

Wedding Know-How

Award-Winning Photographer
Ken Sklute

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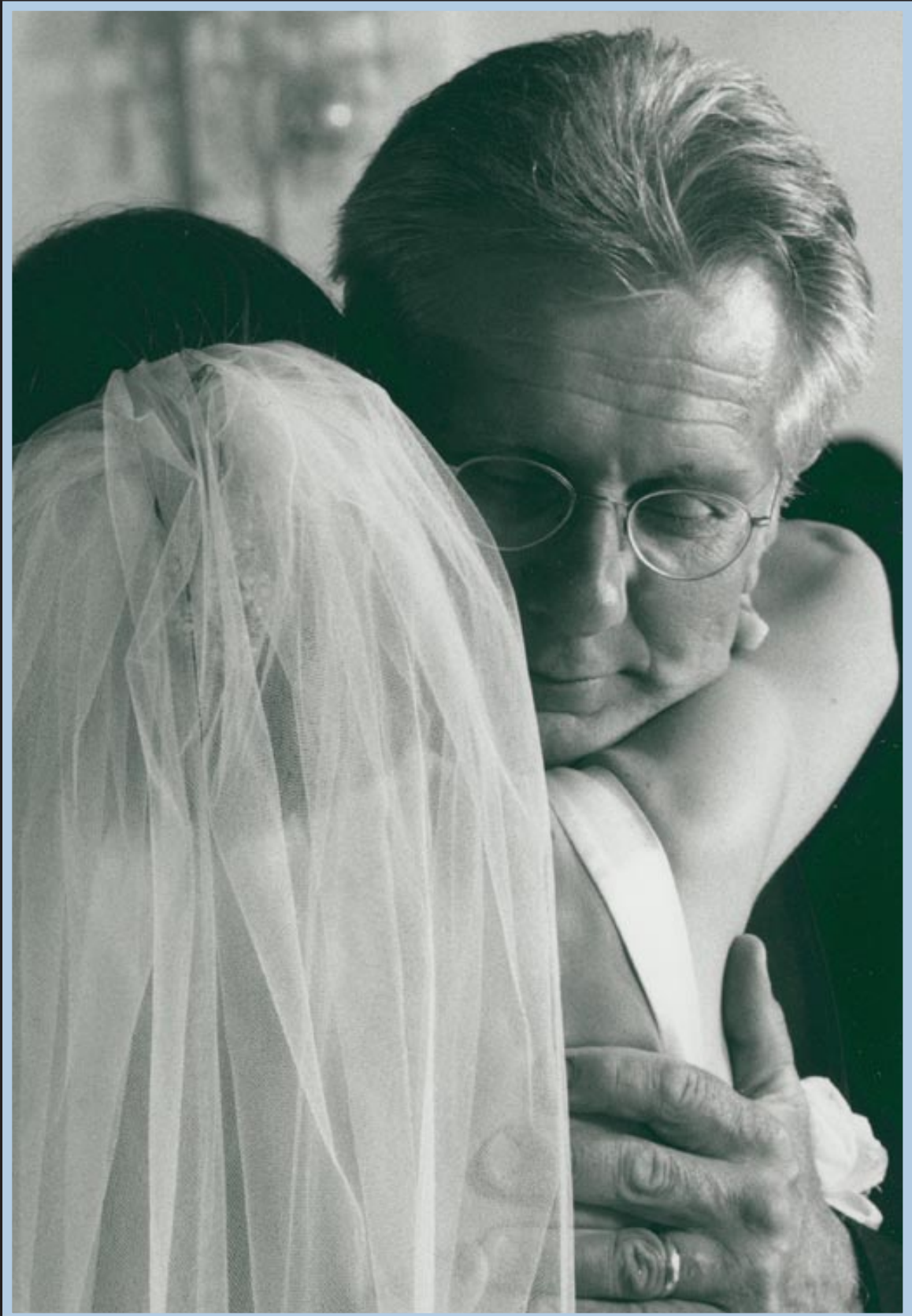


By Bob Coates, PPA Certified

He is certified by the Professional Photographers of America (PPA) and holds their Master of Photography and Photographic Craftsman degrees. He has won the 1999 and 2000 Kodak Gallery Awards, four 1999 and three 2000 Fuji Masterpiece Awards, the Arizona Wedding Album of the Year award, and more, much more. You might think that a person who has had this much recognition would have an ego the size of the entire Southwest. Not Ken Sklute.

The first time I saw Ken he was judging a print competition for the Phoenix Professional Photographers Association. I was immediately impressed with his photographic knowledge, but even more so with how he shared that knowledge during his critiques. He got to the heart of how a photograph might be improved without tearing down the photographer. Here was a man who really cared about photography and appreciated his fellow artists.

Now a successful wedding photographer in Tempe, Arizona, Sklute got his start in drag race photography, of all things. "I fell in love with drag racing," says Sklute. "My friends weren't getting into



the track when they were 14, but I was, so I took a camera one weekend to prove I was there. When I went back the next week, I sold some of the pictures I had taken of a racecar. I had panned with an instamatic and didn't even know what I was doing, but the results were what they had to be. The light bulb went off, and 27 years later, here I am."

Amazingly, it took only a year to figure out what he was doing with a camera. By 15, Sklute had become the official track photographer. A year-and-a-half later came the seemingly bizarre transition from racing to weddings. "Actually, it was a natural progression," Sklute says with a laugh. "During the winter, off-season for drag racing, I met

a wedding photographer and said, 'Hey can I come out with you?' I went to weddings with him for three months, and I booked a wedding for myself so I had a deadline to learn everything by."

For Sklute, the transition wasn't much of a stretch. One of his first award-winning wedding photos was of a bride and groom on a motorcycle. "I had them go up the block and drive by the church while I was panning at a $\frac{1}{15}$ second," he recalls. "The bride's garter was showing, her veil blowing in the wind, and the church was in the background. That shot came right out of my motor sports photography."

Sklute shot more weddings on his own until he caught the attention of a

catering establishment with a large studio, which handled as many as 11 weddings at a time. "I was guaranteed two weddings a weekend all year long—over 100 weddings a year. I was only 16," he says.

I tallied 50 awards at Sklute's studio before I quit counting. Before moving to Arizona, he lived and practiced in New York, where he was the Long Island PPA's Wedding Photographer of the Year 13 out of 17 years and Illustrative Photographer of the Year for 15 of those years. More recently, he was named the 1999 and 2000 Arizona Photographer and Wedding Photographer of the year, earned the Best Wedding Album award from the Western States Regional Print

In Praise of Mentors

Sklute names three people who have inspired his career. The first was Mike Wisney who gave him, at age 16, the studio wedding job. Once, when Sklute was 17 and Mike 34, they went walking on a foggy day. Beautiful light rays were coming through the trees, and Sklute said, "Man, do I love light!" Mike smacked him upside the head and said, "Well, that's why you're a photographer."

Next on his list is Don Blair, PPA Certified, M. Photog. Cr. A-ASP, F-ASP. "Don taught me how to see light or, more accurately, proved to me I could see light," said Sklute. "I think that's a neat thing as a photographer, that recognition. There are so many people today, peers, who can't see or don't understand light. Yet they are photographers. It's a real awakening when you know inside that you've arrived." In addition, Sklute says, Don showed him how to create light that he could not find.

Last but not least, Sklute pays tribute to David Muench, the great landscape photographer. "I never met the man," said Sklute, "but since 1980 I have bought every book that he's produced, and I can tell you anything about any of his published images." Sklute learned a great deal by dissecting the various elements of Muench's work, an activity he recommends with all images. "Try being able to tell if it's a sunrise or sunset, what lens or film was used. Understand a grand foreground. See the concept of reinforcing depth with a foreground, middle ground, and background. These are the kinds of things I picked up from David's images."

In addition to these mentors, Sklute



credits having good assistants for his success in making excellent wedding images. "I've been blessed to have two assistants who make my job easier, James Taylor and Shannon Leibrock," he says. "I really appreciate the freedom they give me to concentrate on the shot. If I'm shooting the portraits and see a little boy playing on the side, I put out my hand and the 35mm camera is there to capture a moment I might otherwise have missed."

Sklute has a few words of advice for aspiring photographers: "Understand who you

are and what your taste is," he said. "Develop a niche. Don't copy from people, but go and accumulate education, whether from competitions or dedicating a week each year to study with another photographer. If we stay in our own studios and towns and don't see what other people are doing, we tend to stagnate. Set goals to go someplace different than you've been today. Every year I change what I'm doing, drastically, and that makes it exciting. You have to look to make yourself happy, and too many photographers do not do that."

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Competition and conference in 2000 and 2001, and scored a perfect 100 at Wedding and Portrait Photographers International (WPPI), which also awarded him the accolade of Photographic Mastery and Outstanding Photographic Achievement.

Why competition? "It's humbling until you find the success," says Sklute. "Then it's almost an adrenaline rush. When you start to compete, you recognize all your deficiencies and inabilities. I think there's nothing more humbling than putting your work out there and not having any defense for it. It doesn't

matter if the subjects were late, or it was windy outside, or that the people didn't cooperate. The work you put up there has to stand on its own merit. No matter how good you think you are, to have other people view your work and tell you exactly what's wrong with it is a magical education process." (See the print competition quiz by Dennis Craft, *PPA Certified, M.Photog.Cr., F-ASP*, page xx.)

Selling the Style

The majority of Sklute's wedding work is shot in black-and-white. The

medium offers affordable fast lenses, film speed from 400 to 3200, and it works well with his photojournalistic style. It's been an easy sell. "It goes with the PPA educational process," he said. "Show what you want to sell. People won't buy what they can't see. If you want to sell 30x40-inch prints, have large prints on the wall. If you want to do black-and-white albums, present them. Offer sample albums with 80 to 100 photographs showing what you can do for clients story-wise. When they come back, they're not

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going to purchase an album with 36 prints. They're going to purchase the story you showed them."

When Sklute discovered a passion for black-and-white infrared images, he added them to his coverage. "I started showing one or two infrared images in an album, and the next thing you know, I had four or five," he says. "Then I added 16x20s to my gallery. The whole thing kind of snowballed, proving you have to show what you want to sell. Now I offer 100 percent black-and-white albums, including infrared."

Traveling from his studio in Tempe,

Contemporary Images, Sklute speaks at seminars around the country. This year he was the keynote speaker at the February Western States Regional Print Competition and conference. Other 2001 appearances include: March 12, WPPI, Las Vegas, "The ABCs of Light," a two-hour seminar covering how to understand light and apply it to all facets of photography; August 5, Imaging USA, Chicago, "Capturing Emotion," a program on photographing the emotions that really occur during a wedding instead of trying to manufacture them; June 24-28, a one week workshop at

the West Coast School, San Diego, combining photojournalism, album design, and shooting into one quality package. Also look for Sklute's new how-to book, *Professional Techniques for the Wedding Photographer* (Amphoto, 212-764-7300), available this May. ■

Bob Coates, PPA Certified, is a commercial and wedding photographer serving clients in the Caribbean (where he lived for 20 years) and the Southwest, from his studio in Sedona, Arizona. His articles and photographs have been published in numerous books and magazines. Visit Coates' websites, www.bcphotography.com and www.bcweddingphoto.com.