

# Winning The Olympic Downhill Is An Uphill Battle: Terry Orlick and Kerrin Lee Gartner

## Abstract

Kerrin Lee Gartner, the 1992 Olympic Women's Downhill champion, was interviewed by Terry Orlick with whom she worked for several years prior to her winning the gold medal. Kerrin speaks of the role that mental skills played in her preparation and performance. In particular, she discusses the issues of commitment, mental preparation, imagery, focusing, and coming back from injury. Also addressed is the importance of talking positively to herself and drawing something positive out of each run in the development of the confidence necessary to become an Olympic champion.

I began working with Kerrin Lee Gartner when she was a 16-year-old on the Women's Canadian Alpine Ski Team. Eight years later at the Winter Olympics in Mirabel, France, Kerrin won the Olympic Women's Downhill gold medal on what was considered to be the fastest, most difficult race course ever.

It has been a joy working with Kerrin and other members of the women's ski team over the years. It has been particularly enlightening to witness the development of their mental skills. Kerrin Lee Gartner is a great example of the spirit and focus that drives personal excellence. I have learned much from her, as I have from other great performers who have shared their journey to personal excellence.

About two months following the 1992 Olympic Games, Kerrin and I met to reflect upon the year and to draw out lessons for the future. Part of our interaction dealt with the challenges of being an Olympic gold medalist preparing for new issues she would now face in her sport and life. The other part of our interaction focused on the mental skills and perspectives Kerrin developed over the years that helped her pursue her potential as a ski racer and as a person.

The following interview excerpts focus on Kerrin's path to personal excellence. Her visions can serve as a stimulus for the pursuit of personal excellence. Her interview transcript can also be studied more carefully to determine the extent to which Kerrin's responses embrace the seven elements of excellence discussed in Orlick's article entitled *The Wheel of Excellence*. See if you can find each of those elements within the following interview.

After completing this interview, I gave the transcript to Kerrin and asked her to tell me whether it accurately represented her journey. She read it that night and not only did she feel the content was accurate, but she was moved to tears because she relived her Olympic dream while reading it. She agreed to allow me to share her reflections with you. I thank her for that because it provides a glimpse into the essence of excellence..

**Terry:** You have achieved the highest goal in downhill skiing and you were able to do it in a very stressful situation. How would you describe your commitment to go after that goal?

**Kerrin:** The commitment is more than 100%. It's committed through the ups and downs. Committed through the good results and the bad results. Committed when you're coming in

50<sup>th</sup> and it looks like there's never an end to the bad results. You still have to be committed and still focused and still trying to win every race. I think the day that you let your commitment go is the day you don't have a chance to win.

**Terry:** How long did it take you to get ready for this one little run (the 1992 Olympic downhill)?

**Kerrin:** A lot of people assume it's an overnight success story. It's taken me nine years of hard work in international competition and many years before that. I think with all of your work, I think that shows how long it has taken me.

**Terry:** When you talk about mental preparation, what does that mean to you?

**Kerrin:** It means years and years of mental preparation. My first meeting with you was when I was 16 years old. I remember it very clearly. I was not very good at imagining myself skiing. I didn't understand why I even had to do it. Now it's come to a point where it's a part of my everyday life. If I'm hanging a picture in the living room, first I imagine where I want it, then I imagine how I want it, and how far away from the wall. I can see it all very clearly. Then I hang the picture, and it's in the right spot. I think that's a very simple example of what I can do when I ski, but when I ski I'm doing something dangerous. I'm doing something that I want to do very badly. It's not worth making a mistake, so I have to use my imagination and my imagery constantly throughout the whole year.

**Terry:** What were your reminders going into the 1992 Olympic downhill?

**Kerrin:** Actually, I kept it pretty simple. I just had the reminder to just go for it, take the advantage, and I knew I had the chance to make it my day. I didn't want to risk it by not going for it and not taking the advantages. I was very relaxed which was obviously a key to it all.

**Terry:** Were there any points where you had to refocus to get back on track?

**Kerrin:** There was one, actually. It didn't show it too well on TV, but there was one spot where I caught my ski and it went out from underneath me. It really caught me off balance, and I remember my mind slipping away a bit there. It didn't take long to get it back. I just said "come on" to myself. It's always been a key. It means everything that I can possibly think in one split second. It got right back together, and the bottom half of the course was exceptionally good.

**Terry:** How did you approach the training runs for the downhill?

**Kerrin:** I just tried to stay very relaxed, work on certain parts of the course all week long, and kept my goals small. I worked on a 30 second section instead of the whole thing. That way I kept the pressure off myself as well. I didn't feel the need to win every single training run. I just felt the need to ski certain parts of the course well and I think that was the key to a lot of it. I think it allowed me to stay relaxed. It allowed the press to stay away a little bit. The press didn't think I was a key person, even though I thought I was.

**Terry:** You skied each section well, but you picked different sections on different runs.

**Kerrin:** Yes. We only got to ski the top 30 seconds of the course twice, and that was where I had trouble at the beginning of the week. The last training run, I concentrated solely on the first

30 or 40 seconds, and then relaxed and basically just skied the rest. I still had a very good run, so I knew I was ready to do well.

**Terry:** Did you do much imagery in preparing for this race?

**Kerrin:** I first ran the course last February. I've been doing imagery of the Olympics for about four years, but I started this course last February and have run it hundreds of times in my mind. So by the time I actually had the race day run, I had done it many times before. I just hadn't won it in reality yet!

**Terry:** What do you experience in your imagery of the race run?

**Kerrin:** I think a lot of people assume that imagery is pictures in your mind, and actually when I was 16, when we first started working together, it was very much like watching a videotape. I could watch anybody with my eyes closed and picture anybody skiing in certain part of the course. It's advanced itself to the very special state where now it's more of a feeling. I can feel the feelings of skiing, and the motions. My thoughts almost turn into feeling. I think that is very important for athletes to do that in any sport.

**Terry:** Over the last eight or nine years you've had lots of setbacks, lots of challenges to overcome, lots of injuries, and maybe some people not believing in you as much as you believed in yourself. How did you get yourself to keep going after your goals through some of those struggles?

**Kerrin:** The obvious struggles were my knee injuries and each one took six months to about a year and a half to really recover from. It wasn't just the physical recovery. The mental recovery was the hardest part. There are always waves in life, and when you're down in ski racing, with a physical disability like my knees were, it was always important to keep my goals set, to always believe in myself, and to look at the reasons why I was going through these struggles, to look at the end result really. I made little tiny goals for myself - little tiny steps, focused on little things. I stayed focused through every single bad thing, stayed focused, stayed focused, stayed focused. I think that's the only way through it, to go gradually and continue believing in yourself the whole way. That's the key to everything when you're down.

**Terry:** What about imagery for getting through injuries and back on track? Did you do anything there?

**Kerrin:** The first injury I had, I remember talking to you, and you said, Remember to ski, remember to ski in your mind." I thought, "The last thing I want to do now is ski, because I'm injured." But I remember it didn't take me very long to get back on my skis in my mind. I skied [in my mind] basically every single day through my injury and through the recovery. It helped me keep my focus on what I was going through it for, and it made the pain and struggle a lot easier to take because I was still doing something very enjoyable in my head. Even if I was on crutches, in a cast, it made it a lot easier.

**Terry:** How did your first run go after those injuries?

**Kerrin:** I think by keeping my imagery there, it made it much simpler to get out on the downhill skis. In a real course, it made the speed adjustment much quicker. With the second injury, it just happened very naturally. I had already succeeded in being able to imagine myself skiing

perfectly and I did it throughout the six months of recuperation. When I put my skis on, it was like I wasn't even off of them.

**Terry:** I am interested in how your belief in your capacity has changed over the years. I know this year you really knew you could do it. How would you describe the strengthening of your belief? How did that unfold for you?

**Kerrin:** Actually, it's amazing because people naturally assume you always believe in yourself from day one. When your results aren't there, the first thing that shatters is your belief and confidence. That's a key to success, and over the years I've developed belief in myself. I knew I could be on the podium, and I knew I would be a winner, but as much as I know and as much as I can believe, until it happens, 100 % belief isn't there. I really talked myself into it this year. I knew I was skiing as well as anybody on the World Cup circuit. I've had top five results consistently in the last two years, and I really, really believed, with 110 percent of myself, that if there was a course that I had a chance to win on, it was the Olympic course. Just by believing in myself, and always talking to myself very positively, and putting positive thoughts in my mind, it only encouraged the belief I already had.

**Terry:** So how would you talk to yourself positively?

**Kerrin:** I would turn anything negative into a positive. If I had a bad run, I would take a positive out of it anyway. If I had a run where I was only good on half of it I would take a positive and build on it. I think that made me believe in myself more each time I ran the course. Each time I did anything, I could build positive emotions on it. On race day at the Olympics, it was very light, very foggy, which is not very pleasant in downhill. The first positive thing I did was say to myself, "You're good on flat light, you're one of the best skiers in flat light, this is your opportunity right now, go for it!" I really am one of the better skiers in flat light. Although I don't like it any more than anyone else, I can still be aggressive and I can still ski like I want to ski.

**Terry:** Sometimes you are totally positive and totally focused, and nothing distracts you, and you have a great race. But sometimes negative thoughts may slip in, or things that don't help you. What do you find is best for getting back on track when that happens?

**Kerrin:** When I notice myself thinking thoughts that I don't want to be thinking and don't work for me, or when I start thinking about outcome or the final result, I try and notice it first, and rectify it by thinking of things that work for me. In Vail [first World Cup after Olympic win] when I came second in the downhill, my morning wasn't very good. I had been thinking a lot about the outcome. I realized it right away and I changed my thought pattern. I changed into the mode that works for me. I thought of going for it, being aggressive, and of all my key thoughts. It helped me come away with a key result.

**Terry:** Has it taken a while to be able to do that?

**Kerrin:** It's taken a long time. I remember races in the past where I wouldn't even realize why I had blown it in that race until a year later. Last year at a downhill in Lake Louise I had been doing very well, winning training runs. On race day, I came fifth, and I realized after the race that my approach was wrong. I was thinking the wrong things. Now I've started to realize when I'm thinking the wrong things before I even race. This gives me a chance to have a good race before racing.

**Terry:** So you change your focus before the race to have a better chance at doing well?

**Kerrin:** Exactly. If I wake up and I realize my head is there, I let my thought patterns work naturally and I have a good race. If it's not there or something distracts me in the start or warmup in the morning, then I know my refocusing thoughts. I know what brings me back to my good results and good focus.

**Terry:** Part of your ongoing evaluation plan is to pull out positive things so you feel good as well learn from the work. Can you comment on that?

**Kerrin:** It's taken me many years to pull something out of each run. If I'm last in a race I learned to still pull something out of it. Most times I give 110 % effort and that's enough for me. If you try as hard as you can try and you give the effort you can give, you have to be satisfied with the results because you really couldn't have done more anyway.

**Terry:** When you talk about being focused in training, focused in what you do, can you describe what that is?

**Kerrin:** My very best focus is when everything happens so naturally. I don't even think about it. A lot of people want to know exactly what I am thinking in certain parts of the course, or what I'm thinking in the start gate, or when I got through the finish. It's almost a feeling. The focus is so clear that you shut your thoughts off, and you trust yourself and believe in yourself. You've already prepared for years and years. All you do is go; it's very natural. You're very relaxed. The focus is so crisp and that happened to me at the Olympics. You're so connected. There're so many words to describe it. There's autopilot, there's connection, there's tunnel vision, there's just being 100% focused. It's all more of a feeling. It turns from thoughts into feelings and natural motions on skis. You don't really have any distinct thoughts when you're going down. You don't see the people on the side of the hill. You don't see anything. You're just naturally doing what you do.

**Terry:** What about distractions? The Olympic games are one huge distraction for most athletes, and most athletes don't perform anywhere near their potential at the Olympic games. How were you able to come through with a great run under the most distracting circumstances?

**Kerrin:** I've taken lessons from a lot of different races. One of the races I took a very valuable lesson from was the 1988 Olympics. I was very distracted in 1988. I wanted to win very badly. In preparing for 1992, what I did was to take every-thing I learned, which included putting myself first, putting what I need first, and concentrating on what I needed to concentrate on in everyday races. I was very relaxed. I knew what my job was. All I had to do was go out and do it. Once I was on the chair lift in the morning, everything was fine. I took an hour or two to deal with all of the distractions in a one block period. I left the rest of the time to myself. I think it's important to make sure that you're relaxed and ready to go. If you get too distracted, then you can't focus anyway, and you don't have a chance to win.

**Terry:** So you dealt with some of the people and media things and then had a time that you just clicked off to get away from it all?

**Kerrin:** I was very fortunate actually. I didn't stay in the athlete village. I stayed with my husband up in Mirabel in our condominium. We did most of our cooking ourselves, so once I

had left the hill and once I had left the race site, which is where most of the stress and distractions are, I was on my own. It was like my normal everyday life with Max, playing our card games, reading our books, and just staying relaxed. I remember in Calgary, all I did was think about the race all day long. In Mirabel I couldn't have been more relaxed.

**Terry:** What about on site? What perspective allowed you to focus on your performance instead of the outcome?

**Kerrin:** I had a very good teacher, Terry! I think I've learned, definitely, not to focus on the outcome of any event. Although you dream about it, and I dreamed about the gold medal for many years, I think the best thing for me is that I've learned to concentrate on what I need to concentrate on. I needed to concentrate on having a good warm-up in the morning, concentrate on being very smooth, very quick, looking for speed in the course. It carried right through my race. I went to the start and I wasn't concentrating on the final result, I was concentrating on what I needed to do to ski my very best. It just became natural to me. I went through the same motions as I go through every race. It just happened naturally.

**Terry:** That's great! I was really pleased that you put it all together on that day and in subsequent races. A lot of athletes who win gold medals really struggle in their next races because of expectations placed on them, and the expectations they place on themselves. You had great races in your subsequent World Cups. How was your focus in those races?

**Kerrin:** Actually, I was very tired going into the first one. I wasn't actually expecting much of myself I went out in the morning, and my warm-up didn't go as planned. I didn't ski as well as I had hoped. I admitted it right away. I said to my husband, "That wasn't very good. I don't think I'll be doing that out there on the race day." I think by getting it off my chest, by admitting it, and by getting the focus into my mind that I really needed to focus on, I was able to do it on the race run. When I was standing in the start gate I knew that I had an opportunity to win the race. I pushed out of the gate and went into my automatic pilot without thinking about anything other than my key thoughts. I just kept my focus. Second by three one-hundredths, that's pretty close to winning. I was pretty happy with that result after everything that had happened.

The lessons that I pulled out of the Olympics and applied to other World Cups afterwards, was to stay very relaxed and to concentrate on what I know works. There are certain key thoughts that work for me on race day, and most of it's just relaxing and going for it, counting on my natural instincts to take over. When that happens, I have my best races.

**Terry:** I've noticed over the past year or two that you are more willing to follow your own path, to do things that you know help you, even when some people may not agree. How have you seen that unfold?

**Kerrin:** I'm in an individual sport that is run in a team manner, so sometimes it's very hard to do things like an individual and to follow my own path. I've come to realize that I must trust myself 100% and believe in myself. When I need something a little bit different from what the rest of the girls need, I am willing to take a risk and go for that to get the win.

**Terry:** So now that you know your win patterns better, you are able to respect them and gain from it?

**Kerrin:** Exactly. You learn about yourself throughout your whole career. I've been out there for

eight years and I've learned a lot, and I've taken lessons from many different things. Now I can apply those lessons. At the Olympics, I knew I had to be away from the team and had to be on my own and away from the distractions of the village. I did that and it paid off.

**Terry:** What about now, after having won the gold medal? There are lots of people wanting your time. How are you planning to respect your needs even though you have people tugging at you?

**Kerrin:** At first it was difficult because it was hard for me to say no. I wasn't used to being an Olympic champion or having that much attention. I think I've realized I really have to listen to my insides. I have to listen to what I feel, and when I'm run down and tired, I have to say no. I have to say, "I'm sorry, I can't do it tonight, or next week, or the week after, I need a couple of weeks off." I've realized it's okay to say no, and to look after myself first because my career is not finished. I know I can still win out there.

**Terry:** It's better to listen to yourself, and to your body, and do something positive about it before you are totally exhausted.

**Kerrin:** Exactly. I think you have to learn to do that as an athlete. You really learn to respect your body. Often you realize a week before it happens that you are getting close to being too tired, and you have to take a week off. It's very important to be able to listen to yourself and be able to follow your thoughts as well. If I think I need time off, it's very important that I take it off instead of listening to other people. Because, if I don't believe I'm on the right program, then I won't win a race. I really have to believe in what I'm doing 100 percent. The program has to be right.

**Terry:** You had a very high commitment to skiing, but you also seemed to maintain a commitment in your relationship with your family. How did you try to balance that?

**Kerrin:** I have a lot of support from my family, a lot of love in my family. I am from a large family of five children, and we were very close throughout my childhood. I think with the support that they gave me, it was very natural for me to put them No.1. Although my career was ski racing, and that was very important to me, I think it's also important to keep my private life alive and separate. A lot of people were worried that when I got married my focus would be gone and I wouldn't be able to concentrate on winning a race. Surprisingly, it's done wonders for my skiing. It's made me relax, try hard, but know that it's not the end of the world if I don't win the race. Chances are I actually ski better.

**Terry:** What mental skills or perspective do you think have helped you most in terms of pursuing your goals?

**Kerrin:** There are so many. I think they're all tied together. Obviously for skiing, imagery is very important as well as focusing. But no matter what you do and no matter how many things you practice, unless you believe in yourself, and have 100 % confidence, you don't have a chance to succeed in anything. I think that's probably what got me through it, because if I didn't believe I could win a race, I probably would have quit years ago with my injuries. I just kept the belief and kept the focus.

**Terry:** What are the most important lessons that you learned from me?

**Kerrin:** Hmm! The most important lesson is probably always to learn something from everything that happens and apply it to the next event. To stay relaxed. I've taken a lot of lessons from every race I've had. I've learned a lot about myself and now I can be a lot more relaxed. My imagery is as clear as I could ever want it. I know exactly how to focus and I just know how to apply everything that I know how to do. I know how to apply it on race day.

**Terry:** What about other people who are pursuing goals in other areas? What advice might you have for them?

**Kerrin:** I think for everything I've learned through ski racing, the first and foremost thing is you have to believe in yourself and what you've chosen to do. If you're a nurse, then you have to believe in yourself and work as hard as you can to be a good nurse. No matter what profession you're in, I think if you try 100 percent to be as good as you can be, it doesn't matter how good you are as long as you believe within yourself that you've tried as hard as you can.

**Terry:** Are you applying the mental skills that you've been developing through your skiing to other areas of your life off the hill?

**Kerrin:** I think the mental skills come into play every single day, all the time. Learning to deal with distractions comes into play now with the press. I have to deal with that and still get on with my life. It comes into play all the time. Learning to relax, or if you have an argument or a setback, it's learning to get through that. Stay relaxed, take the good points out, always take something positive and still feel good about yourself and about the situation. I think everything that I do in sport relates to real life. It relates to everybody's career. I mean it really relates to everything. I think that's the key to it all. Once you're relaxed and confident upstairs in your mind then everything else will follow.

Like all great performers, Kerrin Lee Gartner overcame many obstacles to reach the top of her field. Her positive attitude and strength of character can serve as an inspiration to all those who have visions of excelling. Her interview captures the perspectives that allowed her to achieve at the highest levels but doesn't fully reflect her passion for skiing and her commitment to daily work on the mental aspects of her performance. It is those little steps, executed with passion and persistence, that take you to your dream.

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