can add presence and drama, but check their effect on proportions.

Know the flattering angles. Then earn the right to break them.

Have enough help.

For head shots and conformation photographs, your result is only as good as the person on the end of the lead rope. These are not easy pictures to make. Work with someone who can position the horse calmly and respond to your direction.

Have help to get ears, turn horses, and manage the session. Explain what you need and coordinate any attention-getting. Keep reactions controlled and the horse comfortable.

Simplify the composition.

The eye is often drawn to the lightest area first. Look for bright spots that pull attention away from the horse. Check the whole frame, including the edges.

My most frequent portfolio critique is that there is too much in the picture. People see something interesting, then include so much around it that the idea gets lost. Ask what you can leave out to make the photograph stronger.

Safety comes first.

The well-being of the horse and the safety of everyone helping are always my first priority. If you get uptight, the horse can become uptight too. Stay calm, communicate clearly, and give the horse a break when it needs one.

Let the handler manage the horse. Keep people clear of its path, leave room to move, and stop if the situation becomes unsafe. No photograph is worth an injury.

Expect the Unexpected

The only predictable thing about a horse is its unpredictability.

I take time to study the light, background, and setting before shooting, but the horse often has its own ideas. Being willing to adapt is part of the process, and sometimes that unexpected moment makes the photograph.

01 Horse ready?

Coat, mane, muzzle, and eyes clean? Tack fitted and distracting straps checked? Handler and helpers know what you need?

02 Horse comfortable?

Is the horse calm? Does it need a break? Are everyone's positions safe?

03 Background clean?

Look for posts, bright spots, and objects that appear to grow out of the horse. Move if you need to.

04 Light doing what you want?

Notice direction, quality, and what the light does to the eye, the shape of the horse, and the feeling of the picture.

05 Moment clear?

Know the expression, gesture, or stride you are waiting for. Anticipate it.

06 Frame checked?

Have you included what matters and removed what distracts? Check ears, hooves, and tail before pressing the shutter.

When in doubt

Look away from the camera.

Look at the horse.

Ask what caught your eye.

Move to strengthen the picture.

Wait for the moment.

Then make the photograph.

Don't be afraid to experiment.

Try different angles. Change your height or your distance. Watch what happens when you change your position in relation to the light. Learn the principles, then explore what else you can do with them.

Be honest with your work.

You are going to make mistakes. Look at them and learn from them. Ask yourself what worked and what did not. Be honest with your answers, and decide what you will try differently next time.

“The camera is a tool. It's the eye behind it that creates the image.”

FIELD NOTES

If you'd like to explore these ideas further, my workshops and online classes offer opportunities to learn how I work with light, composition, and the unexpected moments that horses bring to a photograph. I am developing new online classes and workshops. I enjoy sharing the experience of making photographs and helping you develop your own way of seeing.



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