

1. Should I enter into club competitions or not?

Should you compete? Yes, definitively YES. Why? A straightforward answer is, 'Why Not?' A more detailed answer, however, requires approaching this potentially contentious subject carefully. It is no secret that not everyone joins a camera club to compete. In fact, a few give competition little to no credibility, and claim it offers little incentive to improve any photographic skills. I disagree. Like it or not, competitiveness in our culture is a fact of life. However, It need not be a Darwinian do-or-die competitive spirit. Rather it should be viewed as a 'celebratory event' of sorts, whereby each competitor participates in a 'friendly jousting' providing for an opportunity to strut one's stuff, proudly share one's accomplishments communally, and to learn new techniques and improve one's photographic skills. One very good reason to participate in club competition ... simply ask yourselves why would anyone deny him or herself experiencing a 'Zing-go-the-strings-of-your-heart' moment after receiving a 30.

2. Do I enter Digital Projection, and/or Print competitions?

It is decidedly up to a new member to ultimately choose to participate in competitions at SBCC, or not. Historically there is a propensity for the majority to compete in digital projection competitions whereby there are several categories to choose from. The decision you make will most likely be based on what best peaks your interest. Over time you can always vary your choices and compete in categories that will most challenge your photographic skills and talent. In fact, you can choose to participate in more than one category.

There are five categories without an assigned class that is opened to all members - new members included. Keep in mind, however, there are three competition categories that requires you to begin in class B. Read SBCC's Web Site, "Competitions", re Rules and Guidelines for further instructions. For new members who chose to remain active and continue to compete and would want to upgrade into either classes A and AA, such a move is subsequently determined by the Competition Committee at the end of the the year when all judge's scores are tallied per each category. An upgrade in class is generally based on who achieves the highest total in competition scores for a specific category.

New members may choose to participate either in Color or Black & White Print competition, or both, when first joining SBCC. No class requirements for Print competition.

Occasionally, new members who have a known history of having competed successfully in other camera club equal to class A or AA levels at SBCC, and exhibits photographic skills surpassing class B level, his or her acceptance to A or AA is to be determined by the Competition Committee following a review of a members images and portfolio, if any.

3. Which class and which categories do I compete in?

The SBCC web site will provide you with all the information you will need. It may be wise to first enter in Open to get one's feet wet. If, however, one has a preference for Nature, than by all

means, jump right in. Warning: Stony Brook Camera Club is traditionally renowned for its nature photographers. In fact I daresay it is the core category. So, if Nature, specifically Wildlife, is your cup of tea, be prepared for some tough competition. The Open category is just that: Open. Warning here as well: New members should not be overly offended when you enter photos of children, pets, point-and-shoot, everyday photos, etc that may and usually do score in the low numbers. Not that these subjects are unacceptable. In time members find out quickly enough that such images usually lack 'The WOW' factor – IMPACT at first sight. Photos of this ilk make good record shots for family albums, but can fare poorly as competition entries. The Creative category translates into letting YOUR creative juices show no boundaries – so long as the final product started out as an original photo taken by you. Take the opportunity to Photoshop it to death. But, be forewarned, it can go beyond 'creative' and lapse into a frenzied mess. Lastly, I encourage you to enter print competition in either Color or Black & White category - nature, open, and creative elements apply in both category.

4. If I choose to enter print competitions, how best to present them for judging?

Print media is different from digitally projected images in that it is a reflective art medium that will most likely be perceived differently from a judge's perspective. For print competitions consider using papers that accentuate hues, enrich color saturations, control brightness and contrast for added depth. A favorable competitive edge is attained for color prints having images on either glossy or luster papers. If you choose to print your own, familiarize yourself with your printer's profiles for each paper you use. For Black & White consider the advantages of printing on Matted papers. It is advantageous, though not always a guarantee for success, to use matt texture papers with black matted inks (MK) as opposed to photo black inks (PK) for an added impact with a dynamic range of whites to blacks that will pop off the print. Commercially printed entries are accepted. However, keep in mind that when you do so you forfeit control of the final outcome. My personal bias would be to have ALL prints entered in competition printed by the maker ONLY. I believe the printing process and the skills it involves is a large part of the story. A sized print (11x14 Max) when matted (16x20 - maximum size for competition) will most likely sway a judge's score favorably. Mind you, nevertheless, there are smaller images that do manage to outperform and stand out.

6. Why is it my images' colors/contrast/tonality when projected at SBCC appear differently when viewed on my monitor at home?

This is the \$64,000 question that continues to come up often. I think it will continue to haunt us, up to and until man and machine find a perfect coexistence of sorts. Nowadays, though, the simplest and most direct and effective answer how best to fix this problem is to first ensure your home computer's monitor has been calibrated, calibrated, and calibrated. Color management is a highly complex subject not easily explained. There are tomes and ample web sites covering this subject. To reiterate, calibrate your home monitor – and schedule repeated calibration on a regu-

lar basis. Briefly, calibration of monitors and projectors may be performed in two ways: One is to eyeball it. That is, visually calibrate while using computer software when following step-by-step instructions. A more accurate application is to calibrate using an external measuring device. One such device is the Spider PRO that is presently available via SBCC. When the club's projector has also been calibrated correctly, it all falls into place and everyone is happy. I daresay that this is not always the case for one reason or another. There is not enough space here to discuss the pros and cons on this subject. Ideally, it would be best to have all images viewed and judged via a monitor. Since this is not the case, calibrate!

7. What makes a 'winning' image for competition?

Choosing THE image that will most likely do well in competition is an evolutionary process. For a new member it normally begins with a trial-and-error approach. Of course, there is a lot to be said about having a 'beginner's luck'. All the same, when beginner's luck runs out, there will be dry periods, and it will seem that one will never move up from class B. When this happens one risks assessing ways to shoot images that will satisfy judges' tastes. This can be restated as 'Playing the Judges' - NOT a good idea. Chances are this will backfire. Judges can be and are an unpredictable lot. When photographic skills do evolve, and they will with practice, practice, and more practice, a competitor in due course realizes how to 'create' an image, and not just 'take' a photo. Sort of finding one's groove and personal winning photographic style. However, when not taking this approach, one risks settling on images that have a formulaic look and feel. For sure there are academic and aesthetic 'guidelines' that are useful for composing and designing a winning image. And, without a doubt, judges do resort to using such 'guidelines' for scoring. Discovering what are those 'guidelines' and to persistently – no, rather obsessively challenge them, I personally guarantee the 30's will come. If not a 30, you will still have images you can proudly display. Nevertheless, I urge you to first learn the basics and then move on.

8. What are the criteria used by judges when scoring images for competition?

What do judges generally look for when judging? What are the 'guidelines' generally applied when judging? Definitely, judges have personal preferences when determining what is and what is not a winner. Even so, there are fundamentals of composition, cropping, exposure, sharpness and properly focused images, rules of thirds to name a few. They are the core criteria that will deem which images will receive higher scores from others' in a competition. In my experiences when judging, I can vouch for one key ingredient that is a major predictor in determining a winner. It is what is dubbed the 'WOW' factor – Images that have an immediate 'Impact' when first viewed. There are equally important and subtle judging criteria: Does the image evoke or provoke a mood? Is there a striking viewpoint and does it communicate a narrative that brings all elements of the image together? Innovation and creativity generally add to the overall score. As for prints, judges will also critique your choice of matting. Make sure they are clean and presentable. Is it possible judges are wrong? Definitely Yes. The act of judging is not a science.

Rather, it is an art. Judges who provide ample constructive critiques and generously give hints and tips on how to improve an image are ones you want to re-invite.

9. There are judges who bestow positive comments for an image, but score it low. Why?

On occasions there are indeed judges who will for one reason or another choose to generously provide positive feedback and in spite of that provide low to average scores to an image. Infrequently there are those who provide little to no feedback when asked to do so. Nevertheless, when judges do give feedback it is hoped that it will be the type that will give the maker of an image a better understanding of how hers or his image fared when put side by side to others'. As I pointed out earlier, "to learn new techniques and improve one's photographic skills" is a crucial aspect when participating in competition. I can attest to the fact that in all my years as a camera club member I have improved my photographic skills largely due to having competed and listened to judge's comments on how to improve an image. Conversely, there are judges who go overboard with their points of view. By that I mean comments that reflect more the judge's personal tastes that do not really add any useful 'academic impact'. So why are there judges who purposefully provide minimal to no constructive critiques? For some there may be a reluctance to give negative comments and avoid offending competitors? Some judges may want to only reflect on the positive – that is, focus on the positive reinforcement aspect? Also, personality factors may play into how a judge will comment or not? Fortunately, we have had judges who do provide great feedback – this is a plus.

10. At image study night I got great feedback from the members, but when I entered my image in competition it did poorly score-wise. Why is that?

Before answering this one, let's first look at the possibility of the opposite occurring. What if on image study night the feedback from other members had been negative but the decision to show it for competition resulted in a great score? The man, Yogi Berra, once said, "It ain't over till it's over". Straightforward, isn't it? As I stated before, judges are a fickle lot ... and so are we. Yogi is also quoted to have said, "In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is". So, leaving you with these parting and perhaps ambiguous quotes, keep in mind that when you decide to compete in club competitions, anything is possible. For some competition is an intense and passionate event, for others it is merely another club activity whereby the relationship between good or bad photography is meaningless if we know nothing beyond the images we see. Image study night avails us the ability to view, study, discuss, and critique images. It is only a first step towards learning how to improve one's photographic skills. It is not meant to provide us with a definitive answer as to how an image will fare in competition or not. Practice, practice, and more practice will get you there!