

Article in the Star, November 30, 2006

Sit! Stay! doesn't do trick

Just getting Fido to look up as you shoot is not all there is to making

a great dog portrait

Nov. 30, 2006. 01:00 AM

JENNIFER BROWN

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Peter Organa may well be the dog whisperer of digital photography.

The Toronto man combines his lifelong passion for photography with his love for man's best friend to teach people how to get the best pet pictures out of their digital cameras.

He wants to put an end to "are-we-done-yet" pet portraits, which typically feature bored dogs and cats that look more like flash-blind, red- and green-eyed demons than the lovable creatures we know they are.

On a recent outing with Markham-based Dog Paddling Adventures, Organa led 15 camera-toting dog lovers and their canine friends through a daylong workshop. His mantra is simple: "Don't just photograph your dog, photograph your dog's love for you." Easier said than done? Not if you put a little effort into it, says Organa, who taught photography in his native Poland and worked in a photo lab for 25 years.

Today, his computer and Photoshop editing program make up the modern-day darkroom he says every photographer should learn how to use.

His inspiration is his Cardigan Welsh Corgi, Winter, and the results are displayed on both his website (<http://www.organa.ca/pet>) and his space on flickr.com. He gets about 1,000 hits a day on his flickr site and his pet photos get fan mail from around the world.

"I started my flickr gallery instead of exhibiting them in Toronto and, while I still have a few exhibitions in restaurants around the city, this has been more effective," he says. "This is an age where everything is online."

Digital photography and software tools offer new ways for amateurs to become better photographers, but to capture photos, most people need to first learn the basics of photography and realize that good colour digital photography can be difficult to achieve. "What I have found is that people know so little about photography. In the olden days when people had film cameras, they had to learn about f-stops," he says. "Today, they know nothing. They think the camera does it for them, and it doesn't. It's really critical to know that there is something called exposure and aperture, which is extremely important."

Most people who sign up for the \$125 digital photo workshop with Dog Paddling Adventures come with some form of digital camera in hand — everything from \$200 point-and-shoots to expensive single-lens reflex models — but they typically have little knowledge of the simple rules of photography.

"About 95 per cent come with digital cameras — of the 15 clients we take, there are usually 13 with digital cameras," says Kathryn Howell of Dog Paddling Adventures, a company she and her husband, Eren, started in 2000 with their husky-malamute cross, Jessie.

"When we first started offering the program three seasons ago, we would get total beginners. But in the last workshop, people had amazing digital cameras, and they were

asking about aperture and other technical questions," she says. "It really ranges, but they all want to learn and have the same questions, like 'How come my dog's eyes always look red?' and they want to figure out how to get a perfect look from their dog." Arie Smouter drove 13 hours on a rainy day in October from Wisconsin to learn how to take better shots of his 3 1/2-year-old Bernese Mountain dog, Moxie. Originally from Burlington, he combined the workshop trip with a visit to family. Smouter shoots with a digital SLR camera and says the workshop taught him that taking good photos takes patience, and knowledge of how a flash can play havoc with a dog's eyes.

The best tip, he says, is to use an umbrella to bounce the flash.

"I bought one this week to achieve this concept of soft light," he says. "I also learned that you can set your camera so the background is blurry and that brings the attention to the dog.... And I learned that the lower the f-stop is, the lower the depth of field."

Organa says teaching depth of field is one of his most important lessons; "To show them how sharp the lens can see the image so that the nose is sharp and the ears are sharp and eyes are sharp, and how to control it."

Kelly Barratt signed up for the hike with her four-year-old Chesapeake Bay retriever, Remy, so she could learn more about her new Canon DSLR.

"It was great," says Barratt, a veterinarian from Listowel. "I learned about using the settings on my camera and getting the right lighting and paying attention to the background so that it's suitable for the dog. I have a hunting dog, so the best place to take pictures of her is in the bush."

More importantly, she learned that Remy should go for a long run before attempting any kind of photo shoot.

That's why combining the hike with the workshop works so well, explains Howell. The workshop takes place in a cabin on the grounds of Seneca College's campus in King Township. Participants meet at about 10 a.m., enjoy breakfast and take the dogs outside for a break. Then the photographer starts the workshop, usually running about an hour and a half.

"Then we head out for a hike and that's when people practise what they have learned, so the photographer will stop and say, 'This is a great shot' and explain why," says Howell.

"One of Peter's points is it's not about getting a good picture of your dog, but to capture the essence of your dog," she says. "That's the hardest part, and he is just fabulous at doing that. It's not just sit and look up, it's about capturing your dog. That's how you get the really good pictures."

That means getting down low so you're not looking down at the dog as you shoot.

Other tips from Organa:

- Outdoors provides the best natural light for dog photography, especially in late afternoon sunlight or at sunset. Avoid harsh direct sunlight from one side of the animal.
- To shoot indoors, Organa prefers natural light from windows with the flash turned off, or you can bounce the flash off the ceiling or a wall, with the camera set on high sensitivity.
- Consider creating your own mini studio using an umbrella and seamless background, which can be purchased for very little money on eBay.
- Action photography can be difficult, but Organa offers a few simple tips: use short exposure time and a high sensitivity setting (for example: 1/1000 second and ISO 1000). To avoid blurry images try panning (following a running dog with your camera), or pre-focus on a point the dog is running toward.

- When photographing puppies, Organa suggests getting them with a toy they are focused on or when they are still. "Watch out when they are wrestling because the motion blurs and makes their fangs look like sabre-toothed tigers."
- To blur details behind your subject, use a long lens or a lens that's wide open. You can also blur backgrounds later in Photoshop.
- Have an assistant show the animal treats or squeak toys behind the camera, make funny noises, dance and sing if need be, but make them look interested.
- Study photos of professionals on websites such as flickr.com.
- Consider using Photoshop or other photo editing software to enhance your images. Above all, ask for assistance when posing your dog or cat from someone the pet loves, says Organa.

If not available, direct the shot yourself and let someone do the camerawork for you — yelling commands does not work.

This was an important lesson for many of the workshop participants, including Diane Clarke of Mississauga. For years, she has wrestled with her nine pets as she tried to take her annual Christmas photo.

Clarke uses a non-digital Nikon camera but joined the hike with her 11-month-old dog Calista, a husky-collie mix she brought back from a recent trip to Greece, to learn photography tips.

She discovered she could use some of her old lenses with a digital SLR camera body if she decides to make the jump.

"It was a great learning experience for me.

"I realized the biggest difference with digital is you can shoot and shoot and shoot, and get rid of the ones that aren't good before you go to the photo lab.

"I used to shoot a roll of 36 for my Christmas card every year and wonder why I still didn't get anything I could use."

For more information, go to <http://www.organa.ca/pet> or <http://www.dogpaddlingadventures.com>.