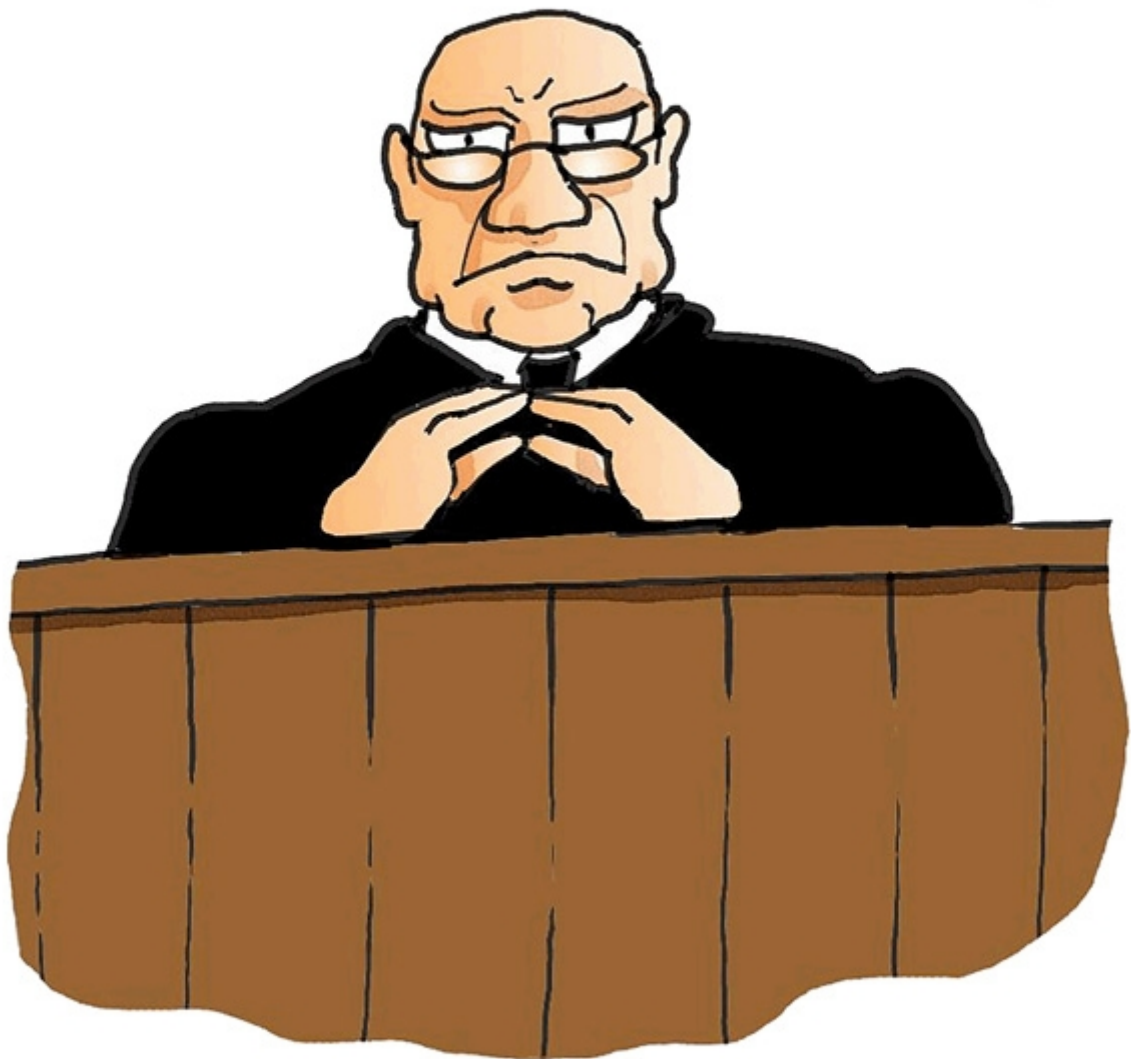


Beckham Digital

Here comes the Judge



by Barry Beckham

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Here Comes the Judge

Camera club judges, don't we just love to hate them.



They just never get things right, they don't understand our creative genius and they always miss the message in our image. Their view of set subjects is always a long way from ours and they talk too much. Then sometimes they don't say enough, some are too technical or not technical enough.

They nitpick and fail to see the artistry and skill in our image. They miss the hours of manipulation that we have put into our masterpiece and we start to wonder if competitions are worth the effort at all. (Cue a long sigh at this point) In fact sometimes the photographic judge can't do anything right in our eyes.

Except, when the judge gives our image a high score or better still we achieve that elusive 10 out of 10. Then our views appear somewhat different and as we shuffle out of the clubroom at the end of the evening, we hear ourselves saying how the judge was really quite good for a change, nothing like the usual judges we have.

It's all rather funny, if you can distance yourself from that evenings proceedings and of course it's all just human nature, well, in most cases it is.

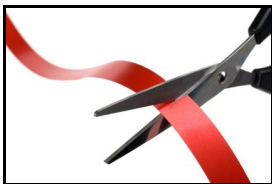
The problem is that we can get a bit too wrapped up with the competitive spirit and we are all so emotionally tied to our own images. We may have travelled a long distance to visit a certain location, so our investment in the images is high.



It may have cost us quite a bit in both time and cost, or we may have waited months for the clouds to be just right for that special location along the coast.

On the one evening the clouds and light met all our expectations, it's natural that an invisible thread ties us emotionally to the pictures we shot that evening. We may have started our manipulation with a less than perfect image/exposure and after an hours work (or more) we are very proud of our result. We have made great improvements in the image and as we stand back and admire our work, it's natural for us to have that emotional tie to the picture.

The problem with all judges is that they commit the cardinal sin when they arrive at our club rooms. They cut the emotional ties we have with our images.



They didn't drive 500k to capture the shot, they didn't wait months for the light to be right, they don't know how long the manipulation took in Photoshop and the cute kid covered in ice cream isn't their grandchild.

So, they can make a judgement free of all that emotional baggage that we just cannot shrug off.

Why do we have competitions anyway? How can a judge compare that cute kid covered in ice cream and the next image that might be an old steam train? Well, it's actually not that hard to do and it's the cutting of the emotional thread that allows the judge to make those decisions on our images.

Disappointment is a natural human emotion, but it's a positive one too because it drives us to do better. It cajoles us to try harder, to put in more effort and now we have arrived at the reason for Club Competitions, it's the judging and the critiquing. The listening to ideas and suggestions and gradually learning.

Competitions are there to help raise your photographic standard. It's not to lower everyone else's standard to meet yours or make any adjustments to make things easier for you or anyone else. The best photographic work of amateur photographers can be of a higher standard than some professionals. All club members with any drive at all should be aiming for that standard. Club competitions are one way that will help, but we don't always appreciate that at the time. Disappointment gets in the way

The real benefit of the evening is hearing what the judge thinks, not only about our images, but of other members too. It's the critiquing and suggestions which is the beneficial part of the evening, but we also need to encourage entries from the members and that is where the competition comes in.



We tap into the natural competitive spirit of human beings to strive and do better. Even those who tell us they are not competitive. It's in our genes to be competitive and it's in almost every part of our life. We even compete to get to the supermarket parking spot first. People have come to blows over far less. So, please don't say you're not competitive, we all are in some way.



No-one likes to be at the bottom of the ladder and we will do almost anything to get off that lowly position. To achieve that we have to get better at our photography. To understand what it is that makes one picture stand out from the crowd. We need to get better at the technical aspects of our hobby and also the creative aspects too.

Gradually we do get better. Try this if you can, go back 5-10 years and look at pictures you were shooting then. If you don't see a huge gap between what you are producing now and what you were producing then give up and find a new hobby, because you're going nowhere. Sorry to be blunt, but it's true.

So, we encourage members to compete against each other and gradually they develop a benchmark. One which allows them to see how they are doing compared to their peers. Only then can we see if we are improving and at first progress seems painfully slow. However, there does come a time when we can look back. Then we see just how far we have come and that too offers us encouragement and spurs us on.

Anyway, back to the judges. They view our images without all the emotional baggage we have and

rightly so. That allows them to make a judgement on an ice cream covered kid or the steam train.

Lets ask another question. Do we get the standard of judges we need?

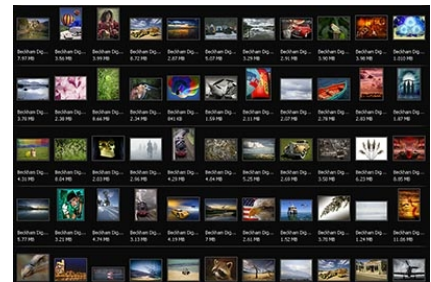
Well it depends what we want from them, but at the very least they should be reasonably proficient at Photography, the technical aspects, the creative aspects and now image editing too. I am tired of hearing judges say *“Some Photoshop work will improve this image”*, but then not even give a hint to what, how or why.

We mustn't forget that judges give up their time to help the rest of us. However, many of them fall into the same trap as those of us submitting our images to club competitions. Over time they gradually drift away from the critiquing aspect and focus far too much on the competition angle. What happens then is constructive suggestions drop off and the competition becomes a pure, first past the post event.

Well, we could pick someone off the street to do that, couldn't we. A kid could pick first, second and third! It's top quality commenting that we so desperately need and it's often lacking. There are a few reasons for this.

The Camera Clubs Fault

We often allow too many images to be submitted to the competitions, so that the judge, whether a live judge or a remote judge hasn't a hope in hell of saying anything constructive about the images, because there just isn't time. So, the monthly competition loses the critiquing and words of wisdom we badly need and we are left with just a simple race to the finish line.



Perhaps giving the judge too much to do is partially responsible for some of those terms which we all grow to hate. *Well seen - A very thoughtful image - A clear image - beautifully captured*. The judge is under pressure to say something, particularly if they are there on the night, but there isn't enough time to do that in the way we need.

Some Experience Necessary

The second reason is that the judge doesn't have enough experience themselves and I see a lot of that. Now that sounds rather arrogant doesn't it, because I am making the assumption that I must have that experience if I am to see it lacking in others.



Modesty tells me to stay away from this and let others make that decision, but I do have some examples of what I mean.

In our [Rules, Rules, Rules](#) article I spoke about how many authors are cropping very small parts from a much larger image and presenting the images in projected competitions.

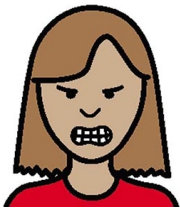
E.g. A bird in flight that was taken from a long distance away. To give the image composition and the subject some size/impact within the frame, the image is over cropped.

By over cropped I mean those images where the crop causes quality to be lost. Anyone with almost any photographic experience should be able to see the effect of this. It isn't difficult to spot, especially when seen on a good quality PC monitor and certainly on the big screen via a projector, but many judges don't mention it at all, even though it is blatantly obvious.

If the image is obviously from a beginner, we don't want to kill their enthusiasm, but we do need to say something to nudge the author in the right direction.

In judges courses I am aware that they are advised not to allow the quality of the image to get more comment than the content. This means that if the subject is extremely strong, but maybe the quality has been a little to achieve that, then the judge should make allowance. The judge should not focus purely on the quality just because that is the only negative thing they can find to talk about. That is understandable, reasonable and acceptable, but that is not what we see happening.

We see bad image quality and quite often it seems as though the judge didn't see it, or for reasons I can't quite fathom, decides not to mention it at all. It's like a dog show judge not mentioning that the dog in front of him only has three legs. OK, that's an exaggeration for comedic effect, but it's not rare for a very poor quality image without great content to attract no comments at all on the quality.



This of course infuriates others in the competition who have managed to create very good image quality. Image quality isn't the be all and end all, but it is pretty important. After all, it is good photo quality that encouraged most of us into the hobby in the first place. What's the point of striving for great quality when dire quality is constantly rewarded.

If the judges main task is to assist fellow photographers to develop as artists, shouldn't an obviously poor quality image be pointed out and then one or two pointers given in advice on how to improve that quality? Surely that is the basic requirement we need?

Listening to some judges comments, I am not sure that the judge knows what to say and perhaps that is why the issue is often side stepped. Maybe it's the political answer when they think they have an image from a beginner. The judge wants to avoid any chance of hurting someone's feelings, so they say nothing. It sidesteps the problem for them, but it's not very helpful for the rest of us or the author.

Baffling Decisions

Recently I witnessed a colourful seascape score 10 out of 10, yet it displayed quite poor quality. As well as that, there was a large mark in the sky. It looked like the square end of some sticky tape had been removed from a print leaving a residue, but being a projected image it couldn't have been that.

No mention was made of the quality or that large blemish in the sky and the sky was the focal point in the picture. That one decision spoiled the whole evening for many, because the blemish was so obvious, yet the judge said nothing. What goes through the mind of those watching and listening. Did the judge not see that large oblong mark in the sky, or did he spot it and chose to ignore it.

Either way, it's not good and then any other comments the judge makes are now tainted by that odd one. It had members looking at one another in disbelief. Poor quality and that awful mark, right in the centre of the sky where it was obvious to everyone. Except the judge !!! These types of decisions, if made too often can chip away the club members respect for judges and that is also a shame.

Another example

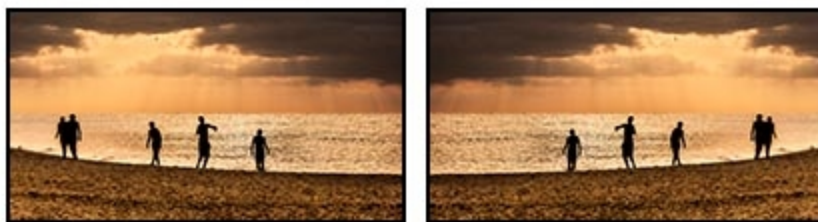
An author through photographic skill and/or even a bit of good luck captures a shot where one aspect of the shot was a lot sharper than you would normally expect. Where you would have expected to see a little movement blur, it was pin sharp. The judge made the assumption based on that sharpness, that the image has been Photoshopped. In other words, one part of the image had been pasted in.

So, the first mistake was making that assumption, because if you do make assumptions like this, then 50% of the time, you will be wrong, as the judge was in this case. The second mistake was to then to show his bias towards image editing of the kind the judge thought he was viewing. I.e. that one part of the image had been photoshopped in.

The third mistake was then to mark the image down based on those assumptions and it scored only 3 points. Now I have been around photographic clubs for almost 40 years and it has nothing to do with personal opinions when I say, that decision stank. A quick look at the meta data (the opportunity was there with the remote judging) would have told the judge that perhaps his assumptions were wrong. The shutter speed was extremely high and the shot had not been Photoshopped in the way the judge *assumed*.

Reversing the Image

One judge told a club members that his landscape image might be much better if he flipped it horizontally. He said that it would read much better left to right and we could all accept that as a fair point. *Although with the comments in my Article called Rules – Rules - Rules in mind, this may constitute unacceptable editing to some club members and some judges too, but that's another story.*



However, when he suggested this for about the 8th time in one competition. It was then bordering on an obsession and now what words of wisdom he did speak were not taken very seriously as everyone was talking about how obsessed he was about flipping so many pictures around.

A Little Photoshop Work is all you need !

I have lost track of the number of times a judge has said that some Photoshop work may greatly improve this image and I have two major criticisms with that being said. Firstly, if your telling

someone image editing is the key to a better photograph, then at the very minimum you need to qualify that statement by giving the author some idea of what editing is required. I don't expect a detailed step by step tutorial, but you can't say image editing will fix this and not say one word about what sort of editing.

My second issue is that much of the time, the judge is wrong. They are telling relative newcomers to Digital Photography that image editing is the key to a much better image when it isn't. No, this is not just my personal opinion and this is a subject I do know something about and I have no hang ups about image editing myself.

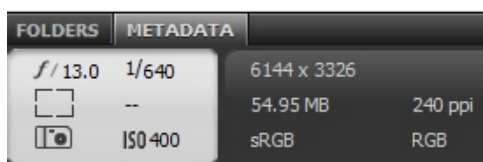
The image I have in mind was shot in such contrasty conditions no amount of Photoshop work even by an expert would have improved it that much. It seems to be a throw away remark to allow the judge to move on, but it's damaging because it's not honest, it's not correct and it's misleading.

The judge did not have to be blunt or dismissive, but the author should have been told that in these conditions he/she was really up against a contrast range that almost any photographer would struggle with and that the image was a bit beyond Photoshop's help. Now the judge either didn't want to say that or didn't appreciate that this image was beyond Photoshop's help. Either way, it's not very good judging.

Meta Data

Despite the fact that we have the meta data recorded for every image we shoot, Judges almost never refer to it and I ask why? It takes all the silly guess work out of finding a reason for a problem with an image. For example, an image I reviewed on the Flickr photo site recently lacked critical sharpness. It was a sunset shot, so my first thought was that it was hand held and camera shake was to blame.

When I looked at the meta data I found the shutter speed used was 4000th of a second @ f2.8. From this information it was unlikely that camera shake was the cause, particularly when I also saw that the lens focal length used was 28mm. The ISO however had been set to 6400.



FOLDERS	METADATA		
f/13.0	1/640	6144 x 3326	
	--	54.95 MB	240 ppi
	ISO 400	sRGB	RGB

Using this information we could, if we had the time, give the author some solid advice, that would improve the quality of their images. Isn't this what judging is all about?

The image in question was suffering from the unnecessary high ISO setting, but the reason for the un-sharp image now looked much more like incorrect focus. At least with this information we could point the author in the right direction. Obviously this is far more practical on remotely judged competitions than live on the night ones.

The Politics of Judging

I always smile when I recall a line said by the comedian Billy Connolly about Members of Parliament in England. He said:- The desire to become an member of Parliament should ban them for life from ever becoming one.

A funny line, but it has an underlying message asking the question what are their motives? I often

wonder if that line could or should be applied to photographic judges. Perhaps judges should be nominated rather than volunteer because many judges can stand up and talk, but their Photographic knowledge and especially their image editing knowledge (darkroom in the old days) is not that hot.

If club members are going to learn, then they need good quality, honest judges and by honest I mean a judge who will not say "Well Seen" to an image that wasn't well seen, wasn't well photographed and wasn't presented very well either. That sort of dishonesty is as good as useless. Honesty is still possible without beating up on people.



Sadly, some club members don't really want honesty, so they can take their share of the blame too. They say they want constructive comment, good or bad, but what they want is to win and be part of the in crowd. They crave acceptance more than honesty, but we shouldn't worry about them at all. To be honest your club will be better off without them.

I wonder sometimes if the judge is so concerned about being invited back that it affects what they are prepared to say. They make sure their comments are well inside that grey area, that no man's land, the area where no-one can possibly be upset. They try to please all of the people all of the time. They are sitting on the fence. In some ways it's just like the clubs who put in place so many different grades, just in case some poor soul should ever be upset.

In almost 40 years of club life I have drawn the conclusion that honesty is the best policy. That trying to appease those who may be offended is a huge waste of time. Some people turn being offended into an art form anyway, so the rest of us should not make these huge changes to accommodate the minority. In some things people have to live with life's disappointments, get on board or choose another hobby.

I am not deliberately trying to be controversial or be completely thoughtless about other peoples feelings. It's just that I have seen so many well meaning and nice people tying themselves up in knots on camera club committees trying to please all of the people all of the time, it's counter productive and you can't do it.

Photoshop

In another article I was saying how club committees inflict stupid rules on everyone in a veiled attempt to slow down those with Photoshop skills. They would say its to make things fair for all. See, they are focused on the competition angle and not the critiquing.

Well, our judges can be just the same. If they have embraced image editing and learned some of the skills, they will allow you to do so too and it will be reflected in their comments and marks. However, if they haven't then you are likely to be marked down.

Not always of course, there are some enlightened people around who can appreciate something even if its not their personal thing. It's those judges I thank, because they tell me what I am saying here is possible.

However, it can be clearly seen in competitions that if there is the slightest evidence of manipulation that oversteps the judges boundaries, you will not do so well.



You could argue that as you don't know the judges boundaries and as you should be producing images to please yourself and not the judge anyway, does that matter? I will leave you to decide that.

Of course and in fairness, there are some crass images put in front of judges as a result of image editing, but that's progress as they say. You, the judge need to be honest and tell the author that what they have produced lacks a little appeal, but also have the skills to explain why and offer some pointers to get things better.



I think judges need an open mind and accept that image editing is now firmly linked to digital photography at least for the foreseeable future. Image editing appears here to stay for a while, so if you're going judge and pass comment, you need to know what you're talking about.

Judges, please don't tell the author that with a bit of Photoshop help their image will become a masterpiece unless you are prepared to give some idea how. Most of the time I have heard that sort of advice the image needed to be escorted to the waste bin. It would have needed to be taken in completely different lighting conditions to stand any chance of major improvement. It's partly the honesty thing, but don't advise it, if you can't do it yourself.

It gives people false hope and often sends them off on a wild goose chase trying to improve an image already past its sell by date. Photoshop is good, but even that has its limits.

Consistency in Marks



This is a crucial area that I think needs an overhaul. We enter competitions to have our images ranked, often with points and we can debate the rights, wrongs and merits of that till hell freezes over. It doesn't alter the fact that most photographers, either consciously or unconsciously use those marks as a barometer to determine how they are doing compared to their peers.

I am not talking here of trying to make these judgements on the comments on one individual image, but many over a year or two.

If we take marks out of 10, I will stick my neck out and say that no matter where you are in the world the following will be generally accepted and I emphasise the word, generally.

A score of 4 and below would indicate that the image is below photo club standards. It may have exposure errors, camera shake and/or the content matter that may not be that stimulating

A score of 5 would be saying that the image is a reasonably competent image, well above most happy snappers, but about average when considered against general club standards. It may still show a problem with exposure or maybe composition for example.

A Score of 6, 7 would indicate a well exposed image, reasonably good quality, no really bad faults. The image will be either at or slightly above club average club standards, but lacking that special something that would elevate the image into the higher marks.

A score around 8 and 9 would indicate an above average image. It's most likely to contain good interesting content, with few, if any photographic faults. Probably an image with enough interest for us to live with for a while. It stands out from the crowd

A score of 10 is all of the above, but the image just has that extra something special that elevates it to a 10. Something we can't always adequately describe, but we know it when we see it.

I would suggest that most members of clubs anywhere in the world, would more or less recognise and agree with the benchmarks those scores indicate. Sure we can tinker a bit with them, but broadly speaking most regular club members will relate to them.

Why then do we get a judge who first tells us that he/she likes to use a complete range of marks and has their own way of marking. The judge then proceeds to award images 1 and 2 points when in any other competition they would have received far more than that. It was way out of step with ALL his judging colleagues and therefore inconsistent.



The result was that club members were confused because they didn't understand the marks at all. The result was a wasted evening for most and nothing positive gained from the comments made. Club members need as much consistency as the judges can give them. We have enough variations with just different viewpoints and prejudices without adding odd marks like these as well. It's very hard to follow when an image gets 8 in one competition and maybe 3 in the one judged by our friend above.

The competition was set up for the members of the club and not for a judge to test his pet judging theories that were different from anyone else's.

It's a different thing in club battles because the images, in theory, have already been judged and are usually the best from that club. In general club competitions a standardisation of marks will be much better for the club members and it's for them that the competition is being run.

Lets have marks out of 10 so we all know where we are. However, many club committees will never do anything like that. They seem to relish being different and sometimes that is a good idea, but not always. People need consistency and honesty. If you're a judge and you are honest with a club and because of that you're never invited back, then so what? Who wants to judge at that club

anyway when all the club members really want is your praise.

Remotely judged competitions

Isn't this the way to go these days for a number of reasons. The judge receives the images via a Mediafire/Dropbox download in advance and judges the images at his/her leisure.

Judges can have the images for a few weeks, so all the pressure is off. If they don't feel like looking at the images for a few days there is no pressure to do so. The judge writes their comments and sends those back to the competition secretary.



Advantages

1. There is no advantage in having a judge present on the night that I can see. Unless we can strap them to a chair and grille them on their decisions. Relax, I am only joking. Then again.....Yes, someone may have to record or read the judges words for club night, but that doesn't seem a huge hurdle to clear.
2. The judge is not put on the spot having to start speaking almost as soon as an image appears on screen. He/she can take their time, make sure they say the right thing, go back and correct any mistakes, change their mind even and really do a good job at critiquing the images.
3. The club in remote areas doesn't have any of those travel issues where the judges would have to travel large distances for just for an hour or so. Also the club doesn't incur any travel costs from the judge, obviously more of an issue for some clubs than others.
4. The judges pool can be widened to include judges from across the country and include those from overseas. It is quite refreshing to have a judge from one country judge a competition from another.
5. Meta data can be viewed when necessary to assist in constructive comments. This is a plus all round, for the author and certainly for the judge who can take the guess work out of their comments.
6. This is a bit more controversial, but some of the judges suggestions, where it's practical to do so, can be carried out on a copy image. A picture is worth a 1000 words they say and it's far easier to show what you're suggesting rather than give a written description. A crop is the easiest example I can think of, but there are others too.

I expect to get a mixed response to number 6, with most people saying, "well what's the harm, and I would rather see what the judge meant anyway". On the other hand some people can become offended that anyone else has had the audacity to alter their masterpiece. To those people I say. *Get a life*, the judge is not cutting up a 30*20 print of yours, just making a suggestion on a digital copy that you can choose to ignore if you want.



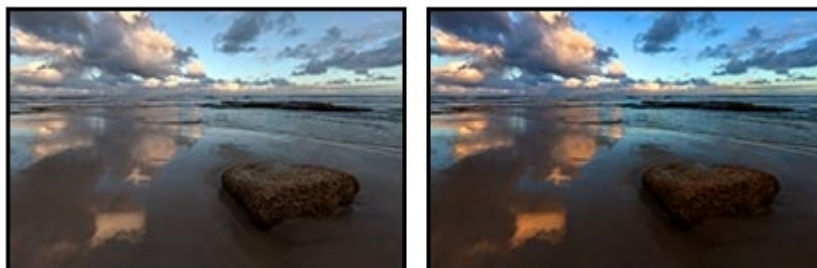
For some, an example is going to be far more beneficial than the explanation, but like all things, judges must not get carried away with this and feel they have to fiddle with every other image. It's all about good taste and balance.

Digital Projectors

It takes a little experience to know that even with the best will in the world there can be differences between what we see on the PC screen and what we see via a digital projector. So, club members and judges need to be aware of this. Especially live judges.

In a live judging, it would make more sense for the judge to be sitting behind the laptop so he/she has the benefit of both the PC screen and the DP screen. It may save that embarrassing time when the judge says the image is a little burnt out in places, but then catches a glimpse of it on the PC screen and realises that it's not.

Club members need to understand that what the judge viewed on his PC monitor may be a little different to your clubs projector.



Later models of Projector are now very good with both colour and contrast, but some older ones struggle just a little to reproduce the vibrancy of our images. It's no-ones fault, but we need to be aware of it. I say it's no-ones fault, but I did demonstrate at one club where my sparkling black and white images became green and white, so the club techies need to make sure the projector is as balanced as possible with the club laptop.

Competition -v- Critiquing

If we are just interested in a straight competition, a race to the finish line and we don't want anyone to say much about our pictures just in case they don't rate them highly, then we may as well pull someone off the street to make a judgement. My grandmother can do that for you.

Great Judges

In a document like this, the nature of it will come over quite critical and lets not beat about the bush, I am critical of some of the things I see and hear, but not always.

There are some great judges around the world who have all the skills to be an enormous benefit to club members. They are honest with what they are judging and they manage to do so with humour and dignity, so we need to take our hat off to them and say thank you. There are many very knowledgeable photographers who would make great judges, but they are not comfortable in a live situation. There is another case for remote judging.

Club Committees

Yes, you're likely to be a volunteer and you want to please most of the people most of the time, however please don't allow some of your members to hi-jack your club and talk you into putting in place ridiculous rules. They will be upset by the best judge in the country, so concentrate on Mr and Mrs average for a change.



Late News

I can't resist adding this final part to **Here Comes the Judge**. On a recent club night our guest speaker had to pass our house to get to the club, so we offered him a bite to eat and a ride with us to the club rooms. On the way back and without any prompting by me he asked what I thought of the judging. Our guest speaker was not a member of any club and therefore was looking at the judging from a different point of view to the rest us who are regular club members.

I said it was about what we usually get, but it still had the usual sprinkling of outright mistakes that make you shake your head in bewilderment. He offered his opinion.

He felt it would had been better if the marks matched the comments and singled out one image (there were others) that wasn't a particularly good one. Taken in the middle of the day, contrasty, not pin sharp, lots of shadows and the content not too stimulating. Nothing negative was said about the image at all, the judge agreed it was a tranquil place, as per the title and awarded 6 points. Our speaker could not understand the comments or the marks, which he felt signified an above average image, which it was certainly not.

He then asked about another image where a Photoshop filter had been applied. This fact was pretty obvious as soon as you looked at the picture, but the judge didn't recognise that at all. He thought it had a fault and talked about over cropping. Our guest speaker admitted that he wasn't very skilled on Photoshop filters, but even he could see straight away that it was a digital effect and not a fault, as could all the members.

However, our guest speaker was most taken aback with the lack of comments on one image that was very obviously a one image HDR effect. It showed all that is bad about HDR in our speakers opinion. (and mine) The effects were so pronounced they were unmistakable to anyone.

Our guest speaker could accept that the judge may have a different view to him on the merits of the effect, but what he couldn't understand was that the judge said nothing at all about an effect

that was obvious to even the rank beginners in the club room. The image scored 8 points.

Final Word

Its easy to be critical when we think that dire decisions have been made on our own images, because we have that emotional ribbon attached to them. However, most of the time when I am bewildered it's not my images at all, so emotional attachment doesn't come into it..

It's also very easy to be critical, but there is a fair bit to be critical of. If you can't recognise an obviously filtered image or an over the top HDR, then you should have gone to a different opticians.