

PFLI JUDGING SEMINAR HANDBOOK

1. INTRODUCTION.

The purpose of the Judging Seminar is twofold. First, to increase the pool of potential judges for use by the clubs and the Federation at their competitions and Second, to establish and reinforce judging standards for all PFLI judges.. You have been invited to the seminar because you have either been a judge for many years, you have been recommended by your club, or you have shown a high level of photographic expertise by finishing near the top of the PFLI All Star List. If judging were a pure science every image would receive the same score regardless of who was the judge. That is an impossible ideal due to the fact that of the 4 main elements that make up a photograph (Technical Considerations, Subject Matter, Composition and Lighting) only the technical considerations can be measured against defined standards. (is it out of focus, overexposed, etc.) Evaluating subject matter, composition and lighting are somewhat subjective and can be influenced to a certain extent by a judges' built in biases and personal preferences. The challenge of being an effective judge is to strive to minimize those biases and personal preferences and then to be as consistent and objective as possible.

2. THOUGHTS TO AVOID WHEN EVALUATING AN IMAGE

a. The maker broke a rule. If a so called "rule" of composition is broken a judge must not automatically lower the score. You must stay flexible. The most common broken "rule" is centering the subject rather than a placement at a 1/3 point. The question you must first ask is "does the broken rule hurt or help the image?" and then score accordingly.

b. That was obviously Photoshopped. Love it or hate it a judge has to be both receptive to new photographic techniques and has to understand traditional techniques as well. An example is the semi-abstract nature of the use of the "Glass filter" in Photoshop. The same effect has been practiced for years in a chemical darkroom using a piece of a broken shower door. Conversely you must not assume that a pair soaring eagles in exactly the perfect composition location was put in using Photoshop. If you say so and the image was actually the result of an hours worth of waiting and 50 or 60 tries you lose all credibility. Don't Guess. The final result should be evaluated only on what it is, not what you think it is or how it got there.

c. Oh no, not another Dahlia. A judge has to avoid thinking "I have seen this subject a hundred times before". In fact there will rarely, if ever, be a subject or a subject genre that you have not seen a hundred times before. Make believe it is the first time and evaluate it accordingly. Remember, for a B worker, it may well BE the first time he or she shot that subject.

d. I don't like _____ (fill in the blank, cats, birds, snakes, whatever.) While you are judging you have to eliminate your personal preferences regarding the subject and score the image appropriately. The converse is also true. If you are primarily a bird photographer, you cannot give special consideration to a bird image, even if it is a rare species you have been trying unsuccessfully to capture for years.

e. I had a bad day at the office. Leave it at the office. The key to being a good judge is to be consistent, not only during an entire competition, but from week to week and month to month.

f. I have to get out of this rut. A judge may subconsciously be influenced by the sequence of images in a competition. After a series of poor images one after another a judge may tend to elevate a simply good image higher than it deserves. Conversely, after giving out 3 or 4 high scores in a row, a judge may tend to penalize a merely good image lower than it deserves. The stack is random. The next image has nothing to do with the previous one.

g. Not bad for a "B" worker. A judge should be gentle to B workers when critiquing their work but not to the extent of awarding points they do not deserve. The images, whether they be A, B or Salon, must all be scored on their merits. The worst possible scenario for a new worker is to get an inflated 8 or 9 at the club and then see the image crushed with 19 or 20 at PFLI.

3. SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Some images generally do not lend themselves to a traditional analysis. Photojournalism is one. The primary purpose of these images is to tell a story or invoke a reaction and the image should be judged on that basis. If the maker managed to control all of the other elements as well so much the better.

Sports photography is another special case. The idea is to capture the precise moment of peak action, generally with the background as unobtrusive as possible. With film cameras this was always a technical challenge but now with digital cameras running up to 60 frames a second it is less so. Still you have to judge the image on what is there, not how you think it got there.

Theme competitions are a third case. The most common mistake for a judge to make here is trying to rationalize an image to fit the theme when it clearly does not. If it does not it should simply be disqualified. To do otherwise would be unfair to all the makers that did.

The final, and most difficult special category is Abstracts. Some are carefully planned and some are a simple click of the Twirl command in Photoshop. There is no technical criteria on which to measure them and from an artistic standpoint as a judge you usually either love them or hate them. You have to score them according to your own taste, recognizing that the scores from other judges will be wildly different. The makers have to recognize this fact as well. Go to MOMA or other photographic venues to familiarize yourself with aspects of contemporary photography so you can be a more knowledgeable judge.

4. THE RECOMMENDED PFLI SCORING SYSTEM - 5 POINTS TO 9 POINTS

A SCORE OF SEVEN

A GOOD solid image. All 4 elements are working. Technically correct (sharp where it should be sharp, blurred where it should be blurred, exposure correct, no Photoshop errors such as sharpening highlights, etc) plus a well defined Subject which is Composed well and Lit well. If there is a minor flaw in one area it is compensated for by a positive in another. You would expect the majority of images to fall in this category.

A SCORE OF SIX

A FAIR image. One that would have been a seven except for a major flaw in one of the 3 artistic elements (poor composition, lighting too flat or too contrasty, an uninteresting or undefined subject, etc). An obviously unwanted flaw in a technical element, such as focus or exposure, should almost always result in a score of at least a 6 or lower.

A SCORE OF FIVE

A POOR image. One that fails in 2 or more of the 4 main elements . It is unlikely that a 5 will ever get to the PFLI competition and even new B workers will quickly learn not to enter them at the club level provided they are scored as such.

A SCORE OF EIGHT

A VERY GOOD IMAGE. One that not only exhibits no flaws in any of the 4 main elements but goes beyond them in at least 1 or more areas. A very difficult lighting situation, an inventive composition of a common scene, a subject doing something unusual or a "rule" broken for impact.

A SCORE OF NINE

AN OUTSTANDING IMAGE. True excellence. All of the elements work together which make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. Outstanding lighting is a pre-requisite for an outstanding image. Your initial reaction to this image should be "WOW".

5. SCORING STRATEGIES

A purely artistic strategy is "Do I like it?", yes or no. If yes, by how much, a little, a lot? It is simple and quick and at the PFLI level, where you are not commenting, possible. Unfortunately this strategy tends to let personal preferences dominate the selection of a score. A purely technical strategy on the other hand has its own problems. Some judges start out with every image a 9 and then start looking for flaws or mistakes in order to subtract points. This "finding fault" technique can lead to nitpicking and not knowing when to stop. Some judges start out with every image a 5 and then start looking for places to add points for elements well done. Both lead to focusing simply on details without viewing the entire image as a whole. A combination probably works best. First, do I like this overall image? If so, then what specific details make me like it. If no, then what specific details cause me not to like it.

6. PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO THE MAKER OF THE IMAGE

While the numerical score may provide an indication to the maker as to his or her success with a given image, a more valuable means of feedback will be the judges comments regarding the strengths of the image, the reason for his/her score and suggestions on how (in the judge's opinion), the maker could improve the image. Comments should be constructive, concise and to the point. Judges should strive to be fair and honest, but to also be sensitive to the maker's feelings. As judges become more confident and experienced, they should work at improving their verbal repertoire, avoiding cliché commentary and repeating the same phrases over and over. Every effort should be made to avoid bias as to subject matter, the techniques employed, the difficulty of the shot, the club, the maker or any other prejudice the judge may have. Every effort should be made to employ the whole range of scores in the competition. Every effort should be made to be consistent throughout the competition and from one competition to another. Every effort should be made to reward both freshness and creativity in an image as well as technical excellence.

ADDENDUM CONCERNING CLUB VS PFLI SCORING

The biggest single complaint regarding PFLI judging is that “I got a high score at the club but a terrible score at the PFLI.” If the expectations are that a 9 at the club should be a 27 at the PFLI this is a foregone conclusion. Less than 1% of the 3,400 images at PFLI last year became 27’s which means if a club exhibits 100 images at a monthly competition only one 9 should be awarded. If the expectation is softened to say that a 9 at the club level should be a 25, 26 or a 27 at the PFLI then each club competition of 100 images should produce approximately eight or nine 9’s. As a judge you should explain the scoring expectations before each competition.

Furthermore, if a “Good” image is defined as a 7 and if images were randomly sent to the PFLI without a selection process you would expect the overall average for all images would be a 21. Since each club tries to pick its best images the overall PFLI average should be slightly higher than a 21. In fact for 2 years running now the overall PFLI average for close to 7,000 images has been 22.4. This would seem to suggest two things. First, that the “natural” score for a “Good” image really is a 7 and second, that while individual judges may differ, the effect of averaging 3 scores comes very close to the correct result.

The complaint stems from the scoring system itself. The nominal club scoring is technically 5 to 9 but human nature being what it is (people generally want to be loved) some judges will never score a 5 and rarely score a 6. If that is the case the scoring system becomes compressed into a 3 score system. (7, 8 or 9). This in turn means a 7, which we have already defined as a good image, would actually be given to the worst images of the night. Good images (true 7’s) would therefore have to be bumped up to 8’s and very good images (true 8’s) would have to be lumped together with the outstanding 9’s. The maker of an inflated 8, of course, now expects a 24 at PFLI, thereby setting up the future complaint “I got an 8 at the club and only a lousy 21 (or worse) at PFLI”. The surest way to alleviate this problem would be to use the full range (5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) of scores.

However, even with a full range scoring system sometimes a judge may be caught, say, between a 7 and an 8. Again the natural inclination to be loved would probably influence the judge into scoring an 8. Fractional point scoring, such as 5.0, 6.0, 6.5, 7.0, 7.5, 8.0, 8.5 and 9.0, would not only allow a more accurate score but would lower unwarranted expectations when the image is submitted to the PFLI. Only one club that we know of now uses fractional point scoring.

A second complaint is that Birds dominate the competitions and get the highest scores. It is true that Birds represent a high percentage of the images submitted. The two largest clubs in the PFLI are Nature oriented clubs as are some of the smaller clubs as well. However, the number of 24’s and up that Bird images receive are in direct proportion to the number of images submitted, no more and no less. If the membership wishes to see more high scores in Photojournalism or Portraits then they have to submit more Photojournalism or Portrait images. As judges you cannot score what you cannot see.