

EXPERIENCE IS STILL THE GREAT TEACHER

Ilford Press Photographer of the Year for 1992, Jon Hrusa of the Pretoria News talks to
MICHAEL ETTERS HANK *about his work and how experience paid off in the end*

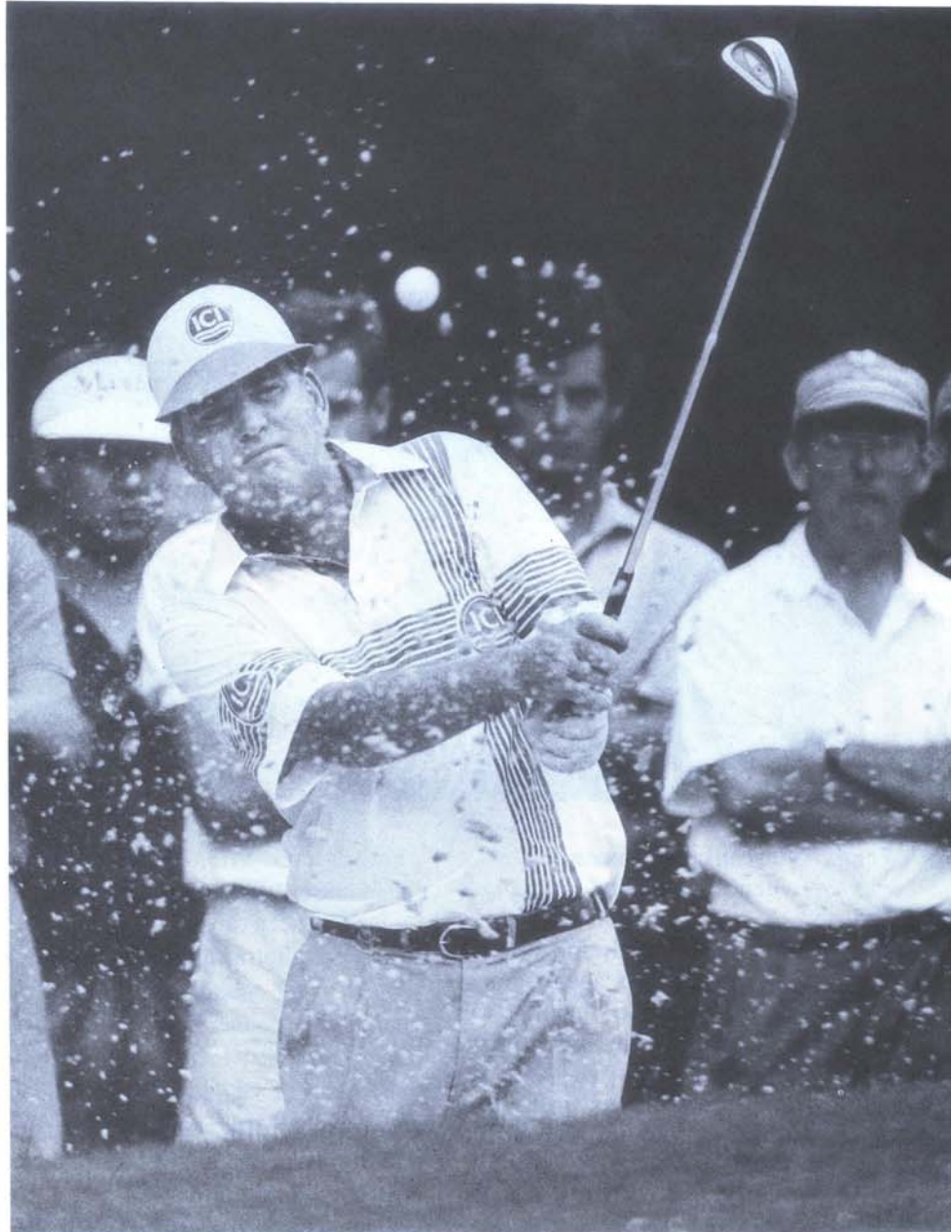
MY first really significant picture was taken in the Karoo in 1984. It was a very stark landscape with a lone tree in late afternoon light," says Jon Hrusa, the Ilford Press Photographer of the Year.

While still at school Jon was active in photographic societies which exposed his work to other local photographers and the creative feedback was important to his early development. Another advantage from those days was the low cost of film. Although equipment was expensive, a roll of transparencies in the early eighties cost less than R5. The equivalent film today is 500 percent more expensive.

To overcome the limitations of his equipment, Jon used what he had to the best of his ability. "I concentrated on pictures which used a wide angle perspective because I had a 28mm lens. I used the converging verticals, the strong distortion, the strongly emphasized foregrounds. Basically I used what I had."

Jon believes it is the huge inflation in photographic prices which forces South African photographers to be technically excellent with very little equipment.

Because of the availability of wide-angled lenses to photography students, Jon felt this was the ideal place to start. "There must be a strong subject in the foreground. Often when beginners use a wide-angle lens, they are only using it to get a lot in. That is wrong. They *will* get plenty in, but it is all miles away and insignificant. The effect is very two-dimensional. If you bring your main subject strongly into the foreground – although not necessarily *bang* in the



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centre – you can create interesting balances between foreground and background.”

Jon left school to study for a BSc at Wits University after his application to study medicine was turned down. “I was fumbling along and hating every minute of the BSc. I hated varsity. It was really terrible for me. It took me six months to realise I was doing completely the wrong thing.

“I was doing my best to get out of lectures, to go and shoot. I was phoning

photographic clients from a public telephone at Wits to arrange meetings.”

Jon had been carrying out a number of lucrative photographic commissions since leaving school, and now he left university permanently. “I didn’t do weddings, portraits, babies, and stuff like that at all. I’ve always hated posed photographs. I like capturing real things, real life. Here and there I make a composition work pictorially, but I hate posing pictures, I’m not good at it.”

It was his love of photographing unfolding events that made sport a prime subject for Jon Hrusa. Several of the winning Ilford Competition entries are of sport, including the Russian All Star ice skating, and John Bland chipping onto a green at the Sun City Million Dollar Golf Tournament.

After giving up university, Jon worked at a popular photographic laboratory. “Working at the one-hour lab was good because it honed my technical ability, I could tell what the end result was meant

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to look like, and I could see how many mistakes they were making. Stupid mistakes. People were chopping off heads, exposures were wrong, compositions were bad. They weren't getting the pictures they actually saw, instead, they were photographing tons of space around the composition which had nothing to do with the picture. They were using crummy film, crummy cameras, crummy equipment. I saw everything."

Jon used the lab as a base for his serious photography. "I did jobs for the *Randburg Sun*, a Caxton knock-and-drop. I did the opening of the Rhema Church. I did some good work, and I was well published. It was motivating."

He was also still active in club photography, and an 'Images of Sandton' competition pushed him further in the direction of news photography at which he was becoming increasingly accomplished. But Jon's time at the laboratory had run out. "I started seeing myself as better than the one-hour lab, and I became very unpopular there." They asked him to leave, which he did but only to start selling encyclopaedias.

Before reporting for military service, a friend from the Sandton Photographic Society who was on the military magazine, *Paratus* gave Jon some help getting onto the SADF newspaper, *Uniform*. "On *Uniform's* photographic staff I travelled all over the place, from Katima Mulilo to Cape Aghulhas. You either sat back and let the army dish you up all the crummy military jobs, or you could organise yourself. I photographed as many sporting events as possible."

Jon used his time in the army to take photographs for himself as he travelled around South Africa, but he also used the opportunity to befriend some of the top brass. "I learned not to be afraid of people with rank and power in society. It taught me how to get on with them on a one-to-one basis. I cheated the red tape to my advantage." ■



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How did he manage to get from a military newspaper to the *Pretoria News*? "I was lucky," says Jon. "While I was still at *Uniform*, I got to know the photographers at the *Pretoria News*. I met Walter Pitso on the Umkomaas Canoe Marathon in 1987, and later I met Peter Morey – former chief photographer of the *Pretoria News* – up on the border of Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe."

Walter Pitso, best known for his distinguished career with *Drum* magazine, called Jon when a post fell vacant on the *Pretoria News*. "I started off on the level of a second-year photographer. Walter phoned me and said, 'Hey, there's a job going. Come and see these guys.'

"I went down and saw Peter Morey who told me to 'go down to the zoo and shoot some pictures'. I reckoned everybody would go down and shoot pictures of the animals so I said to myself, 'don't go and shoot pictures of the animals, go and shoot the people'."

He returned to the *Pretoria News*, processed the film and made the prints that got him hired. He reckons it was his experience that got him the job.

"I didn't study, I didn't go to tech. I learned by trial and error. It's mostly experience, experimenting, trying things, seeing how things work, seeing what happens when you push your film to 6 400 ASA, what results you get and how to improve on those results. Shooting, shooting, shooting... The more you shoot the better you get, the quicker your reflexes become. The more you shoot, the more pictures you see. Most of the pictures I take professionally are very fast, spur of the moment stuff."

Jon uses a Nikon F4 single lens reflex camera, and shoots a lot of colour transparencies. The medium he uses depends on whether he feels his photograph will best be expressed in colour or black and white. He does all his own darkroom work and it is only in very unusual circumstances that a darkroom assistant processes his pictures.

Not all Jon's photography is close-up or dangerous, however. His pride and joy is much-used 300mm Nikkor lens with extra low dispersion (ED) glass. Jon sold his BMW – his other passion – to buy this very expensive lens second hand. The

long lens is the mainstay of his sports photography. For years Jon has been honing his talents at the Sun City Million Dollar Golf Challenge, and he is also a regular at rugby and motorsports.

"I've just bought myself a Nikon F4, and the *News* has also just got me an F4. The F4's motordrive is much quieter than the Nikon F3 so I can now get closer to the golfers without disturbing their shots and, as the mood gets more intense around the greens, I can go on shooting without disturbing the players. With the old F3 motordrive I was likely to get a putter around my neck."

Winning the Ilford Press Photographer of the Year award could not have come at a better time for Jon Hrusa and he intends using the prize money as a deposit on a car – a shiny new BMW to replace the 535i he sold to buy his precious telephoto lens. ●

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