

Kjetil Andre Aamodt

With eight Olympic and 12 World Championship medals, the “Baby Shark” is cruising happily through retirement. **BY EDIE THYS MORGAN**

PHOTOS COURTESY KJETIL ANDRE AAMODT



Left: When asked to name his favorite victory, Aamodt describes “the best feeling ever”—the World Championship slalom gold he captured in 1993 at Morioka, Japan. Above: He was an all-around racer, with wins in all five alpine disciplines

Hvem kan slå Aamodt og Kjus? Who can beat Aamodt and Kjus? That’s the name of a Norwegian TV show that pits pairs of celebrities against the one-time leaders of Norway’s “Attacking Vikings” alpine ski team. Even in retirement, Kjetil Andre Aamodt and Lasse Kjus—best friends, roommates and fierce competitors—are destined to be linked. Friendly rivals in their racing days, here on a game-show stage the two athletes play off each other’s trademark dry humor, goading each other and the competition through challenges that range from running in a giant hamster wheel to answering quizzes to identifying mysterious food while blindfolded.

Who can beat Aamodt and Kjus? That question was first posed in earnest back in 1990, when the two Norwegian teenagers won every title at the World Junior Championships in Zinal, Switzerland. Aamodt won three—downhill, super G and combined—and Kjus won

the remaining two. Two years later, at the 1992 Winter Games in Albertville, Aamodt won his first Olympic medal, a gold, in the super G.

By the time Aamodt officially retired, in January 2007, he had amassed a record eight Olympic (four gold) and 12 World Championship medals (five gold). He had also become one of only five athletes to win in all five alpine disciplines and earned the distinction of being both the youngest and oldest male alpine skier to win Olympic gold. The grueling schedule of being an “all-rounder” meant fewer individual event victories, but it also allowed him to spread Olympic and World Championship pressure between many races. “It’s a big advantage for an all-rounder when it comes to those big events,” he explains. “That’s where I built my legacy.”

Today Aamodt, 41, spends much of his time giving motivational speeches entitled “How to Reach Your Potential.” These talks draw heavily on the wisdom of



Since retiring, Aamodt has joined the board of UNICEF; in 2007, he traveled to Zambia (top) as an ambassador for the international humanitarian organization. His daughter was born in 2006 (above), and he and wife Stine now also have a young son.

his leader, coach and father, Fin Dag Aamodt. Aamodt describes his father as a strong man with strong beliefs, who knew how to push people's buttons. "It is often the people with extreme attitudes who get far. They are not always pleasant to be around, but if you listen, you can get far, too." Aamodt readily admits that such an approach is not for everyone (including his sister, who showed similar promise as a junior racer), but it worked for him because of his irrepressible love for sport.

When seven-year-old Kjetil was doing his daily regimen of 100 sit-ups, push-ups and squats, the elder Aamodt would shout at him from the second-floor balcony: "If you don't finish your exercises, you don't get dinner." Aamodt explains that such public displays were mostly for show. "I never thought of it as training or drudgery." Even after his regimen, which included ballet and yoga (a rare pursuit amongst young athletes in the 1970s), Aamodt still found time to play soccer or hockey six hours a day, just for fun. "I had a lot of energy. I was that kid hanging in the tree."

Fin Aamodt's teaching methods were starkly matter-

of-fact and rarely sympathetic. "He always told me the consequences of not training: 'If you don't train, you will lose by 0.01 second, and you will remember why.'" When Aamodt lost the 1994 Olympic downhill to Tommy Moe on Norwegian soil, by 0.04 second, he joked to reporters that "maybe I should have shaved" to make up such a miniscule difference. But in his mind, Aamodt heard his father's words. Such exacting standards may seem harsh, but the son always understood his father's motivations. When the younger Aamodt read Andre Agassi's book, *Open: An Autobiography*, their father-son relationship struck a chord. "His dad may have been a bit crazy, but Agassi said he felt 'nothing but love.' That's what I felt from my father, too. Nothing but love."

When asked about his favorite victory, Aamodt does not hesitate: "The World Championship slalom in Morioka, 1993." The 21-year-old was already an Olympic Champion in Super G but, as he explains, "It always feels better winning a slalom, because you have to deal with the pressure between runs. And you know you've won as soon you cross the finish."

Aamodt's only regret, if it can be counted as one, is not winning a downhill in Kitzbühel (he finished second in the downhill twice, and he won the combined four times). "If I could change one thing, that would be it." Pause. "...and being DH champ on home soil. That would have been nice."

The nickname "Baby Shark" alluded to Aamodt's killer instinct, but a strong foundation in sportsmanship best defined his character. When Kjus, Aamodt and Harald Christian Strand-Nilsen swept the medals in the 1994 Olympic combined event at Lillehammer, Aamodt said, "This is my best day as a skier...I was not happy with my run, but happy with our victory. My best friend won and I'm very pleased for him."

Indeed, Aamodt credits Kjus not only with his success but also with his longevity in the sport. "I would not have even raced downhill without him. He was a speed demon—more fearless—and we were always challenging each other. Without him, I would not have won as much. He made it more fun and less boring."

Aamodt won his final Olympic gold in the Super G at the Torino Olympics in 2006, shortly after his daughter was born, and after injuring his knee in the downhill. He officially announced his retirement the following January on a live awards broadcast while accepting the award for Norwegian sportsman of the year. When it comes to exits, it doesn't get much better.

"Now I'm just a family man," says Aamodt. He and his wife Stine, a former ballet dancer, now also have a three-year-old son. He describes his kids as "a typical girl and boy." She likes to sing while she skis, and he appears to be as active as his father once was. In addition to the TV show and motivational speeches, Aamodt commentates for Norwegian TV, works for



Aamodt became both the youngest and oldest male alpine skier to win Olympic gold, from his first victory at Albertville, France in 1992 (right) to his last Winter Games triumph at Turin, Italy in 2006. He retired from racing in January 2007.



OlympiaToppen (an organization dedicated to training Norway's top elite athletes) and is on the board of UNICEF. He also recently joined the FIS Alpine Executive Committee. For the record, he was not a proponent of the new ski regulations ("I want max freedom, because I believe it is more fair, more safe, more fun and more interesting to see the sport move forward, not backwards!") and sees Lindsey Vonn's quest to race against men as a prime opportunity to promote the sport.

Aamodt stays physically active but describes himself

as more of a competitor than an adrenaline junkie. That means he can get his fix playing soccer with friends once a week, and hockey in two "old boy" leagues. "As an athlete, you have to pick up your life after you retire, no matter what the results were. Now I cherish time with my family. I get same kick out of playing soccer and I don't have to read about it in the paper." ❄️

Edie Thys Morgan's book Shut Up and Ski is available online at Amazon. Find out more at www.racerex.com.

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