

MOUNTAIN MAN

AS THE ONLY ATHLETE TO WIN A MEDAL IN EVERY DISCIPLINE AT THE FIS ALPINE WORLD SKI CHAMPIONSHIPS, LASSE KJUS IS ONE OF THE MOST HIGHLY DECORATED SKIERS OF ALL TIME. NOW PIONEERING A NEW WAVE OF TECHNICAL SKIWEAR, HE TALKS WORLD RECORDS, OLYMPIC MEDALS AND CAREER-DEFINING DEFEATS

Words: Hugh Francis Anderson



It's not every day that one has the opportunity to interview athletic royalty, let alone a skier from a remote mountain range in the middle of Norway. However, as I soon learn, there is little ordinary about former alpine ski racer Lasse Kjus. We're in the depths of the Sunnmørsalpane mountains, testing some of the new kit for his acclaimed skiwear brand Kjus (pronounced 'shoos'), and though his

professional career may have ended some 13 years ago, his athleticism is still that of a champion. He charges up the mountain ahead of me, his legs powerful from a lifetime of racing.

Born in Oslo but raised in the small village of Siggerud, Kjus' entire life revolved around skiing. Both his older brother and sister competed as juniors, and his father even built a 137m slalom course in the village, complete

with a rope-lift. "My parents told me I started to walk with ski poles when I was two years old and that I started to ski when I was three," recounts Kjus, who won his first race just five years after his initial brush with skiing, aged eight. "As a kid, I remember going to the slalom alone after school. I knew where my dad kept the key for the lift, so I would open it and go up and down until my dad realised where I was."

Switzerland, a feat that cemented his spot in the senior team, despite his young age. "I was young, self-confident, and I think I was almost too young at the time to know what it all meant," says Kjus of his senior World Cup debut. "I was given the opportunity to race and I took it and went down fast. Back then no one knew me, and no one was expecting anything of me. I had nothing to lose."

Yet just a year later, in August 1991, Kjus would suffer the worst crash of his life while on a training camp in Chile, and it would be another two years before he found his feet again. "I dislocated my shoulder and tore the nerve controlling my right deltoid muscle," he says. "With my deltoid permanently paralysed, the doctor told me that would hinder the use of my left arm forever and announced that my career as a professional skier was probably over." Though the recovery was both physically and mentally exhausting, Kjus was able to train the muscles surrounding his deltoid to do the work for it. Although this was successful in terms of skiing, the injury led to the permanent loss of full mobility. It's staggering to think, then, that just 18 months later the skier was competing again, and was even able to win a gold medal at the 1993 Morioka World Championships in the combined event.

A year later, at the tender age of 23, Kjus won his first and only Olympic gold at his home Games in Lillehammer. Though the crash of 1991 had signalled the end of his burgeoning racing career, his stubbornness, determination and sheer physical domination put him back at the very top. "Winning gold that year was a real turning point for me and marked the end of a challenging couple of years in my career," he agrees. "It was the beginning of me really getting back on track and starting to improve once again."

Remarkably, while Kjus was achieving success in the combined event (a combination of both slalom and downhill races), he was also competing across all alpine disciplines, a feat some claimed to be sheer lunacy due to the vastly different natures of the speed disciplines (downhill and super G – super giant slalom) and technical disciplines (slalom and giant slalom). "I always wanted to do the technical disciplines, especially giant slalom – it was always the event I loved the most and what I wanted to succeed in the most," he explains. "However, my ▶



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ALL IMAGES
LASSE KJUS ON A
SKI TOUR OF THE
SUNNMØRSALPANE
MOUNTAINS,
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While it's certainly not unusual for Norwegians to spend their childhoods on the slopes – the country boasts one of the best climates for skiing – as time went on, Kjus' natural prowess became increasingly evident. In 1990, at just 19 years old, he achieved one gold, two silver and two bronze medals at the Junior World Ski Championships in Zinal,



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By the time Kjus retired in 2006, aged 35, he was already firmly prepared for life after skiing. After his success at Vail in 1999, he co-founded his eponymous technical skiwear brand. “I had felt for a while that no one in the skiwear market was focused on technical, functional garments; instead it was all fashion-driven. To me it was an obvious gap in the market and I wanted to be the one to fill it.”

Together with co-founder Didi Serena, Kjus set about developing garments that merge style and technology, finding many references in golf-wear (namely four-way stretching fabric), which the brand also produces. “My goal was to create the most technologically advanced skiwear on the market; to set a whole new standard for skiwear,” says Kjus. “The rest, as they say, is history, and I have never looked back.” ■

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► coaches motivated me to do the speed disciplines, and I ended up having a talent for those too.”

The athlete went on to achieve the one thing that nobody thought possible, or indeed has ever achieved since: in 1999, at the World Championships in Vail, Colorado, Kjus became the first and only person in the history of alpine skiing to medal in all five disciplines at the event.

“When people talk about the challenge of succeeding in a championship across lots of disciplines, they talk about ‘resetting’ between every race. For me, it was about continuing,” he explains. “I got a medal, I forgot about it and moved on to the next. It was about staying in the zone and not giving myself time to stop and think about the medal I had won. When the championship was over, that’s when I stopped and enjoyed it.”

Throughout his racing career, Kjus achieved a total of 16 Olympic and World Championship medals. It’s now been 13 years since he stopped competing on the slopes and he admits the game is vastly different today – largely due to advances in equipment production and design. “The skiing we did in the early 1990s wouldn’t even be good enough to compete at junior level today,” he agrees. “Take the 100m sprint, for example; generally the performance and the times stay relatively stable from year to year – it is different today because of the massive role equipment plays. By using better performing equipment, and adapting your techniques to that new equipment, as a pro skier you can keep improving.”