

Caught in the Moment *with Dave Mills*

By *Jolene Hicks*
Photos courtesy of Dave Mills



Photographer Dave Mills of Folsom, California was gracious enough to answer my many questions about the world of canine sport photography and how he came to work behind the lens.

His favorite subjects to photograph are, "Dogs, of course! I really enjoy the dog sports, both to watch and to shoot. It's a great environment socially, too, so even when I'm taking a break from peering through the viewfinder, I can find nice folks to chat with, or I can watch the dogs." Dave says he loves to talk to customers at events for a variety of reasons. "Firstly it's just nice to feel like I'm a part of the group and not just a vendor, but I often can get insight as to what kind of photos they like or don't like." He reveals, "There are always subtle points that folks like to see documented in photos, and unless I participate in the par-

ticular sport, I might never realize that I'm not shooting an important component of it."

From a young age, photography has interested Dave. He took a photo class in grade school in which the students were taught the basics, including development and printing. After that he felt like a "real photographer" and drug his Fujica camera around everywhere he went. In high school he was encouraged by an incredible photo he took of Yosemite Falls which still hangs in his house (he remarked that it is almost impossible to get a bad shot of that subject!). Although not formally trained, he decided to take the leap from photography as a hobby to a profession in 2005 when digital SLR cameras became reasonably priced.

I asked him how he gets so many great, high-speed action photos. Dave says, "Practice, practice... It's a

matter of knowing the sport, deciding what kind of shot I'm looking for, being in the right place to get that shot, getting lucky with good light, and then doing the technical job of shooting pictures. Even still, I cull out about half of my shots on a first pass review, and only about 10% of my shots end up seen on my website by customers." For him the shot is all about the dog. He shoots tight to the dogs, crops images even closer, and tries to eliminate anything superfluous from the image. "For example you will often find head shots or dogs just running on the grass in my agility shoots. Outside of that image gallery, you wouldn't know the dog was even at an agility event, but they are some of my best sellers!"

Sometimes getting those amazing shots puts him in precarious positions, as a recent incident illustrates: "People that have seen me shoot straight racing know that my favorite shots are taken while laying down in the "end zone" of the track, right in line with the lure and the running dogs. I shoot the dogs coming straight at me, and have had countless folks ask me, "How did you get that shot?" I think they really mean, "How did you get that shot without getting run over?" Well, often I do get run over. Many times I've had dogs run right down my back as I duck low, cover my camera, and close my eyes at the last minute. At



SilkenFest 2011 in May, the lure operator stopped the lure essentially right on top of me, and the entire "scrum" of dogs going after the lure at the end of the race happened right on my back. I'm glad it wasn't the Irish WolfhoundFest!"

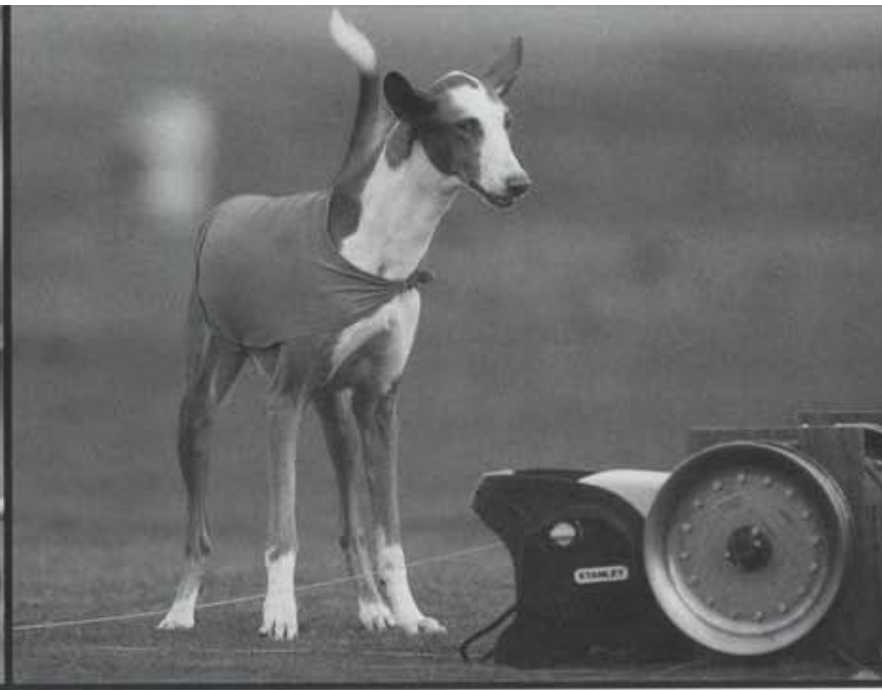
The most common question he encounters is people asking what kind of camera he uses (a Canon 1D Mk4). Encouragingly he notes, while it is certainly true that the camera and lens you use are very important, you can still take great shots with equipment much cheaper than his. "Learn how a camera works, practice, get tips from other photographers, work

on composition and you'll end up with wonderful photos regardless of how much or little money you spend on gear."

Dave says that a pricier camera will track focus better, provide you with more pixels to work with, and might get those shots in adverse conditions (in the rain, low light, etc.). But all those would be extreme shooting situations. "So the net result is that a better, more expensive camera will get you that last 10% of the shots that the cheaper camera couldn't

get, and that's only if you shoot in those extremes." Depending on the canine sport, the lenses that he uses vary. His favorite is his 300mm/f2.8 lens that he says is probably responsible for more good pictures than any other that he uses. He uses it for lure coursing sometimes with a 1.4x extender. Open field coursing requires carrying the camera poised to shoot while hiking for hours and you can easily lose view of the dogs in the topography and vegetation. In those conditions he uses at 100-





400mm zoom and “hopes for the best.” Surprisingly (or not, if you have competed in indoor shows/trials), he says the hardest circumstances to shoot in are indoor agility trials “which push the boundaries of even the best cameras today.”

He observes that photography is quite technical, and only getting more so with digital. To get the best shots he puts the camera in fully manual mode and sets the features up himself. (No “sports mode” for him.) The exposure settings for shutter speed, aperture, and ISO need to be second nature, to adjust them quickly throughout the events of the day. Settings for focus tracking (how does the camera follow the dog) will be different for different dog sports. And finally, you need to set up how much processing and adjustment of colors you want the camera to do on the images. And all of that is before you shoot, and then of course you have the post-processing work typically done in Photoshop, including leveling images, cropping them, sharpening, etc.

Even with all of the procedural aspects he tries to keep it more art than photography. Some of the best feedback he has received from dog

owners is that they see the emotion in their dog, that he understands the sport, or that he has captured their dog’s personality in a shot. “That’s the art, and hopefully a style of dog photo that becomes my own trademark. I have specifically avoided looking at other photographer’s material. It is very important to me to have my own approach and it is very easy to get in a rut and shoot the same angles, same composition, same shots, over and over. So I work hard at coming up with new interesting shots and doing it all my way.”

Many factors come into play before accepting an assignment. Even though the range of possibilities in dog sports may seem limited, living in California affords variety. Dave will shoot anything once to observe the sport, familiarize himself with the organization, and see what kind of images he can capture. After the initial event he tends to get a bit particular: Does he have an exclusive for the event? Specific access to the field that may not be available to anyone else? Is it a known, friendly group of folks? How many dogs and owners will be at the event? Is it a sport of which he can snap good images? All

of those aspects go into the decision process for him.

When questioned what the biggest personal or professional challenge he faces on a daily basis would be, he answers, “Professionally, the challenge for me is running the actual business. Marketing, keeping track of bank accounts, tallying up and paying taxes – who would enjoy that part of a business?!”

Those who shoot can also do. Dave participates on the other side of the camera too in racing, lure and open-field coursing with his two Borzoi, Indy and Dino. Although in the past he has let friends handle his dogs so that he could shoot an event, he now prefers to take that responsibility himself and let someone else photograph the occasion.

When asked if there is anything that he would love to shoot that he has not, he responds, “Someday I’d like to take one of those photo safari trips in Africa. It would be a great adventure.” Let’s just hope he stays in the jeep and does not go for that precarious positioning for which he is known!

You can see more of Dave’s work at www.pixf.com.