

My Three Years Face-to-Face with Photography

Midoring

First-year university student, 18, Osaka

* Third-year high school student at time of interview



Discovery of the Shashin Koshien^{*1}

The same year I joined the photography club in high school, “Yossan,” the leader of the club, and other third-year students were competing in the Shashin Koshien. I’ll never forget the excitement in their faces when they talked about their experience. They were skillful in working with their models, and their photographs were really great.

I asked Hanabata-sensei, our club advisor, about them, “What is their secret? How can I get like that?” and he answered, “Participating in the Shashin Koshien makes all the difference. They have much more depth and breadth than first-year students.” The average high school student is concerned only with his or her own little world, but upperclass members like Yossan go out and take pictures for the contest every day, and through photography they are in touch with the world and people outside school. That gives them more maturity and an awareness of the wider world.



Yossan (right)

©Midoring

So I decided I really wanted to join in our club’s participation in the next Shashin Koshien. At the end of my first year, when the club began to prepare for the next year’s competition, I signed up without a moment’s hesitation.

How and What to Photograph

I went out with my camera every day. But when I would show my pictures to Hanabata-sensei and the upperclass members of the club, they would say, “you won’t get to Shashin Koshien with those photos. What you’ve got is too simple and direct. It’s a good start, but you need to include more background, and have photos shot with different framing and from different angles. You have to improve your skill.” I knew there was something wrong with my photos, but it was tough because I didn’t know what or how to photograph. But I kept on going out to photograph, and gradually I did develop better skills, including those for photographing people. It takes courage to ask a stranger if you can photograph him or her. Before that, I had not taken that many photos of people because I was too shy to speak to anyone, but before I knew it I was photographing people by myself, even when my friends were not around. Still, our club did not make it to the Shashin Koshien finals that year.

Some time after the Shashin Koshien in my second year was over, people began to tell me that my photography skills were getting better. But I didn’t want my photos to be just “good.” I wanted others to say that they were interesting and fun. I began to photograph less. Even when I tried, I would imagine how it would appear as a photo, and think “Nah, it’s not interesting enough. Never mind.” Then I participated in the school’s study trip to Italy in December of second year. Hanabata-sensei told me that this was practice for the Shashin Koshien. If I could not take good photographs during this trip, I would not make it to the finals. I took dozens of rolls of black and white film with me. During our seven-day stay, I photographed people, scenery, and all sorts of things. Until then, I hadn’t really known what I should photograph, but in Italy I found myself once again wanting to photograph anything and everything. When people began to compliment me on my photographs, I gained confidence. I began to think to myself, “If I like it, I’ll photograph it.”



Photo taken during the school study trip to Italy in December of my second year.

©Midoring

Photographs That Speak for Me

We began preparing our final submissions for the Shashin Koshien in January. Before, the upperclass members had been the leaders of the team, and we had just followed their lead. Now we had to prove we could do it on our own. I was all psyched up, ready to have all eight photos in our submission be my photos, and lead the team to victory. We all decided on *takoyaki*,^{*2} for our topic. It would really illustrate the Osaka spirit, and it would show the relationship people have with *takoyaki*.



Takoyaki

At first we took staged photographs in Dotonbori,^{*3} acting out a scene of “having a great time eating *takoyaki*,” cueing each other to pose with *takoyaki* poised before open mouth, to look at the camera, and so on. Then, one day, I was photographing the man who works a *takoyaki* shop in our old-town Osaka neighborhood, and just naturally I started talking to

him. We got a little acquainted and he began to tell me a little about his life. I found out he had been making *takoyaki* there for decades, and I realized, “Wow, this *takoyaki* shop has been here all these years! This man has been living here all this time!” The photograph I took gets across the admiration and amazement I felt. That is the kind of photograph I want to take.

You Gotta Shape Up!

Shashin Koshien is really demanding. You go out to photograph every day, but the photos still don’t come out the way you want. Hanabata-sensei and older students give thumbs down over and over. Every time, it really gets you down, but you can’t afford to feel sorry for yourself; you have to keep on taking photos.

Riding around on my bicycle looking for *takoyaki* stands and shops to photograph, I started to feel so angry with myself I thought I would cry. Slapping my thighs, I tried to pull myself together. “You gotta shape up!” I told myself. I didn’t want to be second to anyone when it came to effort; I just couldn’t imagine any of my club mates being more determined than me to do my best. Yossan sent me a great letter of encouragement: “If you think you get good just by going on shoots after school every day and developing your film, over and over until May—if you think you can get eight good enough photos out of that, you’re dead wrong. When I was taking my photos under the tracks for the Koshien, every day I thought to myself what that place meant to me, and what I wanted to express by photographing it. You need to make clear to yourself why you want to photograph *takoyaki*. You can do it!” I felt that Yossan really understood me, and shared the feelings I was struggling with.

Discovery from Struggle

I had been thinking all the time about what *takoyaki* meant to us. As I took more photographs at stalls and shops around the old-town Osaka neighborhood, I began to see that *takoyaki* were not just a *meibutsu* or “famous product” of Osaka. They’re eaten by people of all ages, from little kids to old folks, and everyone clearly loves them. One day, I photographed a girl at a *takoyaki* shop, hanging on its *noren* curtain while her mother worked inside. The girl looked a bit lonely, and the old-fashioned,



Shot not long after I started taking photographs. I just aimed my camera straight at my subject. Hanabata-sensei said that style vividly displayed my personality.

©Midoring



One of the photos I took for our last submission to the Shashin Koshien.

©Midoring

well-worn façade of the shop testified to its long history. This is probably one of my best shots; a photo that awakens many thoughts and images in the mind of the viewer.

In the end, none of my own photographs were included in the set submitted to the Shashin Koshien primary screening. Photos that show the life at an old-town neighborhood taken with time and patience—the kind of photos I like—aren’t often chosen for such contests. After much discussion among us, we agreed that in order to beat the competition, we should use photos with more impact. We all thought that they were good photos, including myself, but still we did not make it to the finals.

The six months of photographing in preparation for the Shashin Koshien primary were difficult and exhausting. But I wouldn’t be where I am today if I had not taken up that challenge. Hanabata-sensei’s words still echo in my mind: “When you’re having a hard time, struggling to take that perfect photo, it’s like when you’re going up a steep stairway. It’s only when you make it to the next floor that you look back and realize how far you have come.”

Photographs That Feed the Imagination

It may sound boastful, but I think those photos I took in my old-town neighborhood were really good. They may not have what you call impact, but those photos show *takoyaki* subtly blending into the surrounding atmosphere. Looking at them, you start thinking of all kinds of things—the lives of the people shown, the flow of time in the scene, and so on. I decided to major in photography in university. My teachers recommended that I continue art major in college, but I think I want to devote my life to photography. Photography is a way to cut out and record brief moments in time. For example, no matter how skillfully you might draw the houses from the post-World War II era, people may not think much of them, but a photograph will attract more attention, because it delivers more reality. I want to preserve this era I live in through photographs. I want to take the kind of photographs that feed the imagination of those who see them. And, this is the first time I’m saying this, but I want to become a professional photographer and publish a collection of my own photographs someday.

Notes

^{*1} Shashin Koshien: See “Japanese Culture Now-4.” National photo competition for high school students. Only teams that won the primary competition in each region can enter the finals held in July in Hokkaido. The photography club in Midoring’s high school organizes a team of volunteers each year, begins discussing a theme around January, and composes its entry of eight photographs by the deadline for the first screening.

^{*2} *Takoyaki* are made of wheat flour batter flavored with seasonings and a small chunk of octopus meat and grilled in a ball shape.

^{*3} Dotonbori: Main shopping district in the southern part of Osaka, with many good restaurants.