



# PHOTOGRAPHER'S PICK. horse girl

For the past eight years, because the Southern Highlands is such a strong equestrian area, Highlife has published in every issue a photograph of a woman or a girl with their horse. It was a counterbalance to the Man, Ute and Dog photograph on the back page, and they have all been taken by our Chief Photographer, Tony Sheffield. But there's more to taking these photographs than meets the eye. On the following pages Tony shares his secrets with us, and chooses five of his favourite shots.

# LOCATION SHOOTING

## The equine portrait

**B**ehind any successful equine-and-owner portrait is a challenge of personalities, largely between the horse and the photographer. From my point of view I need to avoid being kicked and head-butted, so a basic understanding of safe handling techniques of horses, and their owners in some cases, is essential.

All horses can become tense, uncomfortable and fearful when faced with an unfamiliar photographer at close quarters. Stallions, mares with foal, young inexperienced horses and even older horses lacking recent handling can become flighty and upset. Knowing where the horse's blind spots are is essential to avoid panic – and remember a horse can watch both sides of its body at the same time.

With all this in mind I always make my first approach to the horse slow and gentle and speak to it softly, allowing it to smell my skin and clearly see the camera in my hand. I prefer to use a longer focal-length lens because it allows a safe distance between me and the horse and it avoids distorting the horse's head, making it looking much larger than it actually is, a common error by amateurs.

Getting the horse into position to demonstrate its confirmation can be time consuming, however if the confirmation is poor it's best to avoid this kind of shot altogether. Leg and hoof position is best provided by a third handler by literally pushing the horse back or forward and lifting the hoof to place it in position if necessary. I like the horse's head to be held high otherwise it can give the sad "pit pony" look; make sure the eyes are clean and Aeroguard is handy in order to keep flies at bay and thus keep the horse's head still. I like to have the mane and tail brushed or plaited, as appropriate to the discipline, and trimmed accordingly. A rag is handy to wipe away any slobber from its mouth, which can often get onto

the shirt of the person being photographed – thank goodness for Photoshop!

There is much to think about: location should be on level ground; a choice of background is important with well balanced composition; direction of the sun if it is shining and never in the middle of the day. I prefer to shoot against the light and use reflectors if I am fortunate enough to have another spare groom lending a hand.

Finally, it's time to click that shutter. My eye is on two models, the girl first, looking happy or with deep emotion but glad to be there taking directions from me on where to look, when to adjust her hair or hat, more lipstick, eyes connecting with the horse, eyes connecting with me, adjusting the horse's head, changing hand position and looking pretty.

Secondly, horses have been a symbol of leadership and power for centuries; look at any painting, statue or coat of arms and the horse looks alert and strong and the ears are always pricked forward, the one feature of the horse that allows this strong attitude to be captured. It's a vital contribution from the horse in any photo shoot; without this any shot is quite useless. A simple task one may think but in most cases it is not. Over the years I have discovered many ways to achieve this but there is no one method, so I start simple otherwise the shoot ends up bigger than Ben-Hur!

Help from the team of grooms for some of the tricks I have used is a bonus: a simple shake of a bucket containing feed pellets; a carrot; the rustling of a plastic bag; throwing a plastic bag into the air containing one of my boots; opening and closing of a golf umbrella or the crack of a whip from a distance (use with caution). If all these fail try jumping up and down screaming! Then, the most effective tool, grab two more horses and have them walked side to side behind the photographer in the horse's vision – this usually does the trick!



Although not a competent rider myself I have been among horses from a very early age. My father was an officer in The Household Cavalry when my family lived above stables in London's Knightsbridge Barracks.

My professional horse photography began during the 1970s at racing studs in England and France. During the 1990s I was regularly called to the Royal Mews at Buckingham Palace to photograph The Queen's horses and carriages and to cover polo at Smiths Lawn at Windsor.

