

Kristean Porter

The first U.S. female freestyler to win the World Cup overall title, Porter was a triple-flipping pioneer who also won four World Championship medals, including gold.

By Andy Bigford

To casual observers, World Cup is a murky term, because winning one can apply to a single event, to a series of events within a discipline (like aerials or moguls), or to the entire season in all events and disciplines. Among competitors, the biggest prize of all is usually the World Cup overall title, because it requires season-long success across all the disciplines, perhaps 20 or 30 events in total. This represents season-long consistency and perseverance in a host of locales and conditions, as opposed to a gold medal in an Olympics or World Championships event, which connotes greatness for one day.

In the early years of World Cup freestyle, Kristean Porter won not one but two World Cup overall titles as a pioneering aerialist who was among the first women to perform triple flips; her specialty was the lay-tuck-tuck. She was also accomplished in ballet (no longer a discipline since 2000) and strong enough in moguls to pick up the points to round out her résumé. She was the first U.S. female to collect the overall title in 1994, and just four others have won it since. She also tacked on four World Championship medals, culminating with gold in the combined at La Cluzas, France, in 1995.

Kristean Porter was born on Sept. 3, 1971, in Biloxi, Miss., but grew up in Greenfield, N.H., on the outskirts of Portsmouth. She played any sports that would allow her on the field, including boys Little League, chasing after her two brothers in all outside endeavors. The family travelled three-plus hours north to ski weekends at Sugarloaf in Maine, where her parents owned a ski house. Gradually she started to increase her skiing commitment and volume, dabbling with Buddy Werner racing but eventually concentrating on freestyle. By high school she was attending Sugarloaf's acclaimed Carrabassett Valley Academy, also home to Hall of Famers like Bode Miller and fellow 2020 inductee Seth Wescott. She initially attended part-time for winter semesters so she could continue to play high school field hockey in Greenfield, but by her senior year she was all in with CVA.

After high school graduation in 1989, she was named to the U.S. Ski Team. Up until that point, her junior aerials program had been spent entirely upright (spreads, daffies, helicopters, etc.), but now it was time to go upside down. Off she went to the water ramps at the USST training facility at Lake Placid, N.Y., throwing herself into the inverted program and seeing near-immediate results. “I was forced to flip,” she recalls. “It worked out well.”

She made her World Cup debut that same year, and it took only a month for her to score her first World Cup podium. By the next season, she won the bronze in aerials at the 1991 World Championships in Lake Placid.

In her career, Porter amassed six World Cup aerial event wins and 29 World Cup podiums to go with the two overall titles and four World Championship medals. She competed in the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer when aerials was first added as a medal sport, but didn’t make the finals. She retired in 1997.

Perhaps just as importantly, she had the chance to travel the world, and she made lifelong friends both internationally and on her team. She roomed with Anne Battelle, a World Cup event-winning mogul skier, and was close to fellow aerialist Nikki Stone, who would win Olympic and World Championship gold and the overall World Cup title after Porter retired. The U.S. team in those days was dominant, frequently winning the Nations Cup. But aside from the usual competitive stress and pressure, it was a fairly relaxed atmosphere, and a lot of fun. Porter was young, travelled the world, and made enough money to cover the minimal expenses required at that age. “It was low key for how competitive it was,” she says.

Porter herself is quite low key, and even has a hard time recalling key details from her Hall of Fame career. She found a sports-obsessed partner and eventual husband in Chris Thorpe, a four-time Olympic luger and two-time Olympic medalist himself. Thorpe knows all the details, and as the family statistician is more than capable of helping her remember the what, when and how. Thorpe hails from Marquette, Mich., which was nearby to the only “natural” full-length luge track in the country when he was growing up.

When the two found time away from their winter sports schedules, they wanted to soak in warm weather, so they lived in Florida during off-seasons. Thorpe competed past Porter’s retirement, winning Olympic silver and then bronze in the doubles in 1998 and 2002. Kristean was busy with college, then medical school and residency at the University

of Florida as an OBGYN. When her recruiter came up with a list of hospital locations in which to work, they both wanted to return to the mountains. They now live in Farmington, N.M., and on weekends, with their two teen daughters in tow, Skylar and Kaili, the Thorpes drive an hour-plus north to Durango, Colo., where they have a ski house at Purgatory. It's a lot shorter drive than those old Porter family treks to Sugarloaf.

Career Accomplishments

Born: Sept. 3, 1971 (Biloxi, Miss.)

1989: Joins U.S. Ski Team.

1991: Earns bronze medal in 1991 World Championships in Lake Placid.

1993: Takes bronze in both aerials and combined in the 1993 World Championships in Altenmarkt/Zauchensee, Austria.

1993: Finishes third in the World Cup combined standings.

1994-95: Wins overall title on World Cup for two consecutive seasons.

1995: Wins gold in combined at the World Championships in La Cluzas, France.

1997: Retires from the U.S. Ski Team.