

# Beckham Digital

## Rules - Rules - Rules



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## An Alternative view



When photographers come together in the form of a Photographic club to share their hobby, what is it that makes them want to sit down and start drawing up lists of rules.

Some would say that without photographic club rules there would be anarchy right? Competitions would be unfair, so the rules are put in place to make things fair and to level the playing field for all.

So, rules are imposed with the best intentions and in the interest of fairness to all members. You could possibly argue with that. Well, me for a start!

### **RULES ARE THE ENEMY OF ALL CREATIVITY**

I read the above in a booklet created by the Photographic Society of Queensland and agree with it completely, because rules often have an underlying purpose. Generally, we humans are creatures of habit and we don't like change very much. We all say we accept change, but we don't. We are all as bad as one another and have to be dragged kicking and screaming sometimes.

So if a rule was good enough to be placed in the clubs rule book in 1927 then its jolly well good enough to stay there. I jest a little of course, but it is true that clubs don't take very kindly to some upstart joining **THEIR** club and then wanting rules changed.

Lets face it, competitions play a large part in what interests us in the Camera Club because we use the competitions and the marks given as a measure on how we are doing. Human beings are competitive animals, even those who say they are not. However, competitions and fairness are often used to inflict some pretty odd rules on us. The rules I am quoting here are all taken from clubs and societies rule books. None have been made up for comedic effect, but you can be forgiven for thinking so.



## Images can only be shown twice in the competition year

Some clubs say that an image can only be shown once in that calendar year and this is a rule I think I could happily accept.

This is a good rule as it prevents us being bored to death by the daft member who thinks that if they show a dismal image enough times, it will somehow become stunning. I think not, but they live in hope and keep on submitting the image, boring the pants of the rest of us and hoping they will find a judge as daft as they are.

We want to be inspired when we visit our Camera Club, not put to sleep. Most people will see this as a sensible rule and it's there because we do see this happening enough times for us to consider a rule. A shame, but true. Common sense should be enough and we should never need a rule like this, but you know what they say about common sense? It's not common!

## Projected Image Size

*Rule: All digital projected images should be sized to 1024 pixels by 768 pixels with a resolution of 72 and saved in JPEG form. Images should be no greater than 300k.*

I found the above on line in the rules for one club, but its fairly typical, certainly not unique, but why are clubs still using this old fashioned and outdated resolution of 1024\*768?

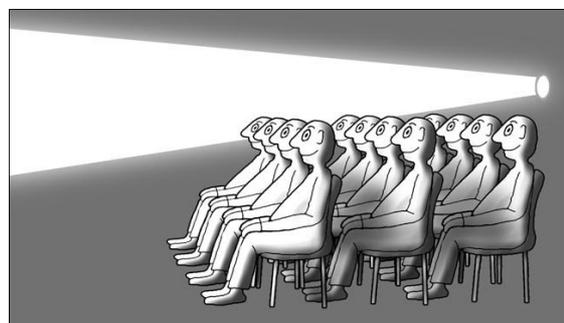
Ask why we all seem locked into this low resolution and you will get all sorts of answers, but the main one will be, *"because we have always used that size", or the real beauty.*

So what? Time has moved on and its time to change this old outdated size. Not cling to it like its the Holy Grail?

The other answer I have heard many times is that the clubs digital projector is also 1024\*768, so the images have to be the same. No, they don't !!!! There is a belief that if you use an image bigger than 1024 pixels by 768 pixels on a projector running 1024\*768, the image will not project correctly.

Wrong, they will project perfectly OK, so I ask again, why are we limited to these tiny resolutions and why does this remain such a strict club rule.

Strict enough that some clubs will even consider throwing out images that do not conform. That's a bit drastic in my view, but they are the rules and if you break them, you can expect retribution. Your new to digital photography and are a bit confused by it all. No excuse, follow the rules or else!!



For newcomers to camera clubs and photography this size issue is your first hurdle you have to jump.

Many people get a bit confused with Image size, resolution and format, I certainly did in my early days. As a newcomer to photography and the Camera Club, this is rule one. It almost seems as if this rule is designed to slow down your progress a bit, but no-one would ever admit that of course.

After all, even though your digital skills regarding image size may need some help, you may be quite a good photographer. While it will never be openly said, some established members feel very threatened, by new members, particularly if they are not rank beginners. The truth ? They don't want any newcomers joining the club who may knock them off their top spot. Oh no no no no.



Sometimes even this simple size rule will be worded in an ambiguous way. So, that newcomers feel their image must be those exact sizes. Yes, I know that those of us who have already cleared this hurdle know the rule doesn't mean what it often appears to say.

I found some rules that are badly worded, saying the image must be 1024\*768. So the newcomer struggles to get their high resolution images to exactly that size.

If the Club really must have this rule it should say that the images must be provided no larger than 1024 pixels on the long side or no larger than 768 pixels in height. The Club should also offer help and guidance to members on this size issue and to their credit, many do.

Now, if you are new to image editors and you have discovered how to change the size of your image to meet the size rules, where does this 300k size limit fit in. Well, perhaps it is designed as an additional hurdle for you to jump, just in case you cleared the first resolution hurdle a little too quickly, in that case the second one will getcha!

So, lets say you have managed to make your image fit exactly 1024\*768, but its coming out at 500k. Now what do we do? Make the image smaller, increase the JPEG compression ? Increasing the JPEG compression level is a likely option, but lets now fast forward to competition night.



The judge now tells you that your landscape image doesn't fit very well into the 1024\*768 format, its too square and you have lost appeal because the format should be more landscape.

See, the rules are working fine, but not in your favour. The rules can and sometimes do, send you off in the wrong direction.

Also the judge may say that you seem to have compressed the image a little too much when you saved it and the image quality is being degraded a little. Great, the rule makers have put the upstart well in their place.

One club even includes this Gem. As well as the pixel size and 300k size. Images must be untagged (no ICC profile) or tagged with the sRGB profile.

Another hurdle to jump

So I ask again, why 1024\*768?

The club where I took this rule from asks that images are brought to the club on the competition evening on a USB drive and this club is pretty typical. So, the one reason there may have been to limit the size of an image (i.e. sending them in via email) is irrelevant.

Have you seen a 1024 pixel wide image displayed on a 24-27in flat screen monitor. It looks something like this below.



It looks ridiculously small and this is what we give the judge to give us constructive comments. We spend a fortune on cameras and equipment to capture the images, sweat blood in our image editors to get it just right, then throw away millions of pixels and view them at postage stamp size.

Why ?



Isn't the example below far better for the author,s presentation and for the judge to be able to see clearly and make constructive comments?



As competition secretary of our own club I allowed a few images from a new member into a projected, remotely judged competition. It seemed obvious the author was unsure how to size them and they were only a few pixels larger than the rules stated. I was later contacted by the judge who wanted to throw out the images because they did not meet federation rules. See, even some judges can be daft enough to become so fixated on the rules that they forget that the images are from someone keen and trying to learn. All the author needed was just a little latitude.

### **Image size for Prints**

*Maximum print size to be 7 inches by 5 inches. Postcard size prints are acceptable but the standard large size format (5 X 7 inches) is preferred.* Large size !!! They must be joking. 7in by 5in isn't large it's small ???

*All competition prints must be mounted on suitable mount board. Maximum mount board size to be no larger than 10 inches 8 inches.*

This is a real rule, not one made up by me, but



why?

In my darkroom days of 30+ years ago 16in by 12in prints were fairly standard and even 20\*16 images were also common. So, what are we doing in the digital age, when we can produce far better quality photographs than we could 30 years ago, yet we limit the competition to little 7\*5 images.



Here is where I struggle to come up with an answer, but I guess its the competition angle once again that has brought out this rule. It's pretty well accepted that a good big image will always beat a good small image, when all else is equal.

So, we can't have those members who can afford larger printers to get an unfair advantage over those who can't. So, the rule is made to lower the bar, to dumb things down to a point where entering a print is not worth the effort. It will be seen far better as a projected image, even at the puny resolution of 1024 \* 768 pixels.

Its no wonder print competitions are dying out, too many crazy rules.

There should be no size limit at all, because A3 printers are a pretty standard size and that will limit the size submitted anyway. Yes, its possible for someone to bring in a 30\*20 inch print, but do we really need rules for this one rare possibility?

Of course not and if a member is producing work that will print to a good standard at 30\*20 inches, I don't know about you, but I would love to see it.

### **Images must have been taken in the past 12 months**

Where on earth did this rule come from and what is it designed to achieve?  
Well, I have my suspicions!



Imagine spending a fortune on a holiday of a lifetime going to a location you may never go to again. You come back with hundreds, if not thousands of images. You had better get busy pretty quickly, because your images will be past their sell by date in 12 months !!

Stupid rules like these encourage people to ignore them and rightly so in my opinion. Of course the establishment answer to this rule is as follows. That its designed to stop a photographer who shot some great images 25 years ago, hawking them around various clubs continually submitting images that they already know are successful. Trophy hunters they used to be called.

Do we really need draconian rules for this isolated person who may or may not even turn up at our club? Of course not. Deal with that individual if and when the situation arises and my guess it probably will not.



What is in the head of the rule makers when they thought this one up?

They obviously feel its far more important to view mediocre images taken last week in Bill Smiths back garden than for us to do anything as foolish as to allow a stunning image into the competition taken 3 years ago.

We all shoot lots of images these days and if I look back a couple of years and present an image that has never been entered in competition before, where is the issue for any other member? Why does that demand a rule? My images don't seem to have a sell by date on them and this one rule alone would have me walking to the door and looking for a more sensible club. Incidentally, its not too difficult to hide the date the image was shot, so how would the committee police such a stupid rule anyway.

This rule can only be designed to hamper those lucky enough to get around the world to the most photogenic places. We don't want you to be able to use too many of the great images you shot on that once in a lifetime holiday. You might do better than the other members who do not travel, so we will make a rule to slow you down and tell everyone it's in the interest of fairness.

Camera club committees everywhere, should review their rules annually to see which ones have been made obsolete by the passage of time and digital progress. Then throw out those that are obsolete and adjust others that need adjusting. Please don't sit around dusty club rooms pandering to all those stupid rules that some of their members suggest.

### **Image Editing**

Now we really get to some really stupid rules, but I am glad to see a noticeable change for the better over the past year or two. Clubs are now much more enlightened than they were, but why? Perhaps because the members are now more skilled at image editing. The rules they once felt were so essential and the ones they wanted put in place, are now effecting them?

Lets cut right to the chase here. Those without image editing skills do not want those, who do have image editing skills to be more successful than them in competitions. So, rules are

put in place in an attempt to prevent excessive editing. Below is a rule I took from a clubs web site.

*Image editing should be kept to a minimum. Changes should be limited to colour and contrast and a little cloning only.*

Can anyone define *minimum* image editing for me? Where is the line that would take us from acceptable editing to unacceptable editing and even more important who will make those judgements? The competition secretary?

How will the committee or other members know if the image editing has been kept in that mythical area called *minimum*? As far as I know, members do not have to produce the original image to verify they have only applied *minimum* editing. Even if they did, who would make that judgement on what is minimum and what isn't. Minimum editing to me, may be maximum editing for others and vice versa.



Its an impossible rule to police and given that we know image editing (in most cases) improves our images, what possible motive can there be in a rule like that?

Simple, its to pander to those without image editing skills who want to continue doing what they have done for 30 years. They want the bar moved down to their level, they don't want to make the effort to raise theirs.

The majority of photographers now shoot Raw images and you quickly learn that Raw images need a lot more work than Jpegs. When we start to think about Raw images and the options we have in Adobe Camera Raw or Lightroom, things just get extremely silly.

If we ask the reasons why editing should be limited? The main reason will be one of fairness. Those with image editing skills have an advantage over those who don't. The members who are most against image editing (no editing at all in some cases) are generally those who are less experienced and are still under the impression that what they see with their eyes is what their camera captures.

They see image editing as some sort of fraud, cheating even, but as their own experience and skills grows, they realise the camera captures something very different to what they

see. Then their views on image editing tend to change because now the rules are affecting them too.

Of course the other reasons quoted for these types of rule is that the club does not want a sky from one location to be placed into a foreground from another! Why? It may make a stunning picture. Many people seem to have been brainwashed over the years into thinking that photography must only record faithfully what was there. A snap shot in time I have heard it called. Why can't photographers apply the same artistic impression to their photographs that painters and other artists do?

### **RULES ARE THE ENEMY OF ALL CREATIVITY**

When we ask for an explanation for this type of rule, we are often told that it's not morally acceptable and the example was given to me of a Natural History shot where an animal could be digitally moved from one location to another. Well, I suppose the honest answer to that is, yes that could happen if the author had the necessary digital skills, but a rule doesn't stop that from happening. "Keep off the Grass" comes to mind here.



I am pretty well known for my Photoshop skills, so if I entered a natural history competition I would expect my picture to immediately come under suspicion, but most people are honest and have integrity. One thing to consider is that it could happen anyway despite the rules. Below is a typical Natural History Rule.

*No elements may be moved, cloned, added, deleted, rearranged or combined.*

*Any manipulation or modification to the original image must be limited to minor retouching of blemishes and must not alter the content of the original scene.*

After reading these lines again and again, I am still not sure where the line in the sand is. Cloning does add, move and delete pixels from an image. I could also make a case to say the clone tool also rearranges and combines pixels too. So, the first line, taken in isolation appears to be pretty clear.

However, the second line contradicts the first by saying modification must be limited and talks about minor retouching. Minor retouching is cloning of one type or another. Cloning is simply a convenient way to copy and paste, moving pixels from one place to another. So, does that mean I can make a selection of a section of the background and copy it over a distracting highlight?

Everyone I ask this question seems to have a different interpretation and struggles badly to justify one act of manipulation against another. Quite often, if they know how to clone, they will say that cloning is acceptable, but if you mention selections, which they are not so comfortable with, Then the answer is that it's unacceptable.

Talk about confusing.

The issue is really about the integrity of the image. If the bird was shot on that branch in that tree in the photograph, but a leaf just across the beak of the bird was cloned away, that should be fully acceptable. Under most current rules it would not.



Surely as long as the integrity of the shot has not been compromised, the bird hasn't been moved from one tree to another cloning should be fully acceptable. If the image can be made stronger and more appealing without affecting the natural history integrity, isn't that what we want to see. Rules like these are making people dishonest, because they feel unable to admit they have done any image editing at all. Even when someone with experience can often tell they have.

One devotee of these rules I spoke to accepted that it would be OK to go into the forest with a machete and cut down offending branches and leaves that may get in the way of a potential natural history shot, but to clone a leaf away from the beak of a bird was unacceptable. Is it only me who sees how stupid and biased this argument is?

Isn't this the competition issue getting in the way of good photography. Even the great Ansel Adams elevated dodging and burning to an art form. Many of his famous prints were manipulated in the darkroom with these techniques. If he tried to submit them into some natural history competitions now, I guess they would be banned.

He understood that what we see is not what our lenses, film and now our sensor can capture and there has to be some form of editing to bridge the gap between the two.



Anyone who has done any image editing will quickly learn that the best results come from as little editing as possible. In other words capture the best exposure you can and take the image the rest of the way to completion with as little image editing as possible. If you overdo things, then the evidence of the manipulation is generally easy to see. Such as:

Results of bad selection techniques, over darkening/colouring of the sky, over sharpening and many more. However, the cause of some of these faults are often hard for the judge to identify because of the tiny file sizes we provide them.

For example: In my darkroom days you needed a pretty good exposure and development of a 35mm negative to be able to achieve consistently good quality 16in \* 12in prints. To create a 20in \* 16in print the 35mm negative had to be extremely good.

Now, in projected image competitions we can crop an image from less than a 5<sup>th</sup> of the overall file size to within 1024\*768 pixels. If we are lucky, that size image will just about display to an acceptable quality through a projector, but it wouldn't have the quality to produce a 3in by 2in print at 300 Pixels per inch.

Given that a digital image from a 20MP camera can be saved as a Jpeg at full resolution and only be about 1.5MB. I wonder why we are obsessed with presenting images to our judges at 1024\*768 pixels. Especially as most clubs ask for the images to be presented on a USB stick or CD, so size isn't an issue at all.

Given a full resolution image, the judge would be far better placed to offer constructive advice, because all they can do now is guess at the cause of a problem/

### **All in the interest of Competitive fairness**

Many clubs now embrace digital photography and the modern way we create our images, but this issue of trying to make things fair to



all is still behind some odd rules. There is an argument that says, if we want to apply rules to level the competitive playing field, perhaps we should go further.

Lets place all entrants into categories, depending on how many pixels their camera captures. After all, the person using a 10MP camera is going to be disadvantaged against those with 20MP cameras.

Some members have a greater disposable income and can purchase top quality lenses and equipment and that is an advantage over those who cannot. We will need a category for those too perhaps. I am retired and therefore have far more time to spend on my photography than other club members. I have an advantage, so perhaps a retired section would be a good rule.

OK, perhaps I have pushed this argument just a little too far for the fun value, but only to make a point, or have I.

### **The Grade System**



The most important part of any camera club competition is the judges comments, not the competition results themselves. However, we need the competition aspect to encourage entries, but perhaps we are far too fixated on that competition angle.

I would say that the vast majority of clubs have introduced a grade system to their members. This is done for a familiar reason, in the interest of fairness.

Its unfair for beginners to submit their images alongside more experienced photographers and they may feel intimidated to take part in the competition. I think most people can see some logic to that, but camera clubs continued for years without a grade system, so what makes this almost a universal thing now?

Could it be that we are in fact too fixated on the competition angle and far less on the critiquing and learning angle?

When I started my photography and associations with Camera Clubs in 1975 there were no grades at all. There were print competitions and slide competitions and all clubs did the same. The average print size was 16\*12 and 20\*16 prints were common. We were inspired by the best images submitted by more experienced members, not discouraged.

I judged a competition for a club a short while ago who shall remain nameless that bordered on the ridiculous, solely due to grade system rules. Let me try and explain by listing the categories:

There were Novice, Intermediate and Advanced sections, but there was a problem with this due to the size of the club. In the Novice and Intermediate sections there were not enough members to have a meaningful competition, which was the whole point of the categories in

the first place. In fact I think there was only one person in the novice category and 2 in the intermediate.

That evenings competition had an open subject and a set subject. Also there was a Black and White open and set subject too. (The same set subject for colour and B&W).

In addition there was the same for prints, these were broken down into Large prints, and small prints, both Black and White and colour.

So all three grades, Novice, Intermediate and Advanced could enter the projected open and set subject competition, both in colour and Black and White. That amounts to 12 sections, but we are not finished yet, we still have the same in prints. Large and Small Prints, colour and Black and white.

There were so many categories, many of them with just one or two entrants that it bordered on lunacy in my view. All done for the best of reasons and in the interests of fairness. The most amusing thing for me was that I could hardly tell the difference in quality between all three grades, apart from the odd one or two. The vast majority of entrants were in the middle ground.

### **Anything New Must be Banned**

Audio Visual is becoming more and more popular with digital photographers because there are few better ways to view digital pictures. Either on our PC screens or via a projector or even via a TV.

Recently improvements in slide show software allowed the use of video clips into a still image presentation. In competition, the first reaction of the photographic establishment was to partially ban video. The rule states that

*Full Motion video capture (above 8 frames/sec) must not be included unchanged from video cameras, however simulated motion (e.g. stop motion animation) by manually sequencing a succession of still captures may be used for effect.*

How do the organisers tell if my video is running at more than 8 frames per second? How do I change my video to run at 8 frames per second even if I wanted to?

What is stop motion? Is that still images shown rapidly so they convey movement a bit like. Dare I say it .....a video. A friend of mine recently took a series of still images and combined them so well in his slide show software, that the clouds were moving just like a video. I wonder what the organisers would make of that? Had I not known what he did and how he achieved it, I would have thought it was video.

## **RULES ARE THE ENEMY OF ALL CREATIVITY**

I have seen very few slide shows where the mixing of stills and video has produced a great result, but that is my personal view and not reason enough to effectively ban it. Doesn't that close off the opportunity for some inspirational photographer to do something with stills and video that makes us all sit up and take notice. Something we never thought of, like my friends idea above.

Why is our first reaction to anything new in photography to ban it or make rules to slow its progress. I have seen this so many times over the years, particularly when digital first appeared. We should allow competition slide shows to include video and let the shows themselves stand or fall on their own merits. If the video aspect doesn't work, then the slide show will not be successful and it will not win the competition.

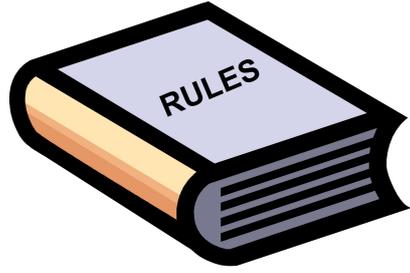
I can understand and support a rule that says something like any slide show submitted must not contain more than 50% video. After all, we are primarily stills photographers, but to ban video completely with so many new DSLR cameras having the capability to shoot HD video seems to be an unnecessary knee jerk reaction. Camera Clubs should be showing encouragement not discouraging anything new.

Its that old chestnut. I don't like it, so you shouldn't do it. Well, I am fed up with having to live by someone else's stupid rules and I will vote with my feet if I have to.

It is a human thing that if we cannot reach a certain level, we will try and bring that level down to us. In the politics of Photography and camera clubs we do that largely with rules.

I ask all club members and particularly club committee members to just give what I have said here some thought and don't allow your members to drag the club standard down to their level, help them push up their standard to meet that of the club.

Remember..... **RULES ARE THE ENEMY OF ALL CREATIVITY**



So, am I way off base here or do you find some merit in my words. You can have a say and let me know, [RIGHT HERE](#) in our digital forum.