

Why Compete?

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“Competition.” As a long-time photographer and camera club member, I’m always surprised that a single word engenders so many strong and varied feelings.

Of course, competition has always been a main-stay of camera club life; but, below the surface, the rationale for competition seems to be far from universally accepted. I know many club members who say they simply want to improve their photographic skills and find competition to be, on the one hand unnecessary, and on the other actually detrimental to becoming a better photographer.

The arguments against competing go something like this. Competition is inherently stressful and detracts from the learning atmosphere of the club. Competition is dominated by the more experienced photographers and beginners don’t have a fair chance to win. Competition takes the focus off of creativity and puts it on conforming to photographic rules and contest criteria. Competition can’t really teach much about photography’s best practices, since each judge has his or her subjective standards. So, with all these negatives stacked against competition, the obvious question is, “Why compete?”

Before I give my answer to that question, it’s time for some full disclosure: First, I’ve voiced every one of the bad raps assigned to competition and, second, I’ve had to get through each one of them to become a better photographer.

Now that the truth is out there, let’s examine, one argument at a time, the pros and cons of competition. “*Competition is inherently stressful and detracts from the learning atmosphere of the club.*” It’s hard to disagree that competition is stressful; after all, we’re sending our creative offspring out there into the cruel world to be subjected to other people’s judgment. And, yes, if our baby isn’t a winner it’s a reflection on our skills and a blow to our egos. Indeed, if that’s all we get out of competition, the experience is pretty much a bummer. But, aren’t all those other winning images—and the judge’s comments about them—the very learning experience club competitions were created for?

“*Competition is dominated by the more experienced photographers and beginners don’t have a fair chance to win.*” Although everyone who competes has an equal chance; logically, experience is often—though certainly not always—an advantage. But if experience is a factor in winning, doesn’t that suggest that at one time the winners were also aspirants, and it was the new learning from each competition that helped them improve?

“*Competition takes the focus off of creativity and puts it on conforming to photographic rules and contest criteria.*” This is a tough one, since it’s true that photography does have its rules that—more often than not—if followed lead to success. And, it would be fair to say that learning the technicalities can, initially, lead to about the same level of creativity as practicing musical scales. One has to, however, learn the rules before one can break them. Otherwise, how does a burgeoning photographer understand what he or she did that was new and creative that worked? If you will, what it was that made his or her work, not only different from, but better than the competition? As to individual contest criteria, they are only guidelines that define the minimum category parameters for what is acceptable in any competition.

“*Competition can’t really teach much about photography’s best practices, since each judge has his or her subjective standards.*” Oddly enough, I actually find this the most compelling argument for competition. It is true that judges have their own standards that supplement those established by PSA and other photographic organizations. But, in the long-run, all our lovingly crafted images will also be viewed by friends, relatives, potential clients and complete strangers; every one of whom will bring his or her own objective and subjective views to bear on our work. What better way than competition to learn how well our growing photographic talent plays in a world of widely varying opinion?

In the beginning I asked, “Why compete?” Now I’ll end with a better question, “Why not?” If the goal is to learn and grow, I don’t know a better way to meet that goal than to compete. ■

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