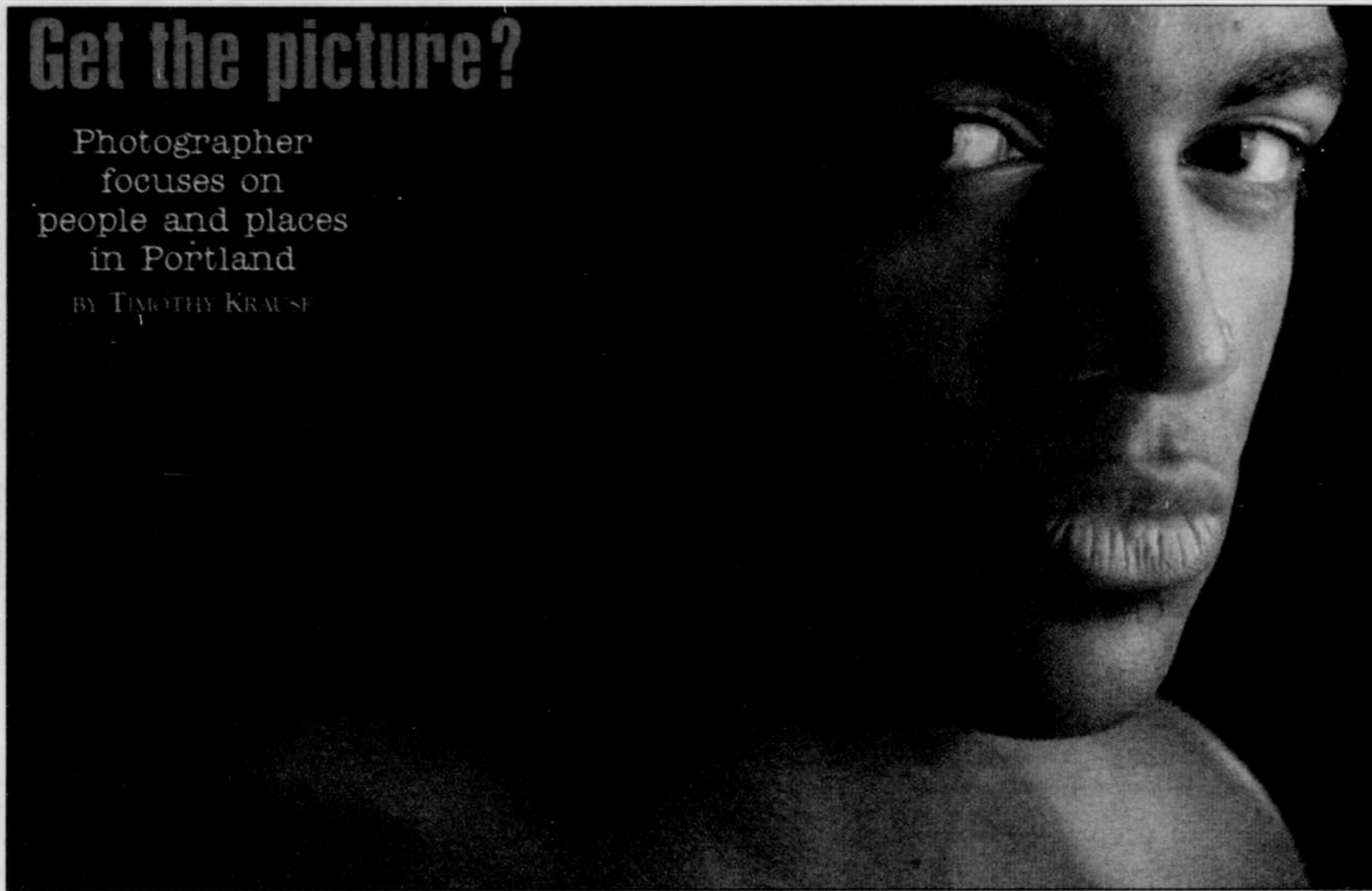


PEOPLE

Get the picture?

Photographer focuses on people and places in Portland

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE



The signature unconventional sports photo: Gress shoots a wrestler at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"I refer to myself as a master of symmetry because everything has to be orderly," photojournalist John Gress admits. "All the lines have to be even and everything has to match up or else it will bug me."

With little formal training, this 24-year-old gay man's career has developed quickly from student newspaper to national media.

Gress grew up in West Linn and began shooting pictures as a teen-ager. His big break came in 1996 when he met a representative from The Associated Press while taking pictures of local flood damage. He submitted examples of his work, and the suburban kid soon found himself free-lancing for the news agency before even finishing high school.

Since then, his pictures have appeared in publications such as *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *USA Today*.

"I always knew I wanted to be a photographer," says Gress, who studied political science at Portland State University and continues to free-lance out of his Pearl District studio. "My favorite thing to do is to shoot portraits, but it's gratifying to shoot sports and really nail it. And I get a lot of intellectual satisfaction from covering politics."

As he flips through his portfolio, familiar faces appear. His subjects have included, among other notables, President Bush, Olympic gold

medalist Bill Johnson, Portland Police Chief Mark Kroeker and the Portland Trail Blazers.

The perfectionist in Gress calls out the technical elements, pointing to pattern, lighting and color. He recalls the composition of each shot, revealing how much preparation went into setting up what looks like a spontaneous event.

It's more than just being at the right place at the right time, he explains. For a typical photo shoot, for example, he'll drag along about 15 pounds of equipment and some 75 pounds of lighting accessories.

About three years ago, he began working with digital photography, which now constitutes the bulk of his work. His state-of-the-art equipment includes Canon EOS-1D and D-30 cameras. Each holds more than 100 high-resolution images and has a display that allows Gress to review his efforts immediately.

"I know exactly what's there," he says, noting that a digital format eliminates handling

unprocessed film, developing negatives and scanning prints. "The other great thing is that I can shoot an entire project and then upload it to a client's Web site for them to view."

Grabbing his notebook computer, Gress loads a cover shot he's prepared for a corporate annual report. A colorful composite image shows nine people staggered among power-generating windmills against a twilight horizon.

"A group portrait can be the worst thing to take a picture of," he claims, but here he's clearly pulled off just the opposite, weaving nearly a dozen images into a dramatic and cohesive picture.

"What I want to do is to put a person in their environment," he asserts. "I want to organize the scene so that it accentuates the connection. To me, the environment and the person are equally important."

While portraits rely on a mix of personality

and setting, Gress finds action in sports. "I don't like sports from a fan standpoint, but I love to shoot it because it's a challenge," he says, joking that the high level of testosterone doesn't hurt, either. "Most of the time, I'm looking for emotion, ball placement and conflict."

To tell a larger story, however, Gress enjoys editorial assignments that center on current news events happening around Oregon. He looks for aesthetic images that also illustrate what's going on.

Sometimes he gets to set up a shot; other times he just tags along, capturing whatever visual elements are present. The latter can be frustrating, though, when he spots a more potent arrangement that could have greater influence with viewers.

"You could make people look so much better by just having them be in the right spot to take their picture. You could make them look a lot more powerful than they are just by positioning them differently," he notes. "If corporations or politicians would just set things up so that what they were doing actually made a great visual, it would get people to read stories about them."

When asked to imagine a photo essay illustrating the Rose City's sexual minorities community, Gress pauses to consider its range of identities.

"I'd want to shoot an older couple that had been together for a long time," he begins, "because so much of the time the focus is on what's in your face. Putting drag queens on cars, lesbians on motorcycles and strippers on floats doesn't really represent the broad array of the community. In an essay, you'd include all that, but I'd also want to include things you don't often see." □

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John Gress loose backstage at Darcelle XV



John Gress, self-portrait



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