

Choosing the right size and format for your competition images

By Bill Keaton – CPS Competition Chair

So, you have decided to enter a print competition and have picked out the photos to enter, but are undecided on what sizes to have the photos printed.....

In an ideal world, one would crop and size photos to what is an ideal format for each photo, cut a custom mat – whether something as odd as a 9x16 or 11x15.5 – and enter the photo, as long as it did not exceed CPS size limitations (11x17, or 187 square inches).

The reality is cutting custom mats are tedious and expensive.

If you have observed CPS competitions, you realize many people enter 11x14s during print competition nights. That is easy and convenient. An 11x14 print is a standard size, and pre-cut mats to fit 11x14 are readily available. The problem is, that may not be the best “format” to showcase your prints.

The remainder of this article will show how I deal with this problem. My way may not suit the way you photograph the world and wish to display your prints. If not, perhaps you can come up with a similar system to meet your needs.

The first thing to remember is a larger print has a larger impact, all other factors being equal. That is the reason for the CPS size limit of 11x17. An 11x17 print is almost a 3x2 format, the same as 35mm film and the same format as almost all DSLRs.

This is the first format to consider, and looks like this:



An 11x17 is not really a common size, but that is easily remedied. If you take an 11x17 cropped print and open in photoshop, there is an option to change canvas size. If you change the canvas size to 12x18, that is a common size for printing photos, and the result will look like this (black border added for clarity):



Most labs will print 12x18 prints. All the printing discussed in this article can be done at Costco if you are, or know, a member.

The next size to discuss is the common 11x14. The same photo, cropped as an 11x14, which is roughly a 4x5 format, looks like this:



In the 4x5 format, this is the largest allowed size, easily printed, and easily matted with commonly available mats. But is this really the best way to crop this photo? Is that much sky, and the plants in the foreground, a distraction?

My preferred crop for this photo, staying with the idea of “common formats,” is an 8x16 print – a 2x1 format – which when placed on a 12x18 canvas looks like this:

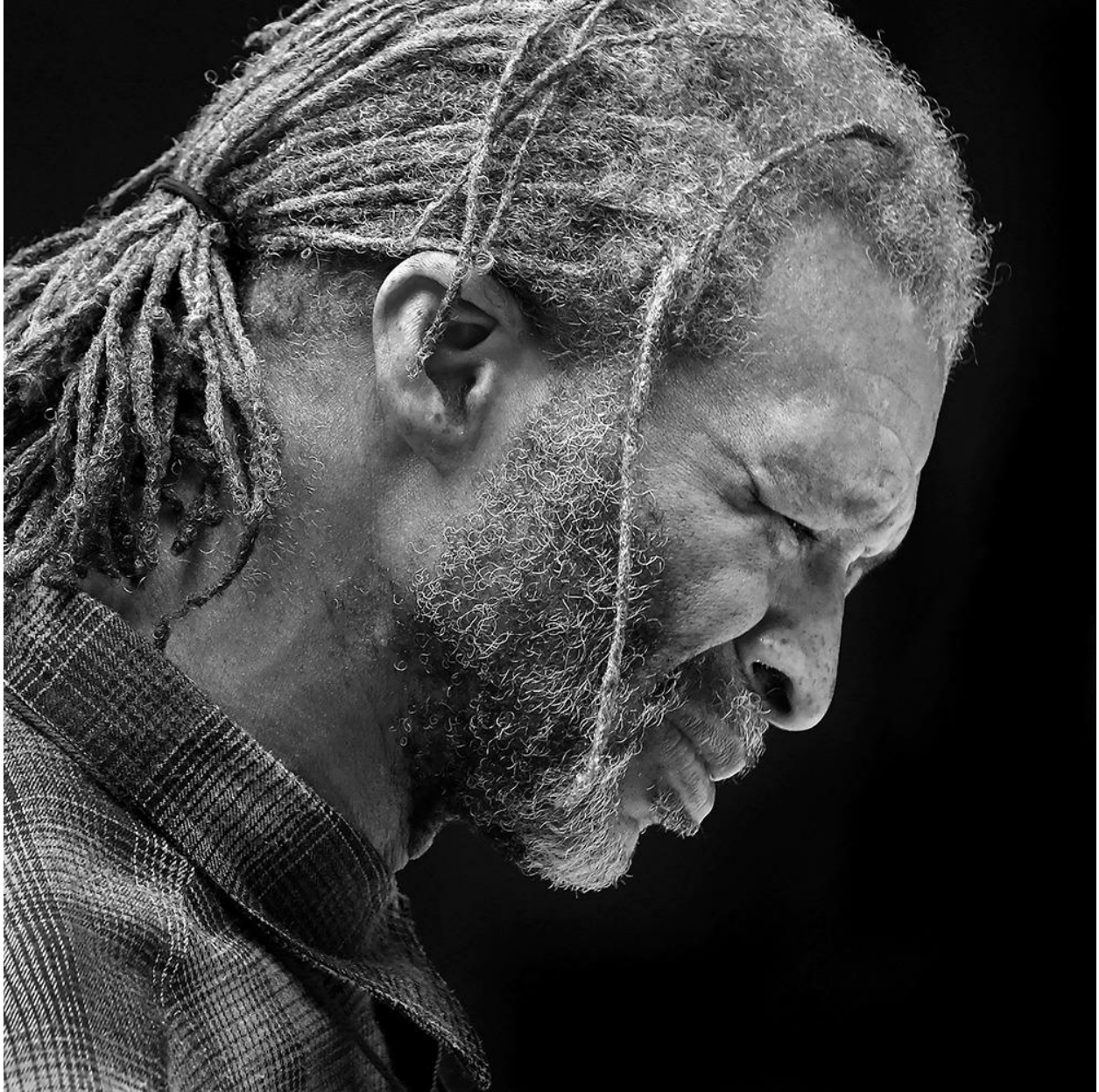


I prefer this crop for this photo because it does away with the excess sky while still retaining the feel of a vast blue sky, it eliminates the foliage in the foreground which I find a distraction, and it lends itself to the thin line of the walking sheep. The next size up in the 2x1 format where mats can be ordered without custom cutting is 10x20, which exceeds the maximum size allowed by CPS.

The last size and format I often use for competition prints is the 1x1 or square, which is locally available in 12"x12" size. This photo does not lend itself to this format:



This photo in a 1x1 format leaves way too much sky, leaves the distracting foliage in the foreground and does not have enough “breathing” room or movement area for the sheep on the sides. Portraits, and some landscapes, however, do lend themselves to the 1x1/square format, such as this:



In summary, there are four “formats” to which I try to crop my photos, all using common sizes for ordering prints locally, and for ordering mats online that do not have to be custom cut. First is the square, or 1x1 format, in the size 12x12 inches. Next is the approximate 4x5 format, available as an 11x14 inch print. A 2x3 format is slightly more rectangular and is represented by the CPS maximum of an 11x17 inch print. Last, there is the slightly panoramic 2x1 format represented by 8x16 inch prints. Almost any print – with the exception of extreme panoramas – can be cropped to one of these formats and look good.

If you are going to enter prints in projection competitions, you don't really have to stick with specific formats, though I would recommend doing so. Unless, of course, a photograph really screams for a specific odd-sized crop.

One good reason to stick with standardized sizes/formats, even in projection competitions, is if a photo is chosen as a photo-of-the-year and honored by being chosen to hang on the wall at CPS, it is still much easier and cheaper to have printed and matted.

Now that one has chosen photos to enter, cropped and sized them, that leaves mounting and matting the prints.

If one sticks only with 11x14 prints, and I hope I have shown why you shouldn't, then mounting board and precut mats can be purchased at most photography and craft stores. I prefer mounting be done on foamcore board because of its rigidity, and I stick with black or white mats.

Locally, "West Shore Wholesale Picture Frames" offers framing and matting supplies, and is located in Westlake. I have used this company and been quite pleased with frames, though have never bought mounting board and mats from the company. I find its website hard to navigate.

An online company, located in Toledo, which has a good reputation for frames and supplies is American Frame, <https://www.americanframe.com/>, from which one should be able to order mats precut to the sizes mentioned in this article.

The company I usually use is Frame Destination, <https://www.framedestination.com/>, a company based in Texas. They are easy to order from, including custom-cut mats if you wish, and prompt in shipping. The downside, shipping costs can be higher because of the distance and the bulk and size of ordering mats and mounting board.

The company does offer price breaks for buying in quantity, and I highly recommend getting a group together and taking advantage of bulk pricing. I use 1/8 inch foamcore mounting board which I order in 16x20 inch sheets. The mats

for my 11x14 and 11x17 prints have an outside dimension of 16x20, and I cut down the 16x20 mount boards to fit the other two sizes I use.

If you are mounting and matting prints for sale or gifts, I highly recommend using archival materials for longevity. Otherwise, I use non-archival mats and mounting board and save the money. For myself, I figure I will get tired of looking at the same picture on the wall before any materials deteriorate.

I hope this article helps show how cropping and sizing different ways can have an impact on the presentation of your photos, and how standardizing on a few formats can help simplify the process and keep costs down.

Looking forward to seeing your prints in competition!!

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