

Picture Perfect

Capture frame-worthy photos of your best friend with these tips from the pros

by ARNA COHEN

Come on, 'fess up now. When someone asks to see pictures of your family, you flip open your wallet or fire up the smartphone and proudly display ... your pet. Here's Snowball sleeping, Snowball eating, and Snowball playing. The spouse? The kids? Oh, yeah, here they are. And this is Snowball on his back, Snowball staring into space ...

We can't help ourselves—our pets are just so darn adorable. They make ideal subjects, never complaining that their hair's a mess or flat out refusing to get in the picture. And what they wouldn't do for a treat!

Happily, modern technology makes photography more accessible than ever for today's pet owners—even the most inexpensive point-and-shoot digital camera automatically adjusts focus, exposure, and shutter speed. And the immediate results help improve technique, says photographer Stacey Morgan. "You're not waiting for film to be processed to see what you messed up."

Since you never know when that prize pose will happen, it pays to be prepared, notes photojournalist Robin Layton. "Instead of packing [your camera] away in the closet or camera bag, just have it ready" so you can catch those moments.

Above all, enjoy yourself and the time you are sharing with your beloved companion. "The fundamentals of taking a quality photo haven't changed," says photographer Jay Herman. "... Shoot in the simplest way possible. Don't be scared of making mistakes. The more experience you get under your belt, the more comfortable you'll feel."

To capture your pet's unique beauty and personality on film, follow these additional tips from the pros—illustrated with the winner and five runners-up in the judged category of the HSUS/HSI World Spay Day 2012 Pet Photo Contest.



Eye Level

Get down on the ground with your pet, advises Morgan. "You'll get better expressions." In the photo below, Wyatt shows his joyful spirit to owner Derrick Carpenter.





2012
Spay Day
WINNER!

Wait & Watch

"We always want animals to perform on the spot for us, but it doesn't always work that way," says Layton. "The more time you spend with them ... they get more comfortable with your presence and the camera clicking. Let them show their personalities to you." Beth Stewart caught Akeela's mischievous side in this "cat in a bag" photo (right).



Indoor Shoots

Natural light is always best, says Layton. If you can't go outside, find a room that is well lit by natural light or shoot by a window. Using flash can look "fake" and scare the pet. Nowadays, most cameras can shoot in low light with ease, so it shouldn't be too difficult. Jaime Santos-Prowse captured Spartacus (below) belly-up in a favorite chair.

Rule of Thirds

Centering the subject is not always the best option, Layton says. To make a photo more dynamic, try the rule of thirds. Imagine a tic-tac-toe grid over the scene in your viewfinder, then place your subject at the intersection of the lines. The off-center placement "gives the subject space to breathe." Aaron Amano took the grand prize in the judged category of last year's photo contest with this shot of Chewie (above).



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Get Creative

Think outside the box. What makes your pet special? A unique hairline, a cute pink nose? For a different kind of pet portrait, Layton recommends taking detail shots of what makes your pet stand out from the pack. After a hike, Lila (right) showed off her long, flexible tongue to owner Adrian Salgado.



Outdoor Lighting

When shooting outside, avoid the harsh midday sunlight. The light is much softer and more flattering in the early morning and late afternoon, says Herman, and cloudy days are "dynamite." Unaware that she's disabled, little Vespa (below) provides owner Brenda Jones with plenty of opportunities for outdoor action shots.



ABOUT OUR EXPERTS: Pulitzer Prize–nominated photojournalist **Robin Layton** helped judge the World Spay Day 2012 photo contest. Her stunning portraits of dogs and their people are the centerpieces of her book *A Letter to My Dog*. She lives in Seattle, Wash. Photographer **Stacey Morgan**'s subjects have included Julia Child, Richard Nixon, and Cab Calloway. Now the Wayne, Pa., artist and author focuses on her true love—dogs. Morgan was a judge for the 2012 Spay Day contest. For the love of a dog, **Jay Herman** left a career in commercial and medical photography. Adopting his beloved Abby inspired him to create Zoom Pet Photography in Austin, Texas. His work appears regularly in *Austin Pets Directory* magazine.

📱 **ON THE iPad:** Get more photography tips from Stacey Morgan, in a slideshow of her favorite pet photos.