

Quick Guide

# RULES OF COMPOSITION

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# Rules of Composition

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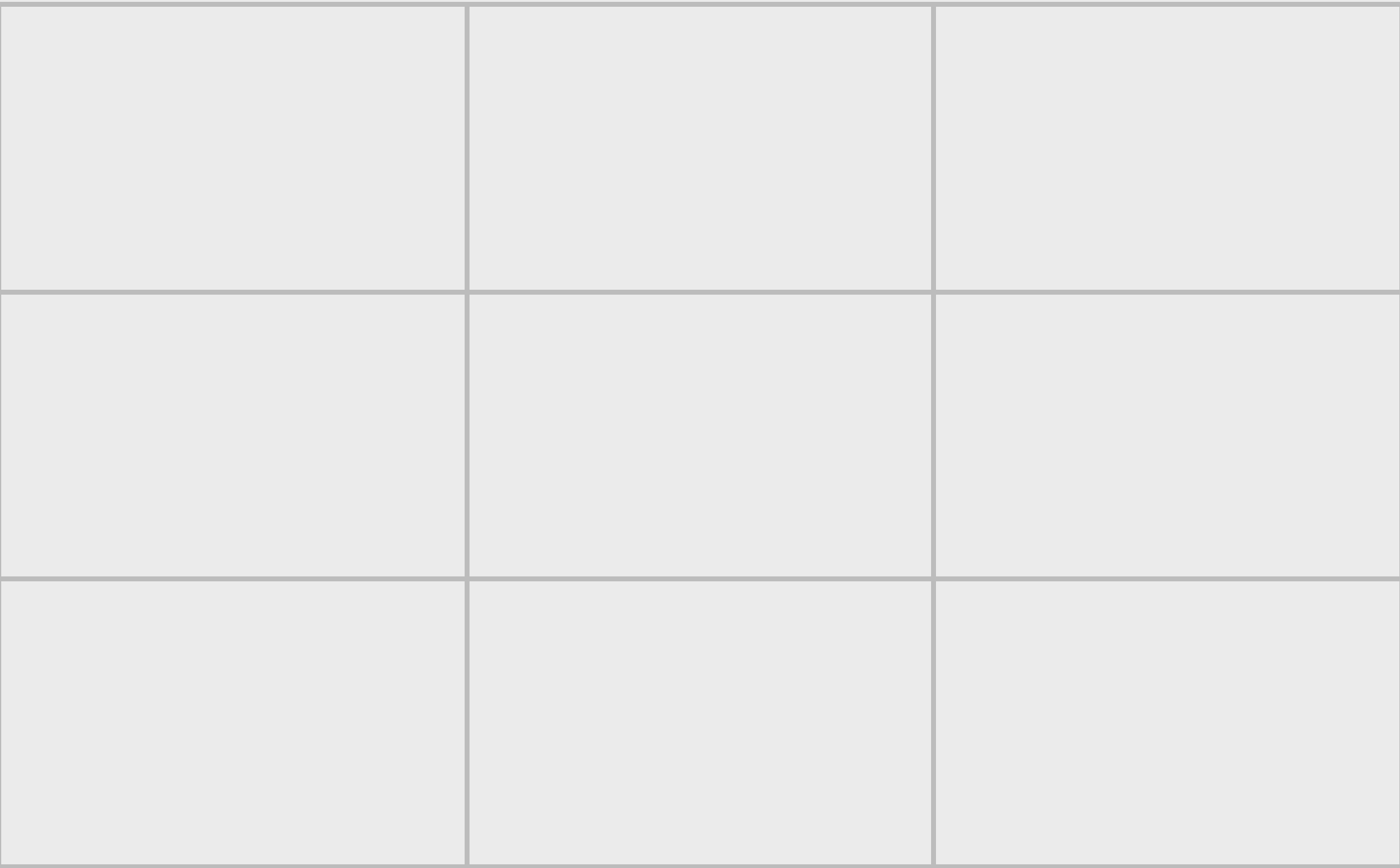


# Rules of Composition

- 1 Definition:** Rules of composition are based on directing your viewer's attention to a specific point of interest.
- 2 Disclaimer:** Rules of composition are not etched in stone, and are at best, a starting point to what we might consider traditional tried and true tested ways of working. But as the adage goes, rules are meant to be broken.
- 3 You Are An Artist:** In the end, your intuition is your greatest guide. You have to stick with what feels right to you and take the risk of breaking new ground. Your intuition may lead you down a path that may ruffle feathers. Don't give in to the critics; there's one around every corner.
- 4 Objective:** The purpose of this quick guide is to give you a go-to reference to occasionally check to keep your mind aware of these basic principles. With time you will be subconsciously, if not already, applying many of these basic rules of compositions. Like anything else, the more you make mistakes and practice, the better you will get.



# Rule of Thirds

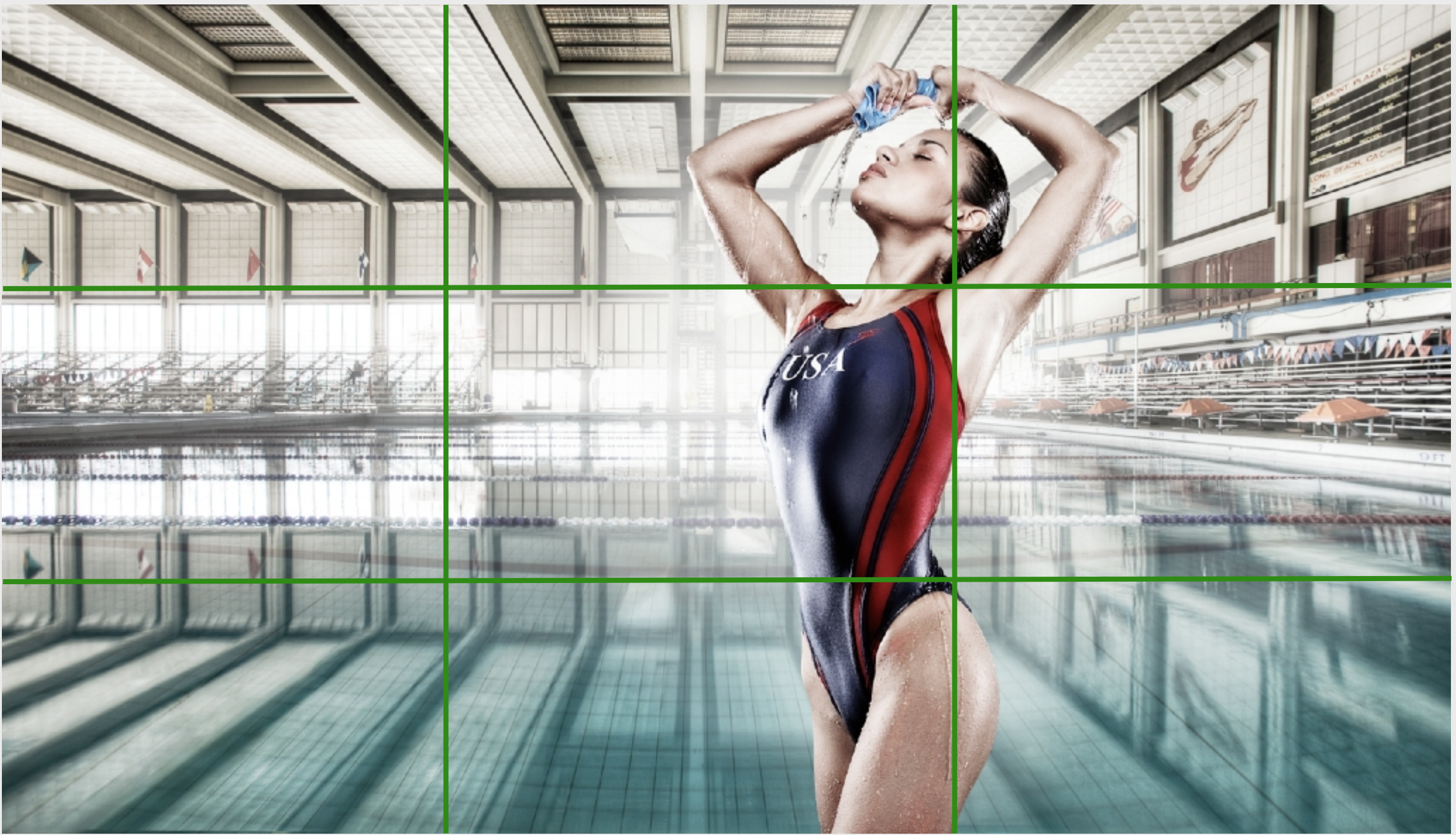


**The Rule of Thirds is probably the most commonly know or used rule of composition.** In my early days of photography, I definitely overused it, but it is very effective. It can work for many applications, especially in the Advertising arena, when type or copy is present. Most cameras have a setting where you can display this grid on your viewfinder or monitor.

By offsetting your dominant object or subject by one third, you make room for negative space that can draw your viewer's eye to the subject. It also sits gracefully in a horizontal rectangle canvas. I often try and put the subject's head close to the top-third intersection as well. Keep in mind you don't have to be exact with this; just use it as a general coordinate.



# Rule of Thirds



## **USA Olympic Diver shot on location in Long Beach, CA.**

I used three strobes with modifiers, two 36x48 soft-boxes with grids as the background edge lights, and one 21 inch beauty dish as the overhead light. My lens setting was at a 24mm position on a full-frame camera.



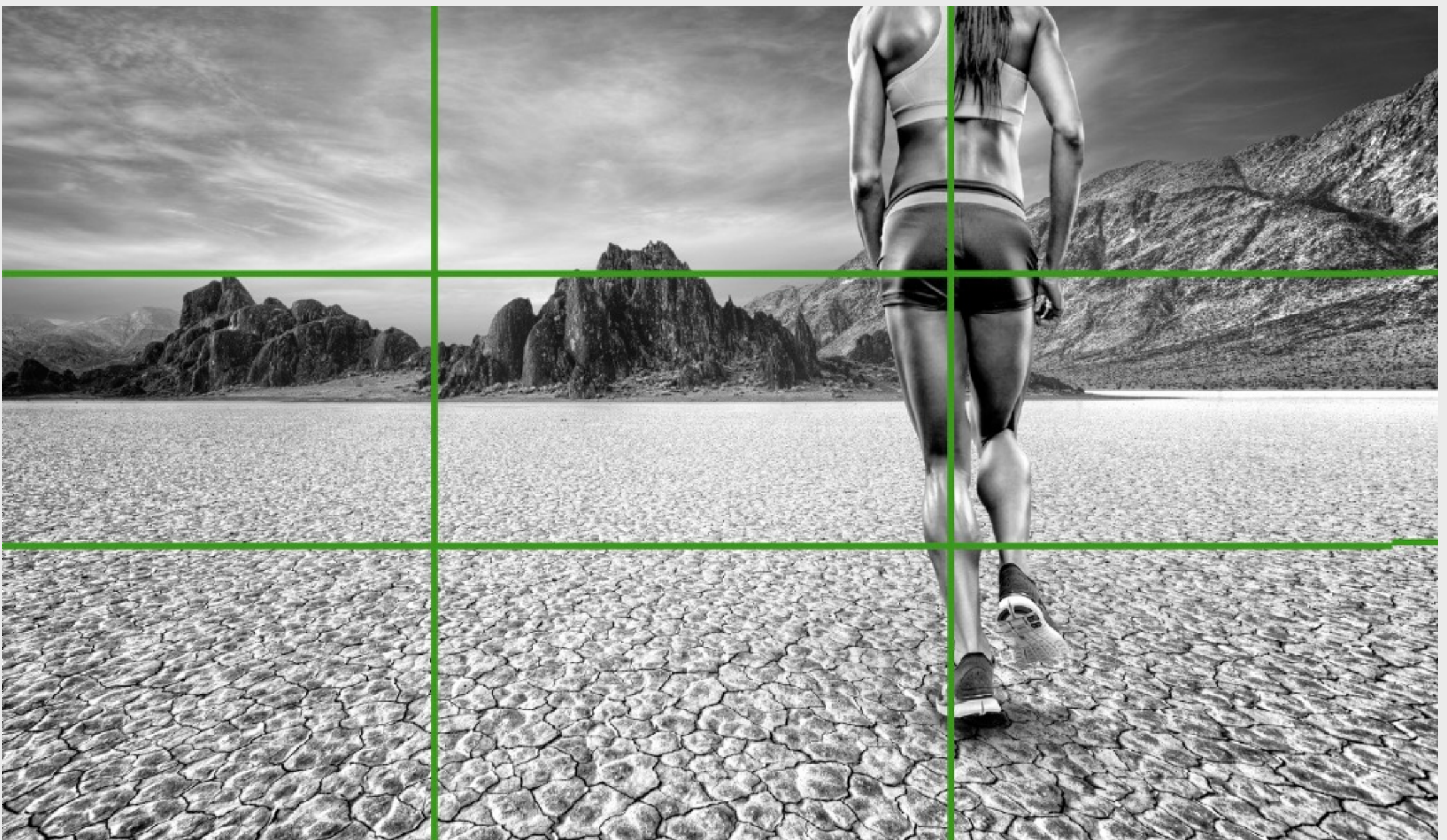
**Whether I am working in-camera or with a composite,** placing your subject correctly in your frame is critical. However, working with a composite can give you the freedom and time to reposition your subject until you have found the perfect placement. Either way, learn what works best for your style of photography.



# Rule of Thirds



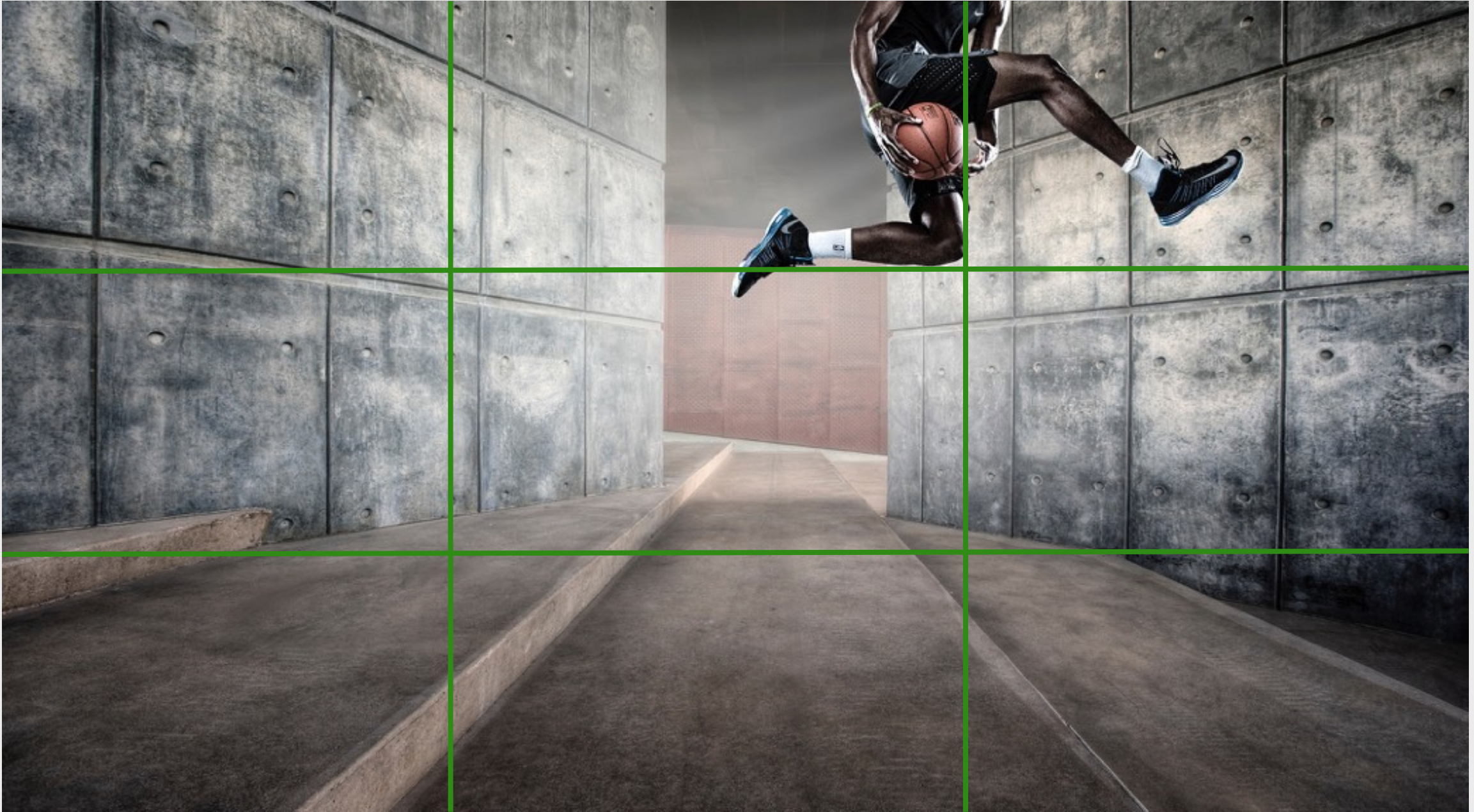
**The background image was created in Philadelphia** and the subject was shot in LA. I used my typical three light approach; two 36x48 soft boxes with grids as the background edge lights and one 21 inch beauty dish as the overhead light. The lens was set at 35mm on a full frame camera.



**This image was created for a national ad campaign** I did a few years back. I love working with sports subjects because they make great larger-than-life superheroes. It comes down to getting all the elements just right, from the subject, lighting, wardrobe, composition, background, lens choice, and so on.

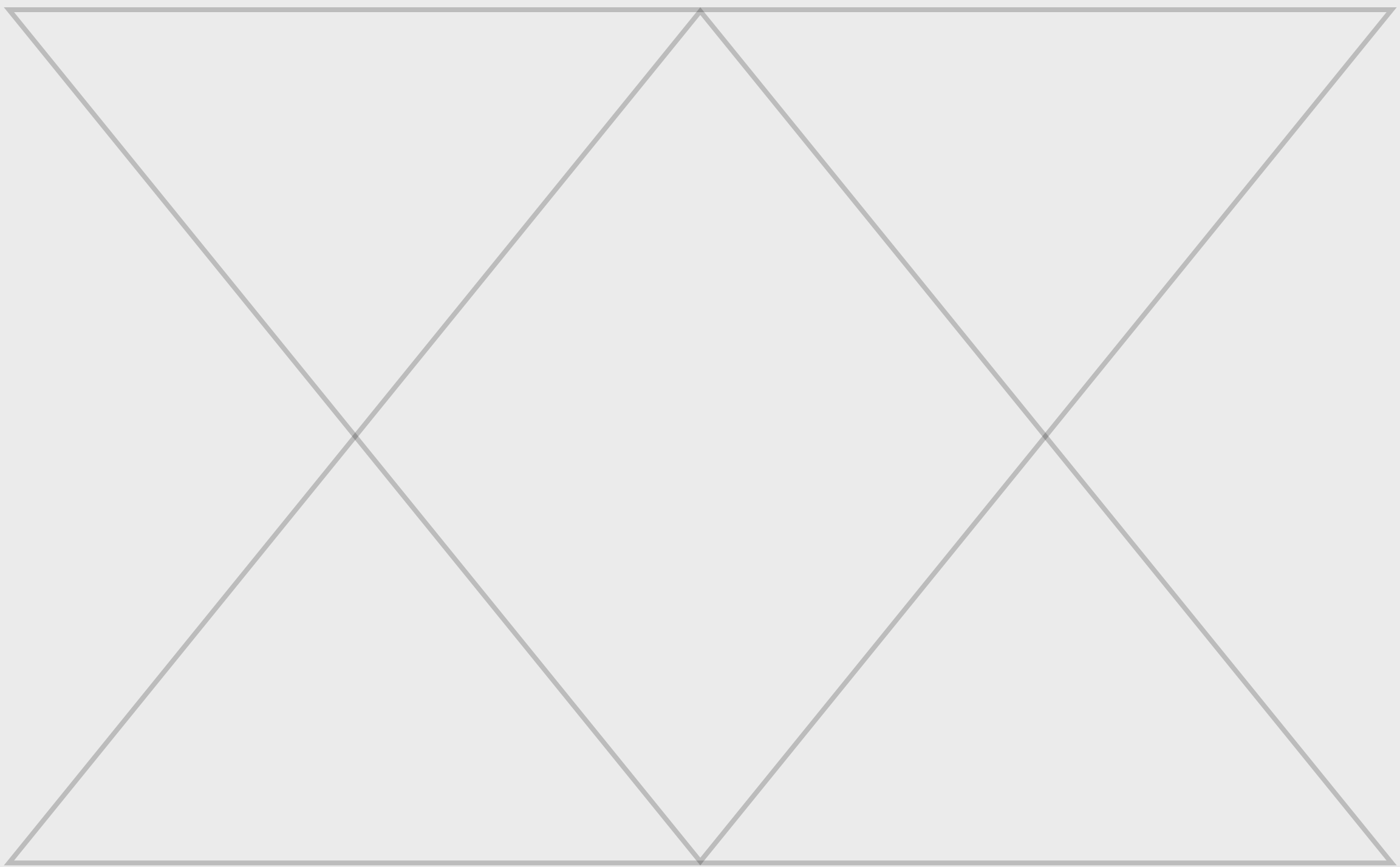


# Rule of Thirds



**Another sports scenario's for a national ad campaign.** And yes, I purposely cropped off the head . When I posted this image on my social media, half the folks said they hated it, and half said I was a genius. What does that tell you? Most importantly, I love it and am willing to take the heat from the haters.

# Triangles



**Next to the Rule of Thirds, the Rule of Triangles is probably my most go to compositions.** Triangles set up both form and balance and can direct your viewer's eye in the desired direction. If you think about it in the way, a triangle creates two anchor points and one off-setting adjacent point that can push the viewer into the desired direction.

It won't take long before you start seeing triangles in everything. Often, when I am photographing a subject, I will ask them to slightly adjust their arm or leg to enhance the shape of a triangle. Again, keep in mind that you are not looking for a perfect triangle; it is the basic concept of three reference points that direct the viewer in a desirable direction.



# Triangles



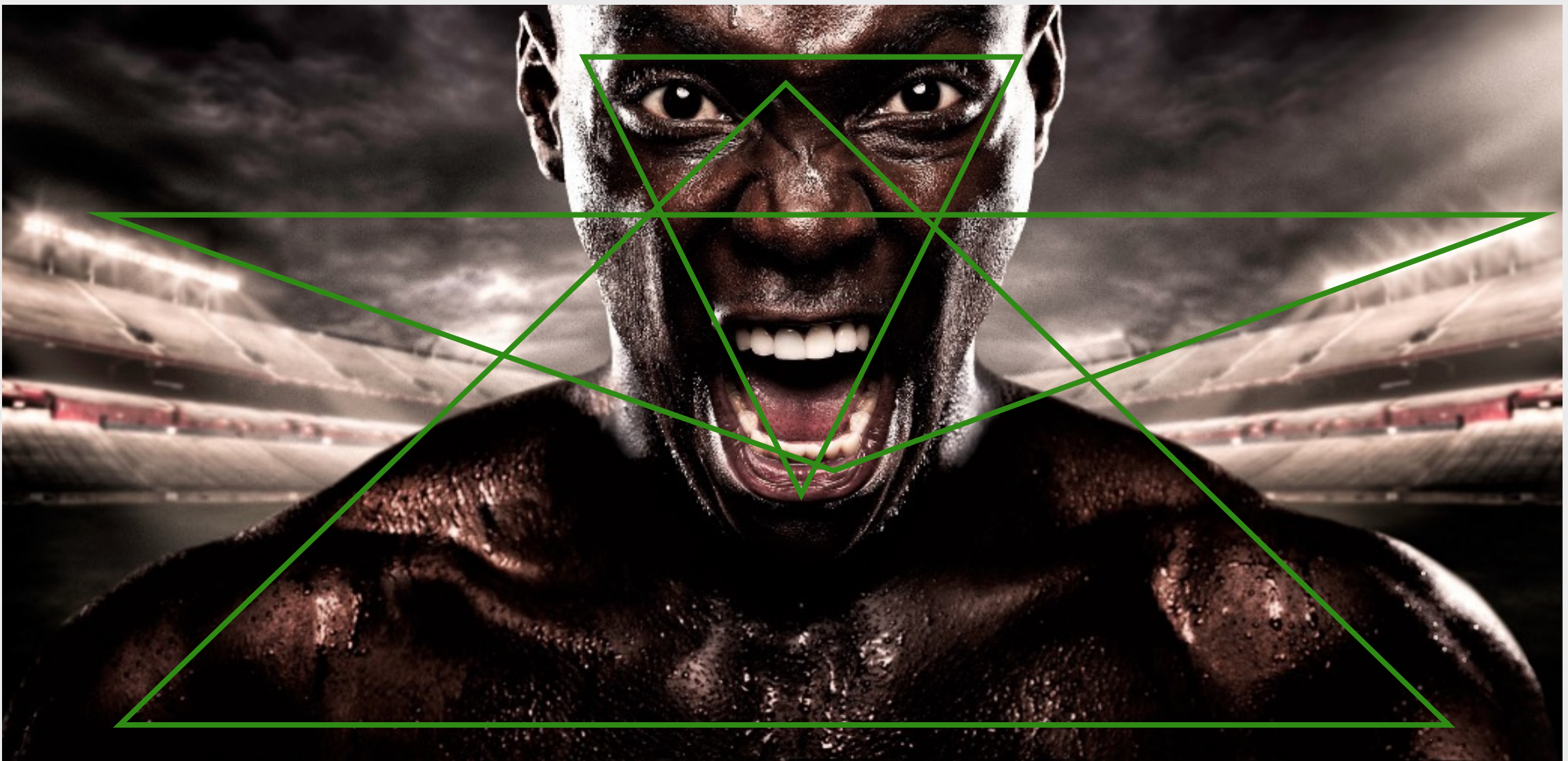
**This image is an excellent example of the use of opposing triangles.** Once you grasp this rule, soon, you will start seeing triangles in everything and, before long, start using them with great effect. As an exercise, go through some images and see if you can find some reference to triangles.



**Look at how many triangles are in this photo** to point to the subject's face. It may seem a bit exaggerated, but the use of triangles in this image was a very calculated conscience process. After over 45 years of creating images , this is something that now comes naturally.



# Triangles



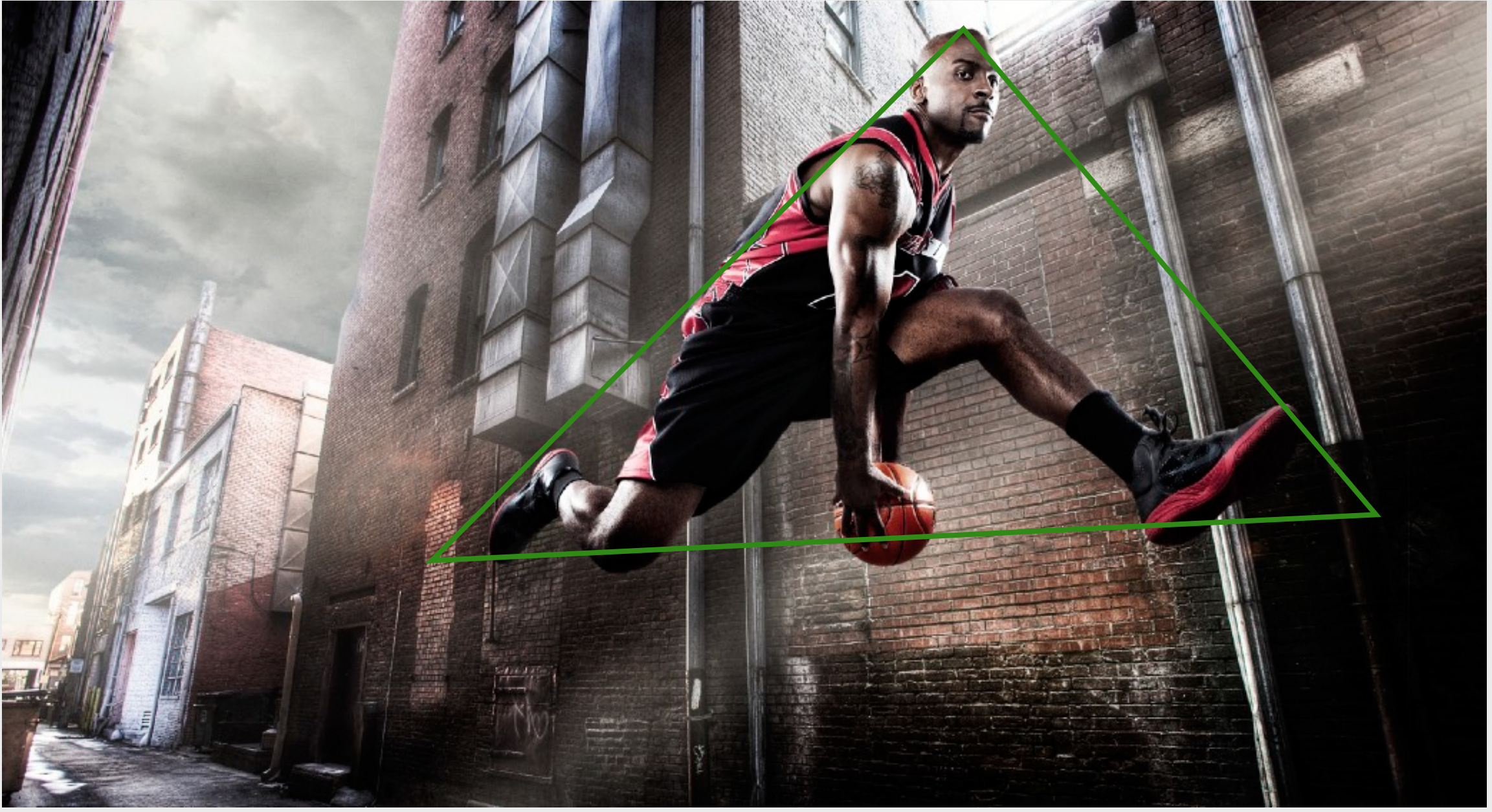
**Triangles, triangles, triangles**, they seem to be everywhere. You might go back to some of your existing images and see if you can find any triangles. I'll bet you can. It's a fun exercise.



**Remember the definition** of the Rules of composition. It's based on directing your viewer's attention to a specific point of interest. Force your viewer's eye in the direction of your main subject. In today's world, you have about two seconds to grab their attention.

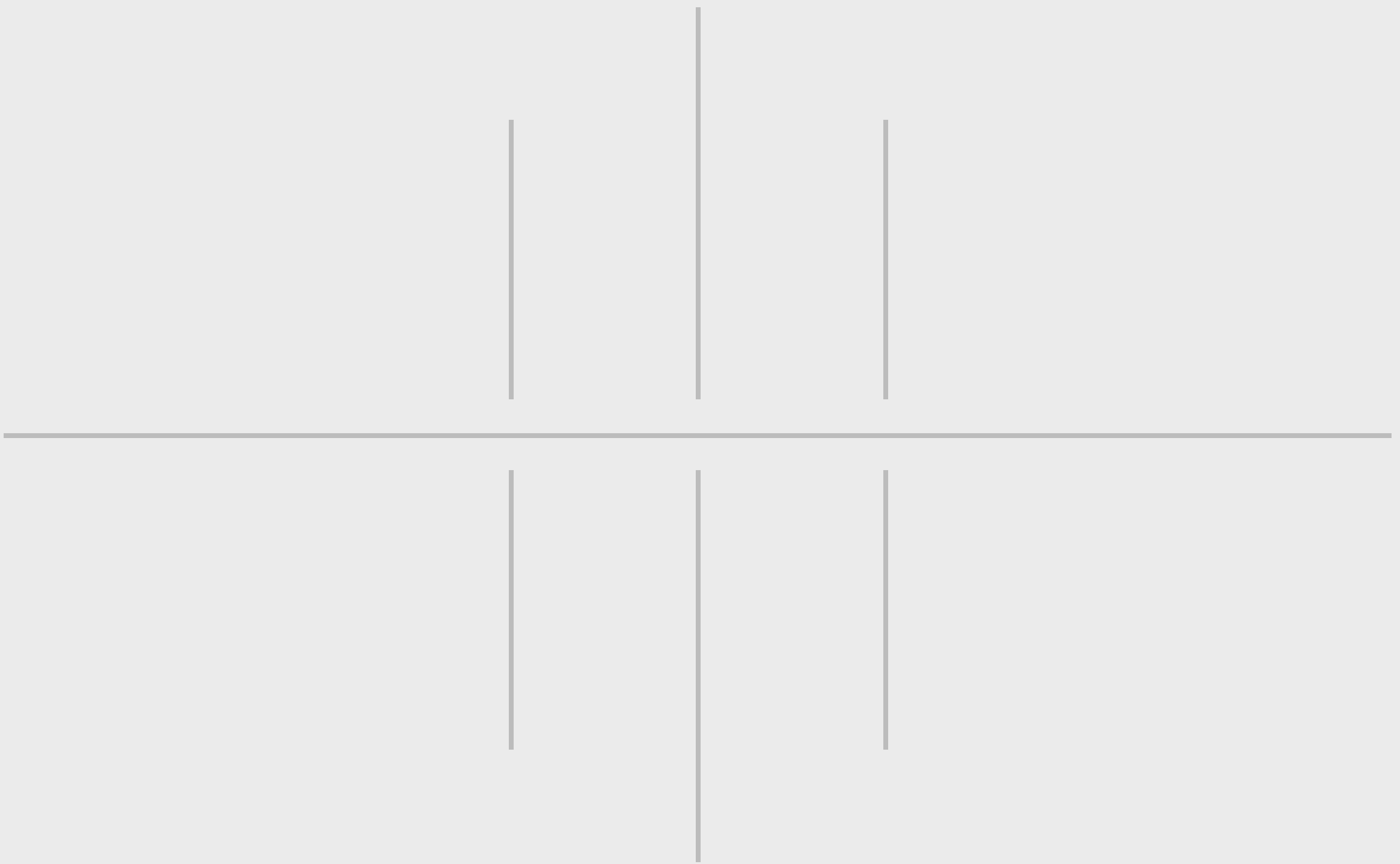


# Triangles



**Surprise, another triangle.** So simple but yet very powerful. What are the odds this athlete just miraculously jumped into a triangle position? Some times it can happen without any direction, but once you start looking for triangles, miracles happen.

# Symmetry



## **I also call this the Rule of Balancing Form.**

Generally, this is where you center your subject in the middle of the frame. When I was in photography school, I was taught never center your subject. However, for some reason I just felt comfortable placing my subject right smack in the middle of the frame. I have received my share of criticism over the years for this approach, but I am willing to take it on the chin.

If you place your subject in the middle of your frame, and have dominate elements in the background, it is best to arrange the scene to achieve a sense of balance. Again, this rule is not etched-in-stone.



# Symmetry



**There are also multiple triangles** in this image and converging lines resulting in a forced perspective. Many photographs will contain multiple rules of composition at one time. Centering the subject demands attention from your viewers. It is this in-your-face approach that I am personally drawn to.



**I could have tried to work this portrait into the Rule of Thirds**, but when I set my subject into this scene, I immediately sensed the overall balance of elements on both sides of him. I often know right away after I snap a few frames whether the overall composition is working.



# Symmetry



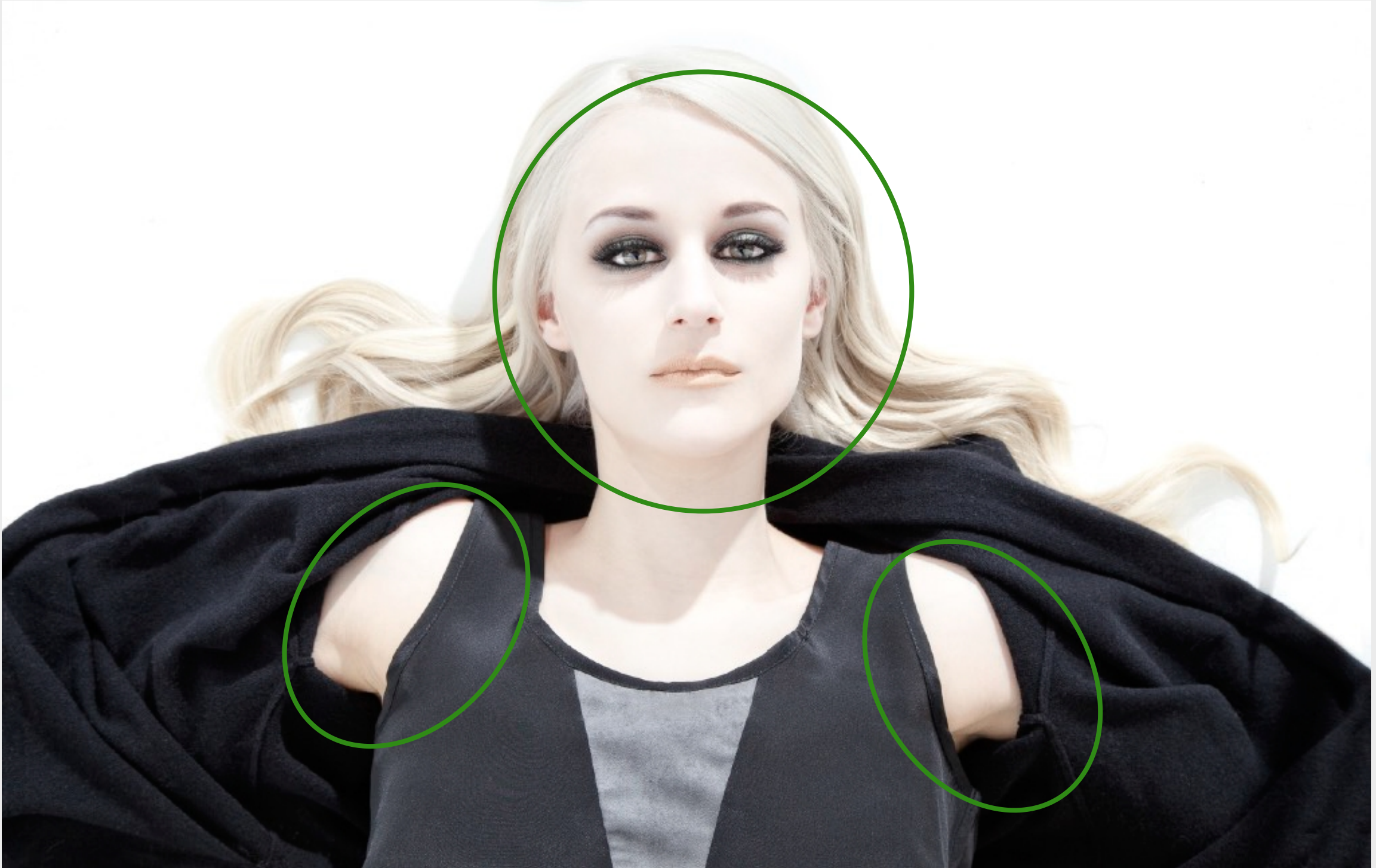
**It took a while to get the tulle to wrap perfectly** around my subject. There is also a triangle in this image that is directing the viewer's eye to her face. I like the idea that the red tulle almost takes on a feel and look of a rose.



**It is hard-pressed to get more symmetrical than this.** You have the Rule of Thirds, as well as a few triangles all leading to the subject. We also have what I call Stretched Perspective with the use of a wide-angle lens. Of course, with our naked eye, we don't see this. But in a photograph, it helps give a sense of depth.

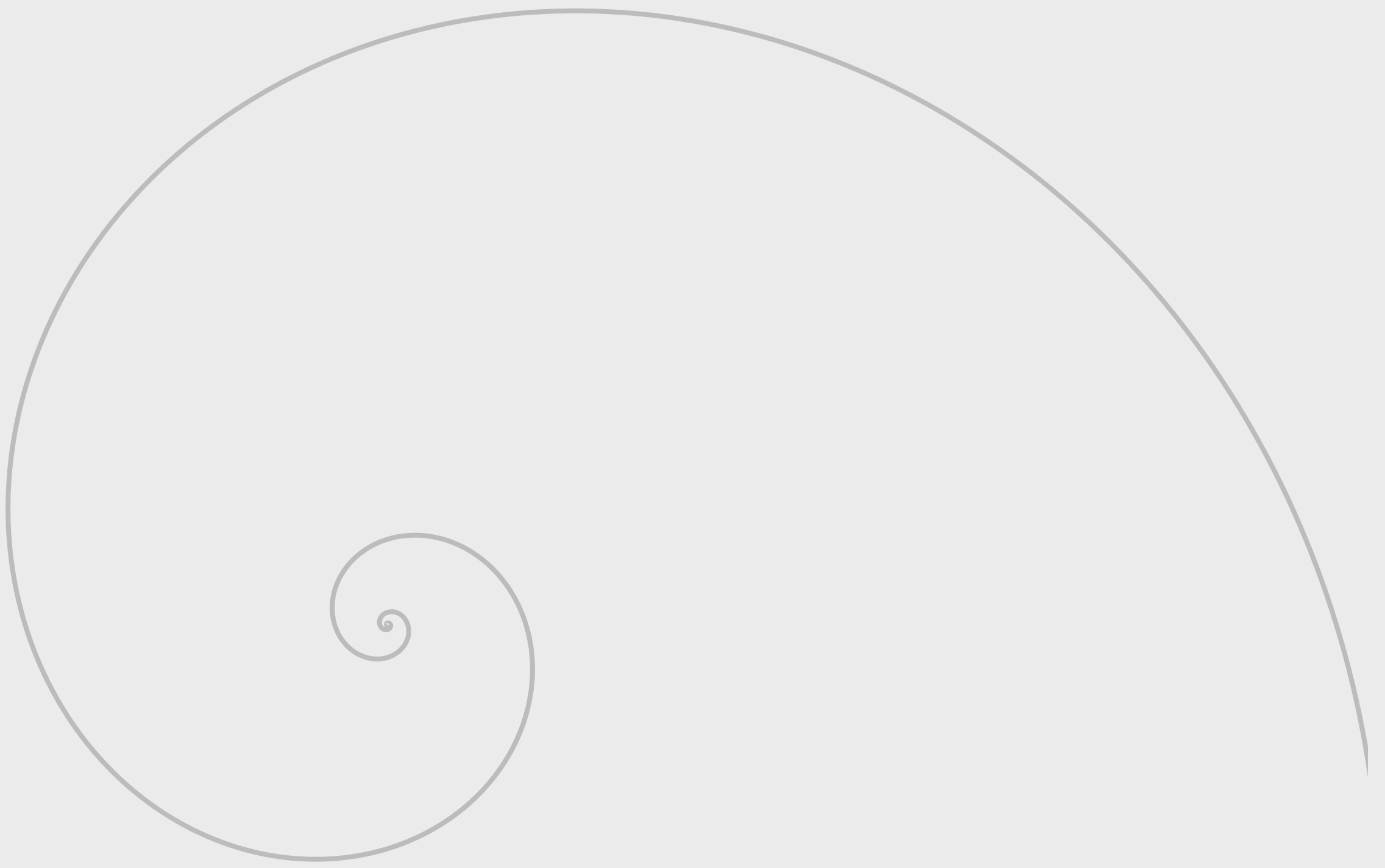


# Symmetry



**The hair, the arms, and the wardrobe** were are all set up to be very symmetrical. The two arm elements and the face also form a perfect triangle. We will be talking about the art of simplicity shortly.

# Golden Spiral



**The Golden Spiral can also be called the Golden Ratio,** or if you really want to impress folks use the term Fibonacci Spiral. Keep in mind that this is broke up into coordinates using a mathematical formula which most of us shy away from. However, subconsciously I use this rule all the time. In its simplest form, it is connecting your point of interest at the top coordinates of the Rule of Thirds, but the spiral uses an anchor point on the opposing side that balances the main subject.

Please don't get your calculator and slide ruler out to compose your photograph. Just use this composition rule as a guide in arranging subjects and elements.



# Golden Spiral



**Since the Golden Spiral is a mathematical grid system**, the goal is not to use it perfectly in your photo. But look at how you're eye follows the motion of the spiral to the subject. The bird on the right side is the opposing offsetting element.



**I typically don't shoot athletes in action**, but this image was for an ad campaign, and when the Art Director showed up, I was all set to shoot my typical portrait style. He said, "Oh, I didn't tell you; I want the athletes moving." This image is one of the results from that photoshoot. Look at the basketball as my opposing offsetting element.



# Golden Spiral



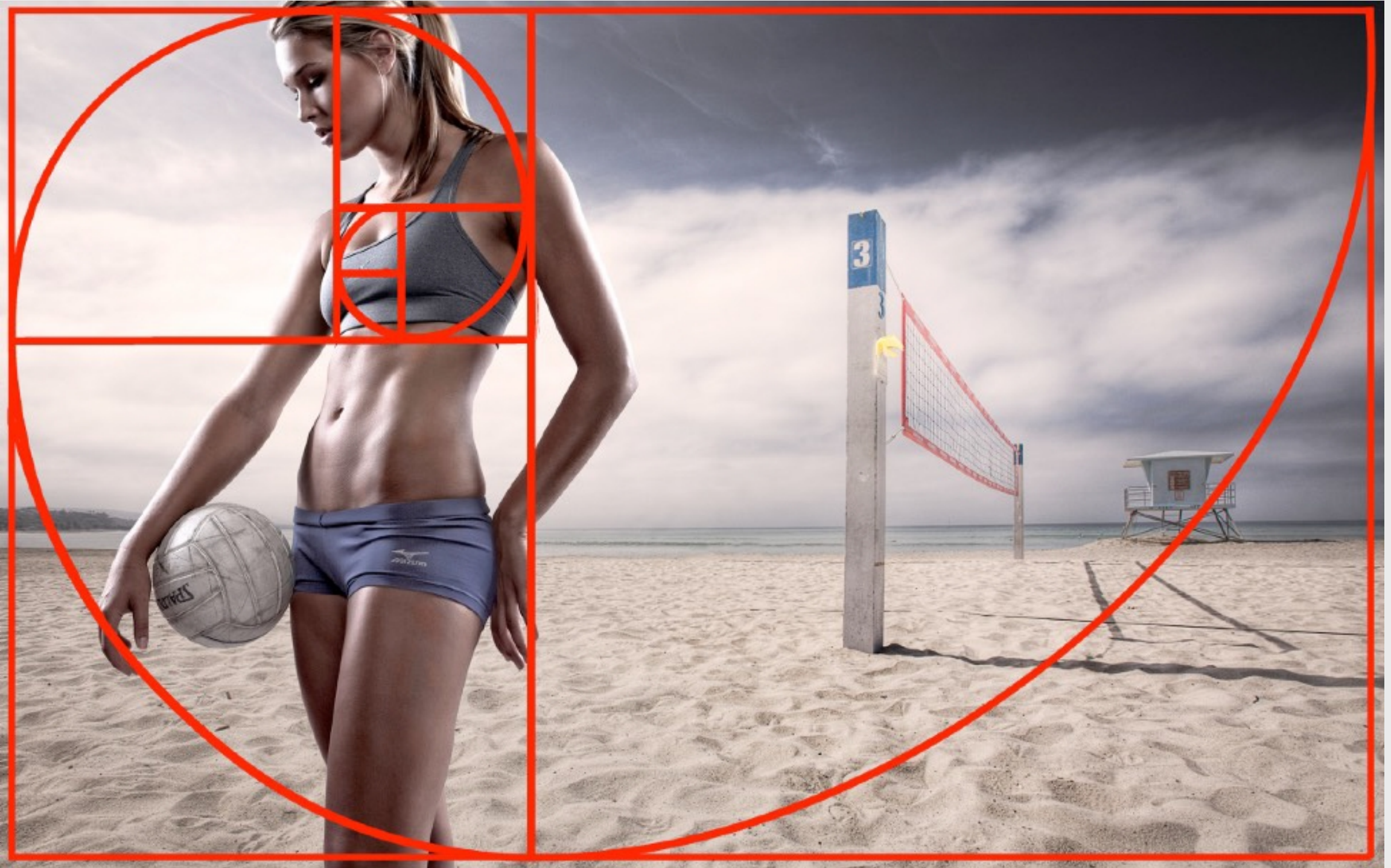
**Look how simple and powerful this composition is.** You can see the barn on the right side is the opposing offsetting element. We will be talking about the importance of keeping your image free of clutter shortly.



**Because in the English language we read from left to right**, in some ways, the Golden Spiral composition rule works even better, placing the main subject on the right side. However, In the advertising world, placing the subject on the left and the copy on the right, would direct your attention the copy.



# Golden Spiral



**One of my early sport subject scenarios.** Here we have the net and the life guard station as my offsetting opposing elements. You can see a triangle shape from the subject to the net to the guard station. Also, look at how this subject is creating a beautiful S curve. All these choices were deliberate decisions during the creative process.

# Foreground Dominate



I also call this the **Bold In-Your-Face Rule of Composition**. Maybe that title won't make it into photo history books, but it works for me. I also use what I call "Stretched Perspective" caused optically by using a wide-angle lens. This enlarges the foreground to enhance your eye to the face. You have to be very careful about how you use this approach. Over the years, this composition style has become something of a signature brand for me in my portrait work.

You don't have to always place your subject in the dead center of the frame, but generally, this is what I do. Play around with what fits your intuition, and you will find something that works for you.



# Foreground Dominate



**This is a very early image of one of my sports portraits.** I love this because it is a bold, impactful, no-nonsense approach. Remember, you have a very short time to win over your audience. This is something I keep in mind as I am creating my images



**Look how I have used a 24mm wide-angle lens** (on a full-frame camera) to stretch actor Dennis Haysbert's arms. This gives a sense of power, authority, and physical dominance. And, of course, we have a great example of the Rule of Triangles pulling your attention to his face.



# Foreground Dominate



**Here we have Rapper and Actor Mustafa** with this in-your-face dominant approach. Not to beat a dead-horse into the ground, but can you see the triangle caused by his jacket, which leads you to his face? We also have the use of Forced Perspective or Leading Lines, which we will be covering next.



**Foreground dominance in-you-face**, it's hard to top this type of approach to dramatic portraits. You can't approach every subject like this, but you have to admit this is a very effective way to get your viewer's attention.



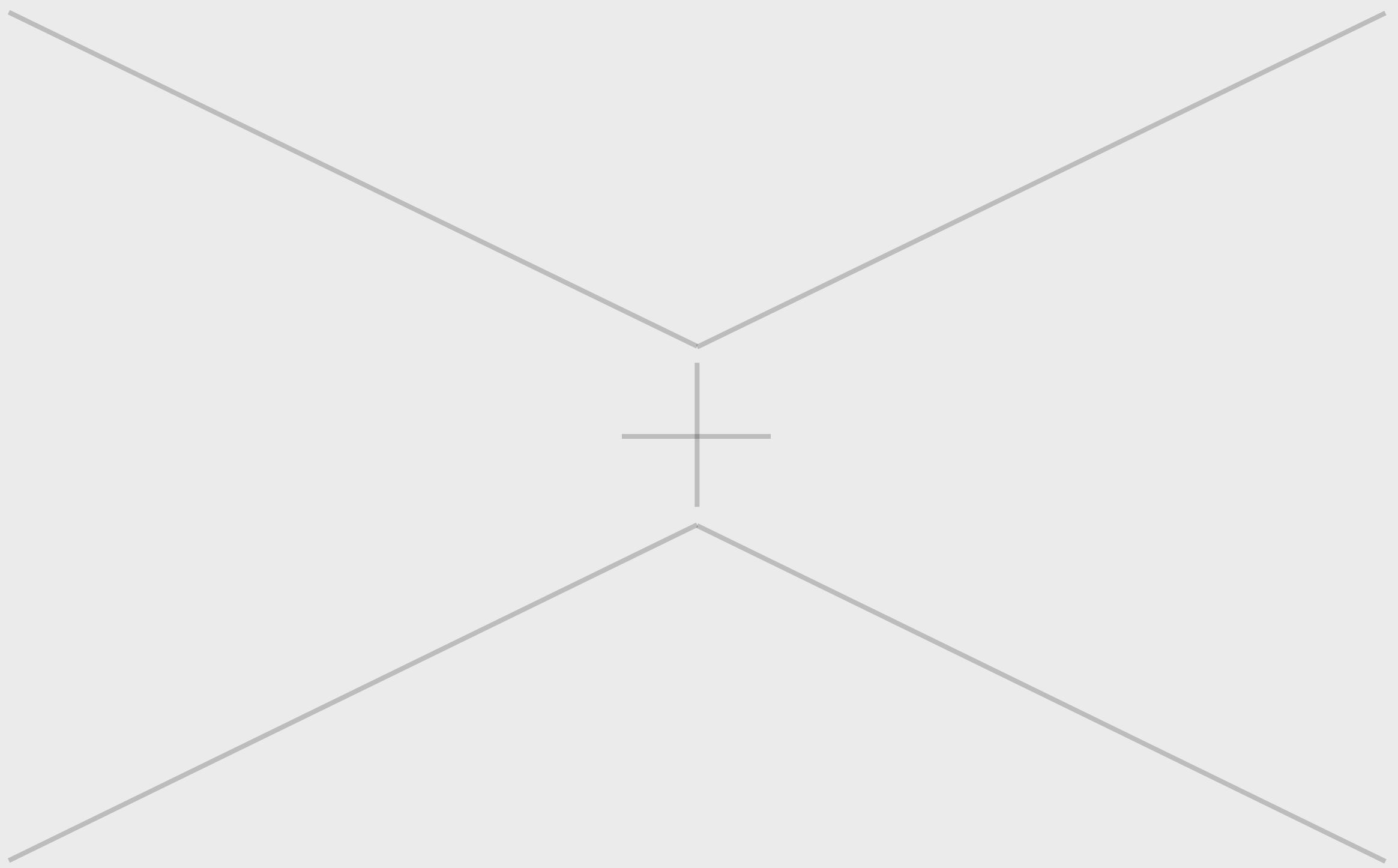
# Foreground Dominate



**One of the reasons this in-your-face approach is so effective** comes down to the lighting choices I use. The right light on a subject can set the overall mood of your final image. I realize the creative process can be overwhelming, but with time and a ton of practice, it all starts to come together.



# Leading Lines

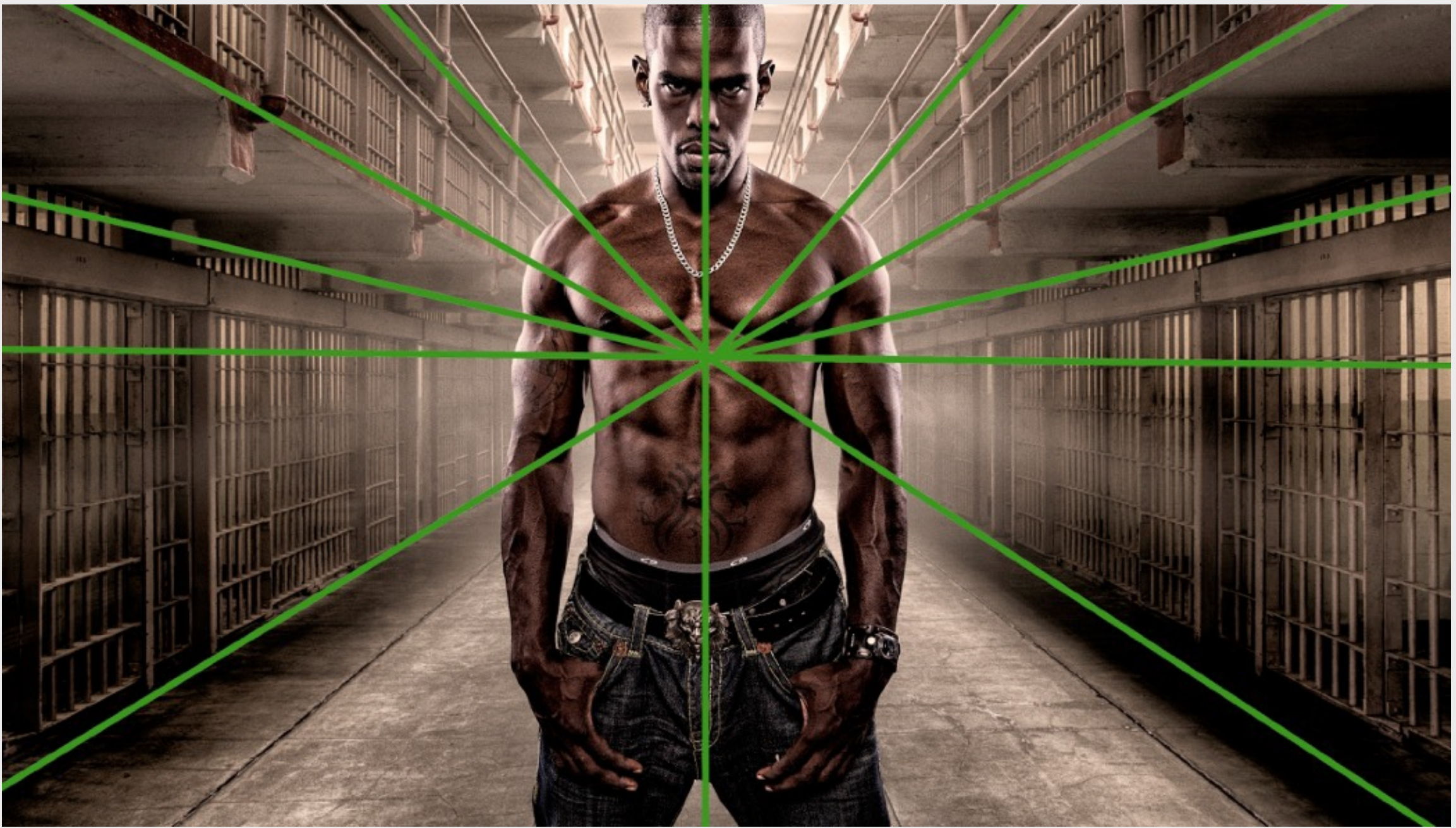


**I also call the Rule of Leading Lines the Rule of Forced Perspective.** This is a traditional way of drawing your viewer's attention towards your subject. Forced Perspective generally has similar lines coming in from both sides, where Leading Lines could just come in from one side. Basically, you are using the background lines to drive your attention in a specific direction.

You don't have to always place your subject in the dead center of the frame, but generally, this is what I do. Play around with what fits your intuition, and you will find something that works for you.



# Leading Lines



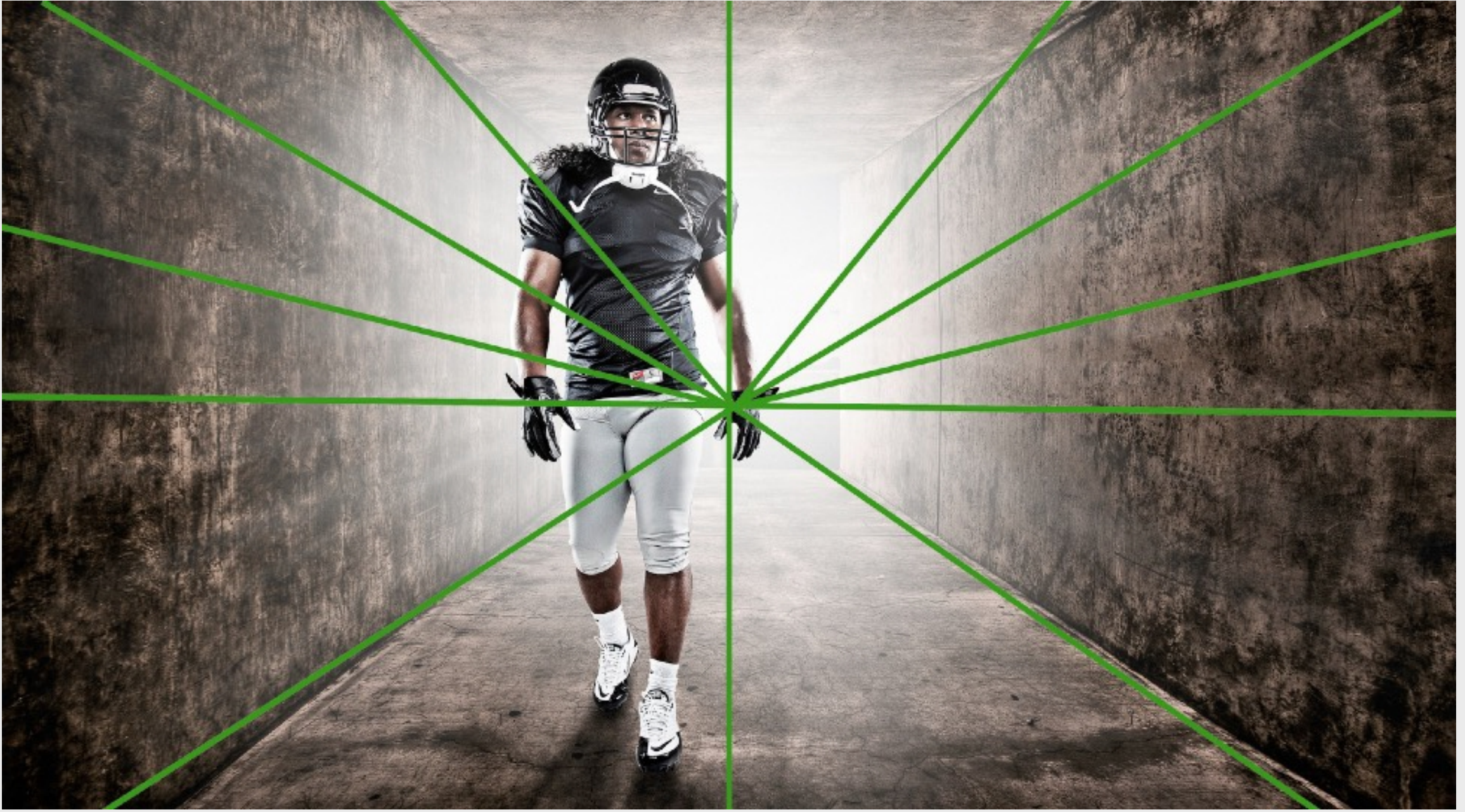
**There is no mistake as to where the viewer's attention** is to be directed . All the converging lines point to the subject. Keep in mind that overstating the viewer's direction may not always be the best approach. Your artistic vision may need to be more subtle.



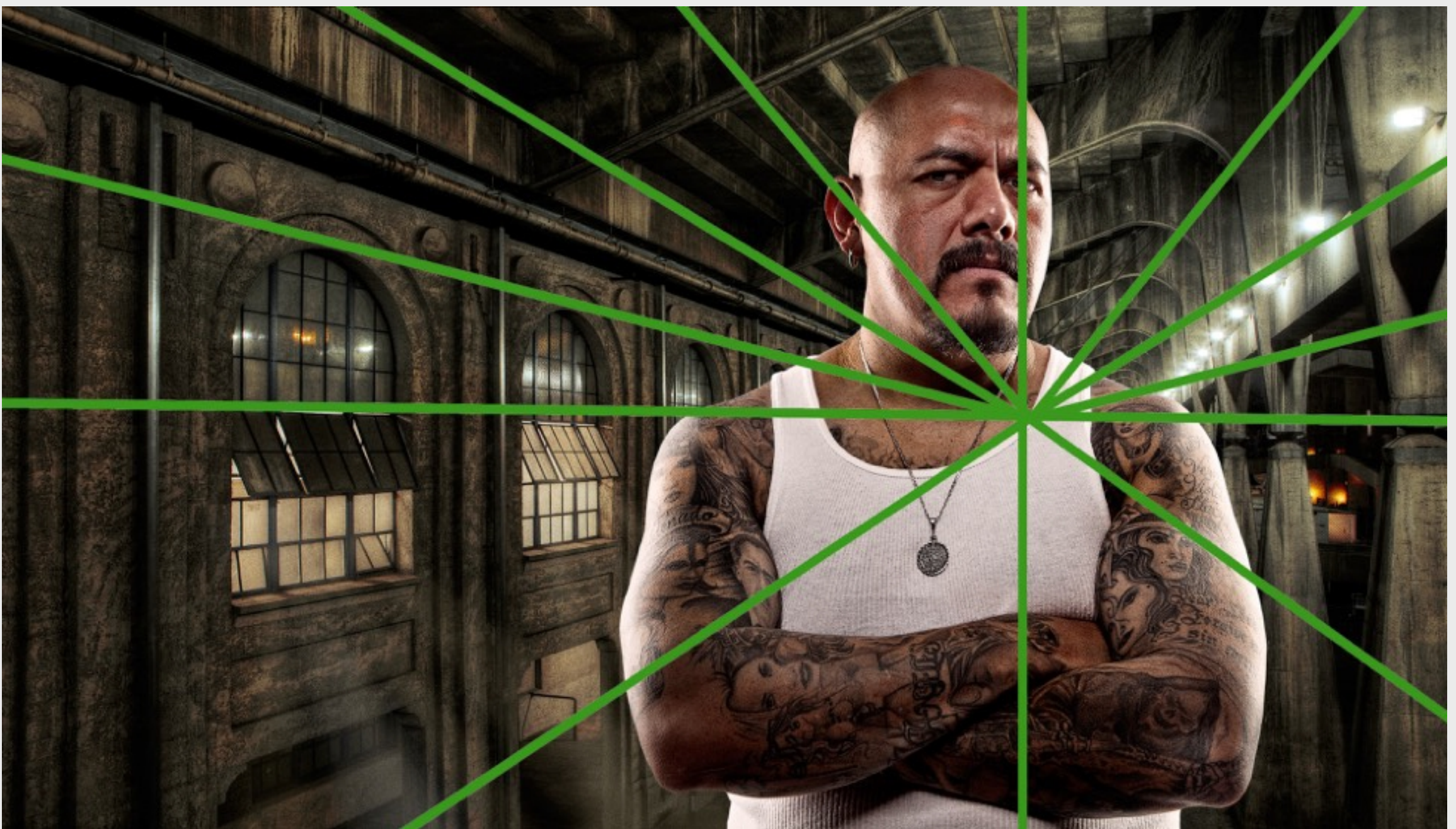
**Often when I am setting up a portrait** or creating a composite background, I look for the leading lines. It's not hard to find leading lines in buildings or structures, but we can also find them in nature.



# Leading Lines



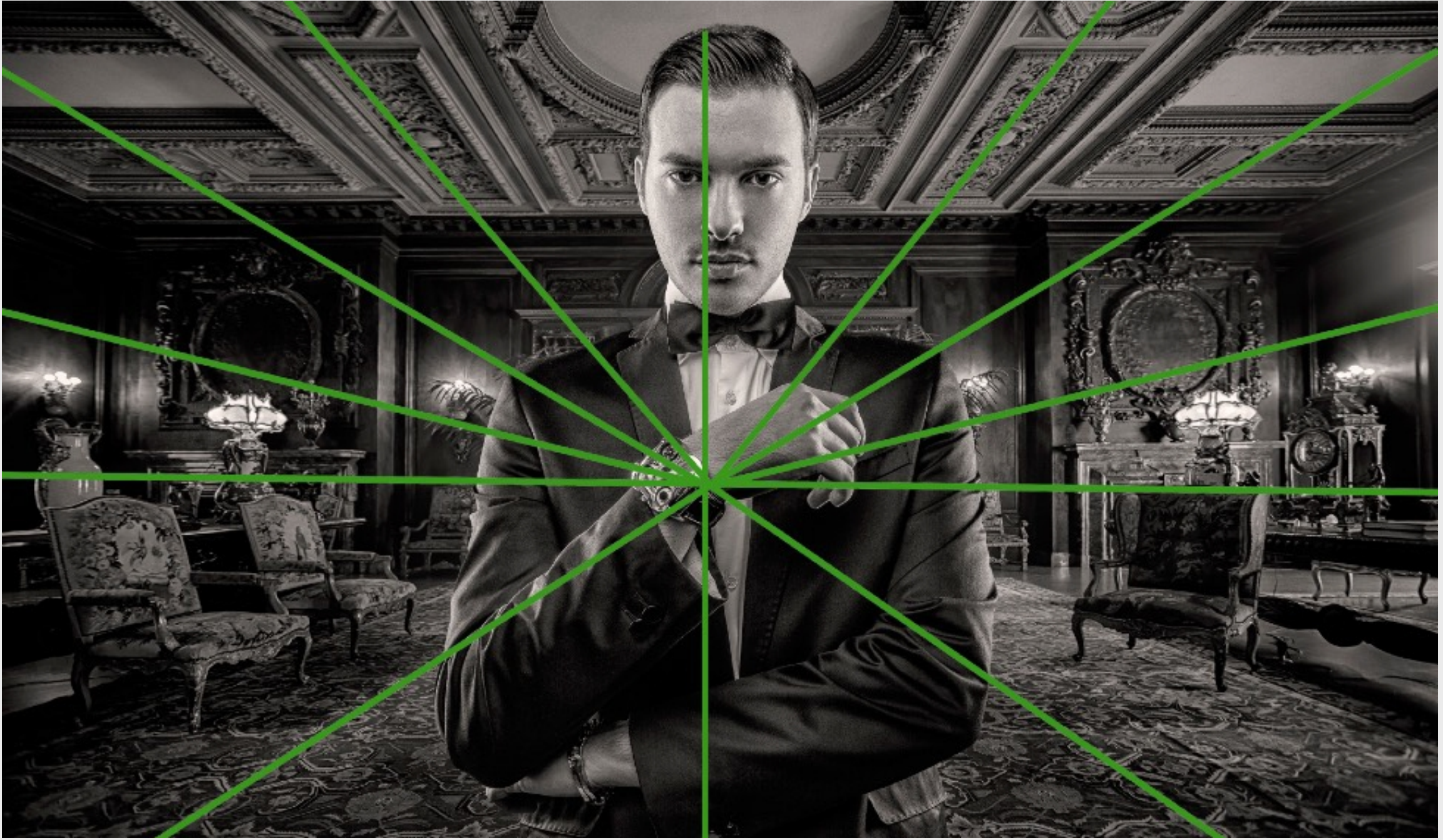
**Some of my best examples of Leading Lines** are with my sports portraits . Stadiums, tunnels, street scenes, etc., make for amazing backgrounds to place your subjects.



**Leading Lines force your eye directly to your subject.** To me, it is like a Rule of Composition on steroids. This may be a bit too bold for some people's taste, but this is why we are all drawn toward approaching our creative vision differently.

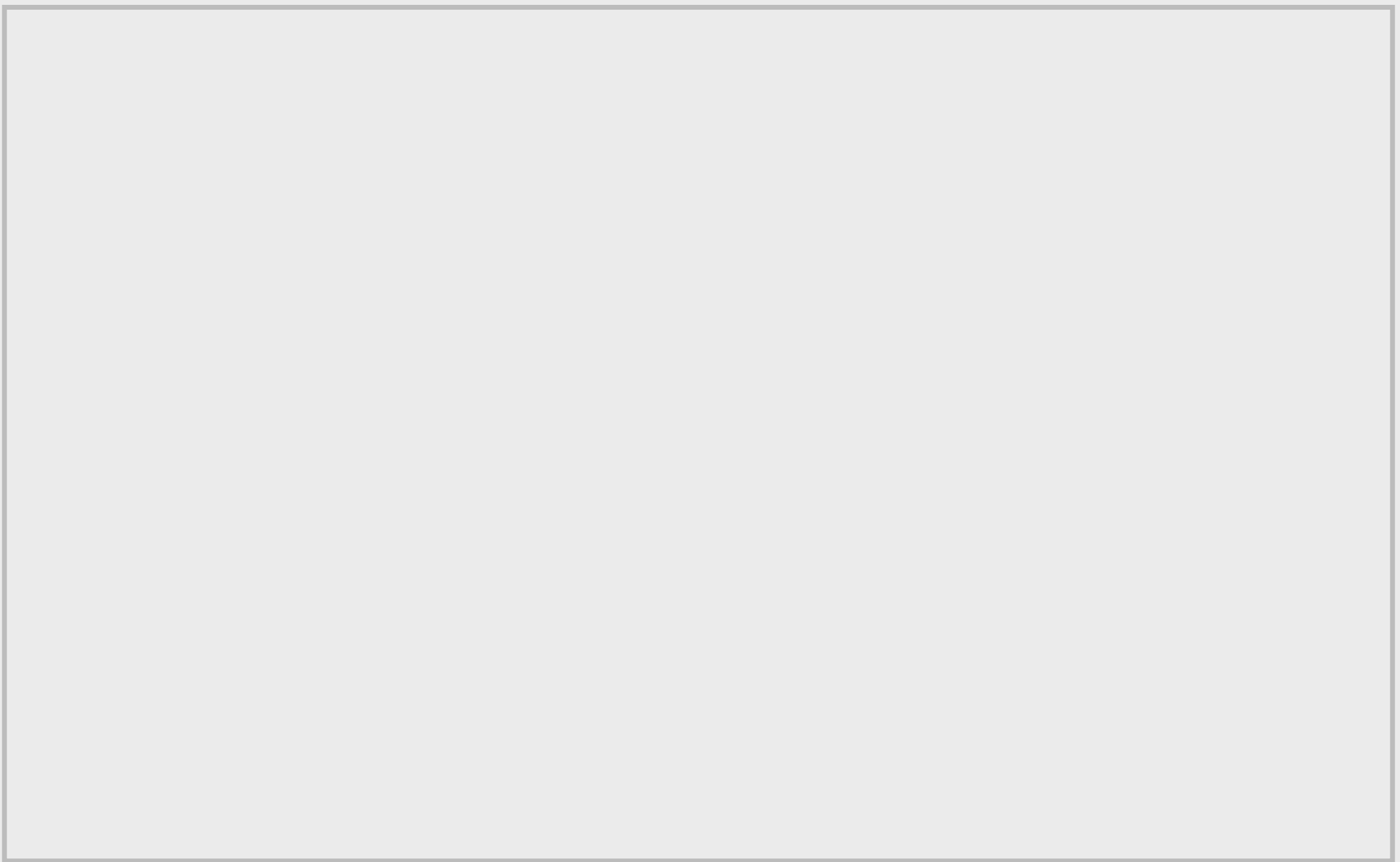


# Leading Lines



**Notice how I, at all cost, avoid running a horizontal line** through the eyes or the mouth of my subjects. And I never have the very tip top of the head touching or intersecting a horizontal line or object. Look at how I have placed my subject's head.

# Eliminate Clutter



**Eliminating clutter from my images has been a 40-year battle.** Remember our definition of the Rules of Composition? "Directing your viewer's attention to a specific point of interest." Keeping your image from distractions is a daunting task, but it is always on my mind. It is impossible to be 100% clutter-free, especially if you are doing an environmental portrait. But look at your images and ask the question, "Is there anything in this image that could be a distraction to my viewers, and is it possible to eliminate it."

Also, watch your corners or edges of your image. In the early days of learning photography I was guilty of letting unwanted things like branches, signs, objects just slightly creeping into my frame. Watch the edges of your image!



# Eliminate Clutter



**When I look for a background to place my subjects,** I often look for the most clutter-free option available . I pre-scouted this location and knew exactly where the sun would strike the horse and cowboy. This image does not fall 100% into the Rule of Thirds, but close enough for my taste.



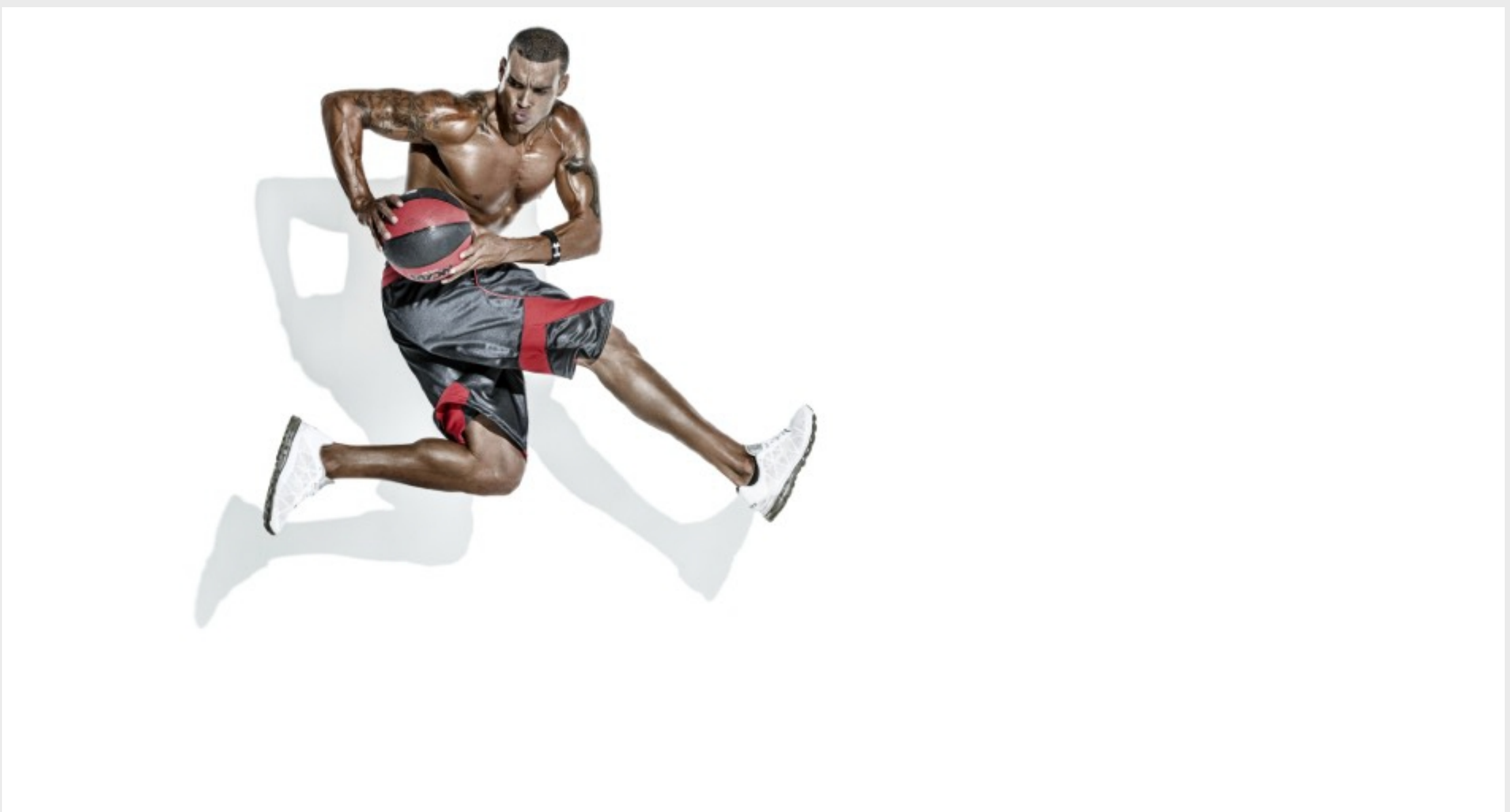
**Here is an example of a simple, clutter-free portrait.** The table's converging lines draw attention to the subject's face . I purposely place Olympic Gold Medalist Kerron Clements in a black turtleneck sweater to minimize distractions from his face. Notice how the background is nondescript, adding to the simplicity of the whole look and feel of this portrait.



# Eliminate Clutter



**For this image, I strobed my subject in the water**, which allows me to darken the background making her stand out. I also used a longer focal length lens in conjunction with a shallow depth of field, which smooths out the foreground and background helping to draw your attention to her face.



**In creating impactful images, I love the use of solid color** backgrounds; in this case, all white. It's hard to get a more clutter-free scenario than this. The subject's shadow creates a hint of depth, which adds to the overall impact of this image.

# Eliminate Clutter



**Grab a subject, a black piece of cloth, and a dark gray background**, and let the magic begin. You don't have to be a creative genius to make impactful images. By eliminating clutter, you can work with light, form, and positioning your subject until it falls into place.



**Now it is time to go out and create some amazing images, and maybe in the process, break a few of the rules! Happy shooting.**



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