

Lasse Kjus

Since retiring from racing, the 16-time World Cup and Olympic medalist has focused on his own line of high-performance skiwear. **BY EDIE THYS MORGAN**

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Kjus (left and above left) credits his business success to “partnering with good people” like Bode Miller (above right), a brand ambassador for Lasse’s skiwear.

The sign outside Gorsuch’s Ski Shop in Vail reads “Meet Lasse Kjus,” and it stops me in my tracks. I barely overlapped with Kjus on the World Cup circuit, making my exit the same year he won his first World Championship gold, in 1993. Later, I followed him as a reporter for *SKI* and *Ski Racing*, while he and his Norwegian teammate Kjetil Andre Aamodt mounted their parallel siege on the precious medals of the ski world. Kjus’s 16 World Championship and Olympic medals are second only to Aamodt’s 20. Despite that success, I remember Kjus—pronounced LAH-seh CHOOCE—as being funny, down-to-earth, friendly and shockingly humble. That reputation, more than his legendary athletic accomplishments, makes me veer into the store.

The smile is as warm as I remembered, and a gray and grizzled beard only adds to his look, best described as Super Mountain Man Casual. We chat a bit about Kjus Wear, which he is on tour to promote. From Aspen and Vail he is headed to Park City and Deer Valley. Since starting in 1999, Kjus (the clothing) has evolved into a thriving business that Kjus (the man) embraced as a full-time occupation after he retired from ski racing in 2006. When I ask why he has succeeded in the finicky apparel market, Lasse answers with typical humility. “It’s all about partnering with good people.”

Kjus seems to have a knack for finding them. In his hometown of Siggerud, Kjus’ father, along with other parents, built a 40-yard slalom slope for the neighborhood kids. By the time he was 7 or 8 years old, he had met Kjetil Andre Aamodt, the boy who would become his best friend and closest competitor. The pair burst onto the international ski scene in 1990 at the World Junior Championships, where both medaled in all four events. A year later, Kjus suffered a serious injury that caused permanent damage to his shoulder and slowed, but did not derail, his neck-and-neck progress with Aamodt.

As four-event skiers on the World Cup tour, Kjus and Aamodt mastered the art and science of maintaining their form throughout a season. They put on weight for resilience, and often joked about who had the bigger belly and was therefore “more man.” Nevertheless, illness plagued Kjus, who explains that “being sick was the story of my life.” From 1995 to 1998, he underwent three surgeries to address bouts of severe exercise-induced asthma that accompanied him into every major competition. He was sick going into the 1998 Nagano Olympics, when weather-related rescheduling pushed the slalom portion of the combined to the same afternoon as the downhill. Despite skiing “like a wimp” (his words) in the slalom, and feeling physically, mentally



Kjus won silver in the downhill at the 1998 Winter Olympics (top photo, at the DH finish). Jean-Luc Cretier won gold and Hannes Trinkl took bronze (above). Despite battling illness, Kjus won a second medal that day, a silver in combined, becoming the first alpine skier to win two medals in one day.

and technically unprepared for the dual challenge, Kjus drew on will and experience and became the first alpine skier to win two Olympic medals in one day.

More comfortable as a speed skier, Kjus's dogged determination helped him in all events. The finest example is the oft-viewed video from a 1999 World Cup slalom race in Wengen, Switzerland, in which Kjus catches his tip in the start, spins around and goes through the first gate backwards. He finished third, his best-ever slalom race. (To see it, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5ReeagmngQ>). Kjus and Aamodt pushed each other beyond their respective specialties and both skiers eventually won overall titles. Kjus won his first overall in 1996—rebounding after a serious crash during a January training run at Kitzbühel, where he was knocked unconscious and sustained a severe concussion—and his second in 1999 by a mere 23 points over Aamodt.

Kjus's finest moment came earlier that year, at the 1999 FIS Alpine World Ski Championships in Vail, where he medaled in all five events. True to form, he did it with a chest infection that necessitated near isolation for much of the event. He started his roll with a

much-needed boost, tying Herman Maier for Super G gold in the opening event. Still struggling, he scored a silver medal in the downhill that “opened the door to the bank of self confidence!” Silver in combined and gold in GS followed, and by the time he was in position to win his fifth medal, in slalom, the mental battle became intense. “Should I go 100 percent and try for the victory, or play it kind of safe to secure a medal?” In the end, the tactician opted to risk it all on the easier top section, and keep some reserve on the final, ice-polished pitch where officials needed crampons just to stand in place. He missed gold by 0.11, but with the silver earned his place in history as the first and only skier to accomplish such a feat.

Kjus retired in 2006, after 17 seasons on the World Cup. Aamodt credits Kjus with his own longevity in ski racing and says he would not have raced downhill without Kjus. When I ask what Aamodt did for him, Kjus is quick to answer, “Absolutely nothing!” But the smile returns and he describes his friend as a source of early inspiration. “He was showing the way when we were 17,18, 19,” Kjus explains, “and the camaraderie was helpful in taking away the pressure, especially in the bad times.”

It was Kjus's reputation as a competitor and a person that enticed Dave Gorsuch to buy his clothing line when it debuted in 1999. Dave's son Jeff, who helps to run the family business, explains that Kjus' technical skiwear, which stretches and moves with your body, addressed the market when there was room for innovation. At the time retailers were cautious, because it was priced 40 percent higher than other skiwear, a reflection of the meticulous detail in its design (the 500 individual pieces that go into a Kjus jacket are almost double the components of an ordinary winter jacket).

For this chapter of his career Kjus partnered with Swiss businessman and apparel savant Didi Serena and shaped the line into what Jeff Gorsuch calls a “pinnacle product.” Kjus skiwear now sells in 120 premium retail shops in North America, and in about 40 countries worldwide. Kjus runs distribution in Norway—he lives in Oslo—and is involved in all aspects of the business.

As ever, Kjus and Aamodt see each other regularly (“too much,” Kjus confirms). They play hockey twice a week, meet up on the golf course and co-host a popular TV game show. Like Aamodt, who describes himself as “just a family man,” Kjus, now 43, seems happy to be immersed in his company and in life with his partner, Marianne Berner, and their two young daughters.

As impressive as Lasse Kjus was as a competitor and is now as a businessman, Gorsuch says it's Kjus the person who impresses him most. “Whatever he does, he does with passion and a smile. He lives life with heart and authenticity.” ❄️

Two-time Olympian Edie Thys Morgan is the author of Shut Up and Ski: Shootouts, Wipeouts and Blowouts on the Trail to the Olympic Dream; www.racorex.com.