

Photographic Panning: What is it and how do I do it?

Photographing Motion in Camera with the Panning Technique

Definition: Panning is a technique in which you keep the subject at least partly in focus, while the background has a motion blur due to your movement of the camera when the shutter is open and following the movement of the subject.



Example:

Cowgirl at Ride and Shoot Competition in Sun Lakes, AZ

How to:

Setup: It helps to have a subject that is moving in a straight line. If the subject is moving in a horizontal straight line, you can use a monopod or a tripod with a rotating head to minimize blur in directions other than the direction of the subject. Until you achieve a bit of mastery, try practicing on cars, bikes, boats, runners, etc. (things that move in a horizontal line at a relatively rapid pace.)

1. Set your shutter speed to a value that is lower than what you would use if you were not panning. It is a relatively long shutter speed that captures the motion blur. You might start at 1/40 if the light is adequate, and go up or down from there, to keep your subject properly exposed and in focus. Work in Shutter Priority or Manual, and remember to keep your exposure correct.
2. If in Manual, set your aperture to a low setting, eg, 5.6, and your ISO appropriately low.

3. This technique is assisted by a neutral density filter, as a low aperture and slower speed may let in too much light during normal daylight hours.
4. If you have focus tracking on your camera, set it to track steadily moving subjects. Check your camera manual about focus sensitivity and focus tracking. Set autofocus to continuous tracking, AI Servo AF on Canon and AF-C on Nikon.
5. Position yourself to keep your line of sight almost perpendicular to the direction of the subject's motion.
6. Set your initial focus on the prime feature of the subject that you wish to keep unblurred. With animals/humans, that is usually the face and eyes. Hold your shutter release button part way down while focusing, but do not release the shutter yet. Continuous focus will automatically maintain focus, after the initial focus, as the subject moves.
7. For a more distant subject, focus on a ground point slightly in front of the point through which the subject will pass and where you want to start tracking (obviously, an approximation improved intuitively with practice). Hold the shutter release button part way down, lift the camera to the height of the subject focal point, and wait for the subject.
8. With the subject's prime area in focus, move your camera quickly in the same direction the subject is moving, and attempt to keep the prime focal area in focus and coordinated with the subject's speed. Track briefly before you take the shot.
9. After shutter release, continue to track as before shutter release. Remember, your shutter is still momentarily open, due to its slower speed.
10. This procedure requires a lot of throw-away shots before one can capture the desired shot! That desired shot has the prime area in focus, with motion blur in the background and perhaps partially on the non-prime area of the subject. Steps 1-9 happen very quickly, so it takes a lot of patience and practice and joy!

Don't forget the last part, about joy. The image on top was taken on my first practice session with panning. I used my tripod as a monopod, and spent an entire afternoon lost in time with my camera and the horses! You too can have a lot of fun with this. Just find a good starting subject, so you don't get too frustrated your first time out! It gives new meaning to the old song "Standing on the corner, watching all the girls go by...'