



It was just me, my model horse Outlaw Blues, and the camera between us.

And I was about to do it all wrong.

Sure, there are no rigid rules about shooting model horses in natural settings outdoors, just a flock of factors that can influence how realistic and appealing your photo will be. In 30 years of shooting, though, certain ideas have evolved for me—like when the light is best, where to find locations that complement the illusion of scale, and how to minimize risk to everyone involved.

But when you can only visit your collection in storage for a few hours every other year, and don't yet have a photo of a member of your herd...desperation makes it easy to ditch those ideas, and try whatever it takes to get the shot!

That desperation sent me and Outlaw Blues outside my Ohio storage unit at dusk, to turn my model photography practices upside down. There was no sun to light his eye and bring out his color. I hadn't planned ahead for a way to elevate him toward the sky, so we were both down on the dimly lit pavement of the parking lot. And I was shooting alone, with no spotter to watch the horse and our surroundings as I focused on focusing. It was all that time would allow; the flight back to my job in Japan was scant hours away.

Sprawled flat, trying to focus on Outlaw's eye and then bring the lens level with his shoulder, I noticed the moon peeking over his withers. This could maybe be a neat image after all! I had never seen a show photo shot at dusk, but if I used the flash—normally another personal no-no—could this mostly white horse possibly absorb the glare, and the end result maybe even be showable? I took the shot to see!

And then a dually truck tore around the corner of the storage unit.

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Sprawling on the ground...that went full-circle back to those mid-'80s days of my earliest outdoor model photo sessions, searching for likely locations and then flopping down

◀ Outlaw Blues, an Appaloosa stallion customized from a Breyer Traditional Hanoverian by Jamie Coughlin, was almost the last model horse photographed by the author. (Hey, kids, don't shoot at dusk in a parking lot!)

with a horse to get a quick shot. Hunting for ways to frame the horse with blue sky while keeping it in scale, I found the best results on schoolyards' baseball diamonds and atop high hills of soil at construction sites. (The camera was a Nikkormat EL 35mm SLR—split-image manual focus, match-needle exposure control, 24 or 36 shots to the roll of film...ah, those dinosaur days!)

Things got a lot less guerrilla when I moved to Columbus, Ohio, to join the staff of "Hoof Beats" magazine. Three blocks away was Wheeler Park, with a concrete picnic table on a grassy rise, a lovely expanse of sky, and the sun at your back in the afternoon. Just scatter kitty litter or vermiculite (hey, it seemed like a good idea at the time...) on the tabletop for



▲ A schoolyard baseball diamond can make a surprisingly realistic location for an outdoor model horse photo. Here's Crusher Talos, an OF Breyer Trakehner, photoed by the author in ye olde days of film cameras.

the horse's footing, and then take a seat to shoot!

With so much depending on the weather's whim, though, an indoor set got cobbled together at home for photos in a pinch. Horses stood on a plywood footing board covered with powdery model railroad diorama soil, atop a drop-leaf dining



▲ Once upon a picnic table...Thunder In Paradise, a Clydesdale stallion customized from the Breyer Clyde Mare by Judy Renee Pope, took command of Wheeler Park with the author behind the camera and spotter Corky Visminas holding the lead.



▲ Used for shooting in a pinch, the author's indoor tabletop set let Ragnarok Hyoga, a Fjord stallion customized from the Breyer Haflinger by Julie Froelich, compete in Western Pleasure with his reins and tail tidy. The space at left leaves him room to continue his stride; try covering it with your hand and see what you think.

table pushed up against a wall, with photo lights in reflective cones clamped onto each table corner. A royal blue Qiana backdrop was push-pinned to the wall, fronted by a two-by-four transformed into a white brick wall with the help of a mix-your-own-mortar kit. The controlled environment was especially helpful for haired customs and performance set-ups.

I was a model photo-shootin' fool—and who wouldn't be, when it's so convenient? And what a dream situation: At Hoof Beats I worked down the hall from master equine photographer Ed Keys, who shared tips for real horse photography that improved my model photos in a slew of subtle ways!

And yet time flows on, carrying us to unforeseen places. After more than a decade at Hoof Beats, I got the chance to move to Japan in 2000, fulfilling a longtime dream. In 2007 Corky Visminas, my ol' roomie and collaborator in model-horsing-around, made the move too. We each brought some favorite model horses along, and continued to collect here and there—but with model horse showing next to unknown in Japan, that aspect of the hobby joined the list of things we've just got to live without here (like going to Arby's, eating sweet pickles, and finding women's shoes larger than size 8).

Then the magnitude 9.0 Great East Japan Earthquake struck on March 11, 2011, killing nearly 16,000 people. The days that followed were even more

frightening, as meltdowns and explosions rocked the Fukushima nuclear plants two hours northeast of us, food and bottled water and batteries quickly disappeared from stores, and roads became choked with crazy-long lines of waiting cars, hoping to get into gas stations before the day's rationed amount of fuel for sale ran out.

Remembering better days, and envisioning

good times ahead, helped Corky and I in that difficult time. The fun we'd both had in model horse showing seemed to boomerang from the past into an appealing distraction for today...and as life incrementally returned to normal, we got reacquainted online with the hobby, marveling at its 21st-century form, and learned how to get involved from the other side of the world. We loaded up the car with a Canon EOS Kiss X2 SLR digital camera (also known outside Japan as the Canon EOS 450D or EOS Rebel XSi) with a 55-250mm lens, a 21 x 30-inch foamcore footing board with model diorama grass sheets glued to one side, and a herd of model horses hankering to show, and hit the comeback trail!

The tricky part, as always, was finding a good location. Japan is a land of wires slicing through the sky—telephone wires, electrical wires, overhead wires for trains. An overhead wire—or anything else that defines real-world size—can damage the illusion of scale.

Distance, on the other hand, is a great help for the illusion of scale. If you shoot on the top of a hill or at

the edge of a valley, the distance helps prevent the size of anything visible on the far side from contradicting the size of your horse.

To me, the stronger light of mid- to late afternoon brings out a model horse's color better than the softer light of morning (but not too late in the afternoon; light gets a little too yellow then). That makes the ability to shoot toward the east another gotta-have for a location.

Of course, there's also the question of how you feel about the possibility of being seen photographing li'l plastic ponies. Is the location secluded enough that you can take your time shooting there? Or do you not want to risk drawing a crowd? (This doesn't really apply in Japan; heck, as a foreigner, anything I do is automatically eccentric!)

Happily, the industrial park where we work in Tochigi Prefecture turned out to be a great location. Once a vast area of rice paddies stretching to the edge of the Tohoku Expressway, the industrial park is gradually being built on parcels of land artificially elevated by soil that had been piled high, levelled off, then allowed to settle. At its edge, it slopes steeply down about 20 feet into an expanse of ground that's sometimes grassy, and sometimes cleared for bulldozers and other heavy equipment to maneuver. Beyond that is the expressway, with sky interrupted only by



▲ Here's the kind of photo we'd love to take every time at our outdoor shooting location in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan! This is Reverse Polarity, a Carol Williams Valor resin painted by Sandra Jones.

the scenic foothills of Mt. Mikamo in the background.

A handy stack of pallets is usually waiting near the edge, ready to hold our foamcore footing board well off the ground. The foothills in the background are directly southeast, but the footing board swivels smoothly on the plastic pallets if we need to shoot more toward the east.

The slanted angles of those foothills can cause some aesthetic complications. It's difficult to avoid the diagonal shapes behind the horse, but as Ed Keys once told me, the viewer's eye will go to the horse's head first. So that's the first point on my mental checklist when shooting: Surround the horse's head with sky. If that's not possible, are his facial profile and ears in the clear? If not, then at the very least his ears should have sky behind them, to immediately draw the eye to his head. Otherwise, having all his head within the shape of the mountain will subconsciously make the horse seem a little harder to "see."

The second checkpoint is again thanks to Ed Keys—who was inducted into the media branch of harness racing's Hall of Fame in 2006, by the way—and applies anywhere you photo your horse: Where the viewer's eye is going first isn't just to the horse's head, but to the horse's own eye. A light in that eye helps the viewer's eye find it faster, and creates a more pleasing first impression than an eye with no highlights. On the model front, a gleam in the eye also adds a spark of life, so I want to make darn sure his eye is lit by the sun. If it's not,

I'm not above wetting a finger and dabbing his eye to help catch the sunlight.

If the Canon had a split-image focus, I'd focus manually all the time...but it doesn't, so auto-focus is fine. Full Auto mode, too, and no flash. That frees up a few more brain cells for everything else to consider before snapping the shutter.

With the eye so important, that's where I focus. Once auto-focus has locked onto it, I gently bring the lens level with the horse's shoulder. If he should be a particularly tall horse, I sink a smidge to shoot slightly up at his shoulder; if he's a pony, I rise a tad to shoot slightly down at his shoulder.

The amount of space in the frame can also influence the optical illusion of the horse's height. The frame is your viewpoint of looking at an average-sized horse. Leaving a little less space than usual between the horse's highest point and the top of the frame makes the horse seem a little taller. Leaving more space than usual up top makes the horse seem a little smaller. This can be fine-tuned with cropping the digital image afterward, but thinking about it in advance helps leave enough space to work with.

Along the same lines is another gold nugget from Ed Keys, who explained that in an action photo, your eye anticipates the horse's movement, looking ahead to where the horse is heading. If you crop an action photo too close to the front of the horse, the result is claustrophobic to the eye. So I'm careful to always leave room for a horse in action to continue to

"move," to bring more life to the model and avoid jarring the viewer's anticipation of the motion.

Now it's time to click the shutter—but only thanks to someone else having helped the horse and photographer all along. As spotter, Corky stands just out of the frame, ready to grab tippy horses, smooth down hair manes and tails, swivel the footing board as needed or hold it tightly down if the wind threatens to catch and flip it, warn if I've backed up a step too close to the slope, or just plain make me stop for a water break when we're shooting in 110-degree heat. There's so much that can happen when shooting outdoors, it really is best to not shoot alone.

The last time I shot alone, that dually truck came around the corner of the storage unit. Tires roared up from behind me, churning a hot gust of dirty air as they passed a few feet to the right, and sped on into the night.

For a few moments, I laid there shaking. I had almost died. Disregarding everything I knew about taking model horse photos had almost gotten me killed.

Never, ever again will I shoot alone, I decided. Never, never, no...after this one.

And snapped one more of Outlaw Blues, to be sure I got the shot! 🐾



▲ Corky spots *Finest Kind*, a Morgen Kilbourn resin Johann painted by Mandy Hood, at our current photo location in Japan's Tochigi Prefecture. The fallow land it overlooks is sometimes grassy, sometimes torn up by heavy equipment training. The monster vehicle parked at left cut down our options that day; Corky is sliding the footing board further right to try to avoid it.