

Q&A with Renee Deal
Image of the Year Winner, 2019-2020

Renee Deal, winner of MVCC's Image of the Year last season, earned that honor during a difficult year, thanks to the pandemic upending our lives. Add to that a change in our website service, and it became a 'perfect storm' on which we'll blame the lateness of this article. That said, Renee's unique and wonderful winning image, "Ready to Launch," will remain memorable for a very long time.



Mike Milicia, our judge for last year's IOY competition, had this to say: "One is instantly drawn to this image by the intensity and focus of the running dog. Having the two front legs off the ground and the splashing water drops add even more to the drama. But what really completes the story is the out-of-focus human figure in the background seemingly cheering on the dog. The juxtaposition of the human and the dog also adds a pleasing diagonal element. The finishing touches are the colorful background and the clean upper and lower edges. All in all, it's just an image that draws me in and makes me smile no matter how many times I see it."

Renee competes in the A group and has won countless awards. She consistently scores at or near the top in both the storytelling and people categories. In the 2020-2021 season, she swept storytelling and tied for first with Keri McAndrews in the people category.

Renee, please tell us about your IOY photo. What was the inspiration behind it?

I took the photo, "Ready to Launch," at a dock diving event. Dock diving is a super fun sport where dogs and their owners compete in a variety of games all involving the dog jumping off a dock into a pool. In this particular event, dogs are judged on the distance of their jump. I was taking photos of dogs flying through the air, and splashing into the water, and I wanted to try something a little different. So, for this shot I decided to capture the moment before the jump, the anticipation, and the intensity in the dog's eyes. The dog's name is Ranger and the owner is Jessica Edgerly.

Any thoughts on what made the photo so special that it won?

I really think the dog's eyes make the photo! The focus and intensity are so strong the viewer can actually feel it. Adding to the story are the dog's ears curled up almost like little devil horns, water droplets flying, and the handler crouched in the background. I remember when I entered this photo in the competition, and it came up on the projector screen and there was a collective gasp in the room. I thought that was a pretty telling moment that people felt the impact of the image.

Let's talk about your photography background. How long have you been "doing" photography?

I started pretty young, probably in elementary school when I first used a small point-and-shoot film camera. It was sometime in the mid 90s when I got my first "real" camera... a Nikon 8008 DSLR with a detachable lens. Things were still all film at that time.

What sealed your love for photography?

Without a doubt it was rodeo! I was on vacation in Wyoming and chatting with a stranger about how I wanted to take photos of the rodeo. One thing led to another and I found myself in possession of a freelance photographers pass to get behind the chutes at the rodeo. I barely knew how to use my camera at the time, and there I was not just watching from the grandstands, but I was right in the thick of the action, as the cowboys were getting on horses and bulls. I knew right then that through photography I could experience the world in a whole new way.

What do you do now with your photography?

More than 20 years after my first rodeo experience I still photograph rodeo! But now I am an official PRCA (Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association) photographer. That took a lot of work and was years in the making, but it is a title I am proud to hold. I also photograph a lot of dog sports. Fast moving action is my favorite thing to photograph! I do other types of photography as well, such as portraits, real estate, and products.

Any thoughts or personal philosophy about what photography means to you?

I have two favorite things when it comes to photography. The first is simple... making people happy. I love when people get excited to see their photos! My second favorite thing is capturing moments that happen so fast you just might miss them in person! There's nothing like capturing the excitement, expression and emotion while an athlete... animal or human... is doing what they love. There are so many meaningful moments in life that can be enjoyed again and again through photos.

What camera(s) do you use? Any favorite lenses?

My main camera is a Nikon D5... I just love it! I also have a Nikon D500 and Nikon D750. My all-time favorite lens, and most used lens is the Nikon 70-200 2.8. I couldn't live without it! I also have the Nikon 120-300 2.8, Nikon 24-70 2.8 and the Nikon 14-24 2.8.

Let's talk about the club! How long have you been a member of Merrimack Valley Camera Club and why did you join?

I joined in 2015. After many years of not using my old film camera I purchased a digital camera. I wanted to learn more about how to use it so I could improve my photography.

How has being part of the club been of value to you?

Oh wow.... There are so many ways! I really can't believe how far I have come in five years since joining the club! Being a part of it has really helped me "find my tribe" ... and get to know lots of like-minded people. As a photographer it's so important to have other photographers that you can talk to, share

ideas, ask questions, talk about gear, etc. The monthly digital competitions have also been something that has driven me to really analyze my own photos. Each month I spend a lot of time sorting through my images, and really looking at them critically to make my selections for competition. I feel that taking this time to really dive deep and be critical of my own work has helped me to improve as a photographer. Another thing I love about the club is all the great speakers who come to share their knowledge.

What are your favorite things about the club?

Definitely the people! I have met so many wonderful friends and have been able to learn from some amazing photographers.

What would you say to others who might want to join the club?

Join! You won't regret it! It doesn't matter if you are new to photography or a pro, everyone is welcome. It would not be an understatement for me to say that joining MVCC was life changing. My love of photography is always growing! And as my knowledge of photography grows, so do my opportunities!