

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

KURT LANCE – An Oral History

**Conducted by Edith Swift
Sackville, Windsor, May 2009**



**Kurt Lance
Thredbo Masters' Ski Race 2008**

Copyright held by
Thredbo Historical Society
PO Box 6
THREDBO NSW 2625

KURT LANCE (Albert Kurt Lance AM) - An Oral History

Interviewed by Edie Swift, May 10th 2009

Edie: I'm Edie Swift and I'm doing this for the Thredbo Historical Society and we are at his house in Sackville, near Windsor. It is May 10th, 2009.

Kurt has quite a history of doing all sorts of things with the ski industry, his clothing, and his involvement in ski racing, his involvement in the Snowy; he walked and talked to a lot of people in the Snowy Mountains. So we are going to talk with him this afternoon.

Kurt was also a member of the Snowy Mountains Region Advisory Committee for eight years. He was also a keen student of the history of the Snowy Mountains region and he has skied and walked Kosciuszko since 1953. He has mixed and talked with many of the local identities and skied with a number of surveyors and hydrologists during the construction of the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

Kurt is a life member of the Southern Alps Ski Club, a life member of the Thredbo Ski Racing Club, a life member of the NSW Ski Association and a patron of the Thredbo Historical Society. He was a member of SMRAC (Snowy Mountains Region Advisory Committee) for 9 years; past president of the New South Wales Ski Association for two terms until 1983; past president of the Australian Ski Association 1978 – 1983; member of the Alpine Committee of the International Ski Federation since 1983 and still current; an Inspector for Alpine Courses, and Technical Delegate of the International Ski Federation since 1978 – now Honary Member; Chief of Race Alpine World Cup Thredbo 1989.

He has received a lot of awards through the years: Australian Ski Federation for outstanding service to skiing 1987; NSW Department of Sport and Recreation in recognition of a life time of service to ski racing and for the role played in the creation of the FIS race courses. One course was named Kurt's Downhill 1988; appointed as a member of the Order of Australia for community services in skiing 1990; Australian Sports Medal 2001; International Ski Federation award in recognition of outstanding services as an alpine technical delegate; and the deepest gratitude on behalf of the sport of alpine skiing worldwide, he received an honorary diploma in 1999. In 2001 the Ski and Snowboard Industries of Australia awarded him a plaque in appreciation of many years of service and dedication to the snow sport industry of Australia. Kurt was also very involved in ski wear manufacturing and importing business from 1951 to 1999.

Merit Apparel Proprietary Limited started in a small tenement house in Summer Hill in 1951, manufacturing ski trousers. In 1962, Merit Apparel moved into a new purpose built factory at Ashfield, producing all ski wear and uniforms for most ski schools and ski patrol in NSW. He bought out Playway, another ski wear manufacturing business; then branched out into importing not only fabrics, but brought into Australia, the first Olin skis from America, Caber boots from Italy, Rottefella bindings from Norway, Geze ski bindings from Germany, ski poles and cross country skis from Finland, ski clothing from Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Korea.

In the 1970s, Merit Apparel became Australia's leading manufacturer of ski wear and supplier of ski equipment. In 1988 the Ashfield factory was sold and the company started to reduce its coverage and manufacturing as the labour costs were making Australian manufacturing not competitive any more. He continued as an importers and wholesalers, first

in Rydalmere then moving to Windsor and finally in 1999, closing the doors and retiring from the industry, to run Merit Farm at Sackville where he is now. And that is where we are recording from right now.

Kurt, do you want to start by making a correction to that which I just read?

Kurt: Yes, in 2001 – it might have been in 2002 – I resigned from the Alpine Committee of the International Ski Federation because by this time New Zealand, Japan, Korea and other so called “Small or developing ski nations” already had their own representatives at the International Ski Federation level and there wasn’t any point for me to really be chairman of what originally was the “Small Nations Committee” which then changed to “Developing Nations Committee for Skiing” so I am now not a member of that. I also resigned as Technical Delegate and that opened it up to other people. Now I am just skiing for Kurt Lance, not for anybody else.

Edie: Would you tell us about your date of birth, your parents’ names and where you were born?

Kurt: I was born in Vienna on 24th January, 1925, to Edmund Kalmar and Gisela Kalmar who were original pre-World War I people from Slovakia, that came to the Austrian Hungarian Empire, capital, Vienna. The British Army required me to change my name by deed poll to an English sounding name before we were posted overseas because of the fact that as a recognised Hungarian Austrian name, I would be shot if I was a prisoner during any war time action. So the people I lived with were named Lance and as Bert sounded similar to Kurt, Bert Lance is something that I would turn around and listen to. So that is my name.

My skiing life in Australia started in Kiandra when in 1951 I realised there was snow here and there was a Kiandra Pioneers’ Ski Club operating from the old Jail House in Kiandra. I went up there and started skiing in Australia. I soon joined the Club and became a member of their racing team. We had races against the Snowy Mountains Authority’s people and the Balmain Cup which was a four-man team race. That was the start of my skiing in Australia.

Edie: Where did you stay when you raced in Kiandra?

Kurt: First in Kiandra Jail cells, then later in Kiandra Pioneer Ski Club Lodge (now burnt down). As I was in a team, I always did reasonably well. I became a member of the NSW Ski Team. I was never a champion except in the ski jump. In 1956 or ’57, I became NSW Ski Jump Champion and in the following year I became Australian Ski Jump Champion. Basically I was never a top notch skier – I skied well and I raced pretty well but not any gold medallist other than jumping.

Edie: Would you talk about the equipment you used in the ‘50s in Kiandra?

Kurt: Well obviously there were still wooden skis with bindings that let the heels lift. We started getting screwed-on steel edges at that time. In 1952 or ‘53, Paddy Pallin brought out a pair of fibre glass skis and gave them to me to test down the Selwyn Quarry run which was sheet ice and he wanted to see how they performed. So I guess that was the first man-made material ski that came into Australia. I had a run down the Selwyn Quarry run and there were surface cracks on the bottom of the skis straight afterwards, after the one fast run on solid ice. Gradually we got into man-made materials away from hickory and ash skis.

I think it might have been 1956 when I went to Charlotte Pass to enter in a non-stop downhill that they ran annually. I think it was called the Stilwell Cup or something of that nature. I happened to win that one. So then Kosciusko Alpine Club asked me whether I would join them and become a member of their racing team. Which I did at the time, and I met Tommy Tomasi, Tony Mandlik and the other ski racers of that era, like Billy Day who I had raced with in Kiandra already, and Danny Coleman who was then Australian ski champion.

From that involvement, I then got into ski administration on the Alpine Committee but I also got involved with cross country skiing and jumping. From that I drifted into ski administration. At the same time, because there were not many people bringing equipment into Australia, and not many outlets. Skiing was still a very small sport, I decided my parents who were manufacturing trousers at the time from a tenement building in Summer Hill – should make some ski pants. I started marketing them and that's how Merit Manufacturing and Merit Apparel started its existence from a small tenement building to eventually being the leading ski wear manufacturers in Australia.

Edie: Would you elaborate on that? How it progressed from that to the end.

Kurt: We originally made what in German, is called “keilhosen” which is pants that went inside your boots – in other words they were baggy sort of pants that tapered into nothing and went inside your boots – leather boots which were worn in those days – with a strap under the foot. In Australia as there were only a couple of tailors making those trousers, I convinced my parents they should make them out of gabardine and from that we went into stretch fabrics which were imported from Switzerland and Austria.

Through my involvement with the sport, those few ski shops like Paul Reader, Paddy Pallin and Mick Simmonds that were selling ski equipment in those days, all brought them off me because they knew of me as a ski racer. The department stores did run some imported equipment, also bought small quantities, but basically that was the start of Merit Apparel and Merit Manufacturing which became Australia's leading ski wear manufacturers.

We branched out later into importing boots, skis and everything else, and became a major importer of equipment - again through my involvement with skiing. Because in 1970 at the World Championships in Val Gardena, the Italian team had some ski boots which were copies of Lange boots but made by an Italian factory by the name of Caber. Our coach of the Australian ski team, “I was by then the manager of the Australian ski team”. Why don't you become the agent for those boots because they are fabulous boots?” I won't go into all the details, but the owner of Caber came to see me at the World Championships because I had no time to go down to Monte Belluno. I then became the Australian representative of Caber for the following year.

From that equipment importation, we then gradually drifted into skis from Olins in America and various other bindings and ski poles. So we became a full-blown importer of ski equipment, not just the clothing manufacturer.

Because Malcolm Milne was our top skier at the time, in fact he won a bronze medal – the first bronze medal Australia ever won at the World Championships - at those Championships, went on to Caber boots and with his assistance, Caber developed their racing boots. We tried all sorts of things together, and so we became Caber's development team.

Basically, skiing in Australia was not big enough sport to make it worthwhile to do moulds for plastic boots. There was a small boot manufacturer who made leather ski boots. And there were a couple of people who - one Austrian, Joe Steiner – who made skis out of spotted gum. He had learnt his trade in Austria – his father was a carpenter – and he learnt that. But basically the market in Australia wasn't big enough to warrant the expenditure of dies and this sort of equipment.

Then during the Whitlam era, duties came off most imported things and the department stores started importing made-up clothing and everything else, directly themselves. So our manufacturing also had to compete with this and we ended up having to import clothing as well as the department stores, because Australian wages were so much higher than the wages in Hong Kong at that time. Therefore we weren't competitive anymore with the Australian-made clothing so we then had some of our clothing designs made in Hong Kong, then in Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and became basically an importer and reduced our manufacturing base.

As we had previously supplied Australian teams with uniforms, we now ended up importing stuff and became agents for Descente for instance, Descente is a Japanese manufacturer. We then got involved into supplying stuff for the Australian ski team under the ski pool arrangements. We reduced our staff from twenty eight full time machinists down to half a dozen to design, repair and do alterations. The bulk of the clothing from the late '70s onwards, was imported.

Edie: What is the ski pool?

Kurt: The ski pool is an arrangement that nearly all national teams have with equipment suppliers, or clothing suppliers, supplying their national team with uniforms free of charge, all skis, all boots, all gloves, whatever the equipment is, so that the actual racers don't have to buy the equipment. It was advertising for them, whether they be, boot companies or clothing companies. In return they pay a fee to the national body to be allowed to supply equipment to their national team. It reduces the cost for the ski racer because parents were forking out an absolute fortune for their kids to become racers. It meant that lots of children who had lots of talent, once they got beyond Australian ski racing, couldn't do much more because they could not afford the trips to Europe or America that were necessary to train the whole year round, so we needed a ski pool and to put funds into the organisation in order to pick outstanding talents, even if their parents couldn't afford to send them, to go out with the team.

Some of our designs were actually based on experience from ski patrol and ski schools that had to be out in all weathers in Australia and because our snow here is moister and we have a lot more wind, far more severe than in Europe and most American resorts, our parka designs were modified from European designs, to cope with this. In other words we needed waterproof equipment prior to Gortex turning up, because we had so much wet snow and sometimes rain, and we needed proper high collars and hoods because of the wind factor in Australia which is far more severe than the wind in the American and European resorts. Basically, the design was just a modification of what was being done in Europe and America. Fashion comes into it as well but basically design is a big word for modification.

Edie: Tell me about the Thredbo Ski Racing Club.

Kurt: The Thredbo Ski Race Club was actually started in 1970 by Karel Nekvapil, Sasha's husband, Adrian Studley and Larry Rumble. The manager of Thredbo at that time was Albert van der Lee who was also the first president of the Thredbo Ski Racing Club. Those four people started the club actually, funnily enough, in the toilet of the bottom station. They decided it was necessary to train young skiers into ski racing, and the club was started by those four people in 1970.

In 1971 or '72, the company actually gave a piece of land to the Club next to the Ramshead ski lift for club rooms and training facilities. So Otmar Dorfer and I started digging the foundations – Otmar being a builder from Canberra – on the long weekend there – I think it was in 1972. The Director of Sport and Recreation of the NSW Government came across and said “What's the president of the NSW Ski Association doing, digging here?” So I said “We are going to build a ski club for the Thredbo Ski Race Club.” “Oh, have you got a grant towards it from the government – Sport and Recreation?” I said “No it's too late; all requests for grants and applications had to be in by May.” He said “that's interesting, because on Monday I am going through the grant applications and I am approving what grants are going to be given on a dollar for dollar basis. Do you think you can get the cost quote in by Monday when I am looking at all applications? We need two different quotes. So Otmar you are a builder, have you got a mate who can put in a second quote quick?” He said “Sure.”

So we then got that done and we supplied the government with two separate quotes slightly different and we got a dollar for dollar grant to build the lodge. So therefore, the members donating towards it, only had to put half the money in to get this built and Otmar Dorfer as a builder, basically charged nothing for his labour or his workers. So it was only the material costs that went in and we got a dollar for dollar grant from the government, so the Thredbo Ski Race Club was built.

The first president was Albert van der Lee, the General Manager of Thredbo at the time. The second president was Larry Rumble – one of the guy's there - and then I became the president. I was president for five or six years. I can't remember exactly how long.

The Thredbo Ski Race Club really was instrumental in putting Thredbo on the map, then internationally. The kids in '73 went to Mt Rose in America, as a training programme during the summer – their winter and our summer – and kids from America came over here. Eventually it started international ski racing in Thredbo. The Swiss team came out and all the events were run basically with me as Chief of Race but with the people from the Thredbo Ski Race Club doing all the manual work. They organised the gate keepers, time keepers and so forth.

So it was the Thredbo Ski Race Club that really put Thredbo on the map internationally to let the people world wide know, that there was a ski resort where ski racing and training in their 'off ski' period could take place in Australia. We had the Swiss team, the Austrian team, the Italian teams coming out for two or three weeks training and then participating in the Thredbo Cup which became an international event. It ended up in 1990 with the World Cup being held in Thredbo and that was on television in Japan, live throughout the race. It had two hours on television in France, two hours in Austria and I think it had two or three repeats in various programmes in America on NBS and some other. It really made Thredbo a world resort. I really think that Thredbo Ski Race Club which was formed by those four people needs the kudos for doing that. I think that should be recorded in the history of Thredbo.

During the World Cup, everybody else helped of course. The company put lots of money into it. The ski school also came over and helped as gate keepers, but it was basically the Thredbo Ski Race Club which supplied all the manpower to run it. Otmar Dorfer was Chief of Course, I was Chief of Race. Most of the ex racers of the club – young boys – became gate keepers, so it really is something that the Thredbo Historical Society should keep on record, and perhaps, so it might be a good idea for you to have an interview with Adrian Studley. Adrian lives in Jindabyne. He was the club captain for years, and he was president for one year. It would be worthwhile to talk to him. So he has a lot of records of that time. He and Larry took the first team across to Mt Rose and then they went to Aspen two years later, and did an exchange programme with the Aspen Junior Ski Club. The kids from Aspen came over here for our season and our kids went over there for their season, not the whole season, but two or three weeks.

I think the reason why I have been made a life member was because I was involved in the early building of the club and got them the grant to build them the club, and then was president for five or six years and worked with the club whether I was president or not. That is probably why they made me a life member.

Edie: Would you tell me about your life membership of the NSW Ski Association?

Kurt: The NSW Ski Association was originally the Ski Council of NSW. I was chairman of that from 1960 to 1963, but prior to being chairman, I was race committee chairman for the same organisation which is now the Ski Association of NSW.

Later on after that I was replaced by other people, and a few years later, they got into financial trouble. I went back on to the board again and I guaranteed them to the bank and took over as chairman again and guaranteed the finances. I didn't actually give any money; I just guaranteed it to the bank. This was in 1964 to '66. I think I was president again for those two years and pulled them out of their financial problems. I didn't do that on my own, of course, lots of other people helped. So after two terms, they made me an honorary member. Somebody else then took over, and in fact, I ended up being the president of the Australian Ski Federation and that is when they made me a life member for coming back in and helping them get out of financial problems

Edie: What did you do as president of the Australian Ski Federation?

Kurt: This was again a financial thing. The Australian Ski Federation was also in financial problems. After I came back from Europe in 1970 as a team manager of the Australian teams, I spat my dummy and said "I've done enough. I will look after my business now" because I made some suggestions that some of the kids that had played up, should be disciplined severely and although they were fabulous skiers, they influenced the other kids. The organisation didn't want to do that so I spat my dummy and walked off. It proved right because the following team manager had untold trouble the following year.

I wasn't doing anything, so the Australian Ski Federation got into financial trouble. So Bert Gardener, who was president of the NSW Ski Association, said "Kurt, you've got to pull the Australian Ski Federation out of this financial mess. Will you come and stand for president." "No, I've had enough; I don't want to get involved." Bert said "I'll do all the work, I will be secretary general, but we need a name, just come and stand for it as a name." He talked me into it in the long run. I was then president of the Australian Ski Federation from 1978 – 1983. Although Bert said he would do all the work, I can't be part of an organisation and not

get involved. Obviously I am the type of person, if I'm part of it; I've got to be involved. So anyhow we managed to get it back into reasonable shape again.

As I was the representative of Australia on the International Ski Federation, it gave me more standing at the International Ski Federation as the president of the Australian Ski Federation. That's how I got involved in planning to have a ski congress in Australia in '83, which we brought to Australia with six hundred delegates from all over the world, at the bi-annual congress in Sydney. They talked about it for years. It was the best run congress they've had for years. We were very lucky; we had beautiful weather and Sydney harbour. Besides having all the working sessions in the Hilton Hotel, we also had free time and took them out into the countryside. It was in May, it was beautiful weather, blue skies and sunshine and that of course made everything very impressive to the international people.

That was when they appointed me as the chairman of the Small Nations Committee which represented Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea - small nations meaning small in the way of alpine ski racing. America, Canada and central Europeans were the big nations and although Australia is bigger than any of them, in skiing it was a small nation. Eventually they changed that to call it to the Developing Skiing Nations, not the Small Nations. I was chairman of that at FIS level for a number of years until all these nations started getting their own representatives on the International Ski Federation committees. I then resigned from that position.

That is when FIS – the International Ski Federation -after many years as a Technical Delegate, the chairman of a sub committee gave me the honour of making me an honorary member of the Alpine Committee of FIS. It is all really things that I loved doing and did for my own pleasure as much as for the benefit of the kids. But I enjoyed doing it and really it didn't do my business any harm either because I was going to Europe anyhow, for business reasons so I could combine that usually with the times when these meetings were on. Bi-annual FIS and bi-annual Congress, and two meetings a year of the various technical committees. So I managed to use my own money in the business to go overseas at that time and attend all these at the same time. So basically it was a good arrangement – one helped the other. The fact that I was involved in ski racing, ski administration, also helped my business connections with Merit, so it was of mutual benefit.

Edie: You were a technical delegate of the International Ski Federation (FIS) and I wonder if you would tell me about that?

Kurt: In 1976 or 77, I was appointed a technical delegate (TD) for the Alpine Committee of FIS. Now a technical delegate is really not a referee because each race has a referee and a chief of race, but this is a representative of the International Ski Federation at all international races, that looks after the technical standard of all the courses. The main reason for them is for the safety of the races. So in other words the technical delegate inspects safety nets and other safety measures on the courses and can actually overrule the jury of the race. He is sort of a policeman to look after the race – that everything is right. But a good technical delegate actually works with the race committee. He helps them to get the thing right and checks the specifications of length of the course, the number of gates and the fairness of the race is adhered to.

So that is the position I was appointed to and I didn't only do these things in Australia. I did them at European courses. I was TD for instance, at the World Cup in Bad Gastein in Austria. I was also became an Inspector of Courses. Basically you have to be a technical

delegate first, before you become an inspector of courses, and then you can homologate a course – in other words certify a course, that it has a standard of the specifications that FIS require for a downhill course, or a slalom or a giant slalom course.

I homologated the original homologations of all but the first one in Australia which was done by Willy Schaffler. After that first one, I homologated all the courses in Australia and I also did all the courses in New Zealand and I helped New Zealand for the first few international events they had there. Four years running I was the technical delegate for those FIS races there. I got New Zealand to stand on their own feet and run their own races. I basically helped them. I've got a nice award from New Zealand for that too. That is basically what a technical delegate does, not only in Australia but world wide.

They always try to use somebody from another country to be the technical delegate at an international race. The organisers of the race have to pay fares and expenses of the technical delegates. In Australia, being so far away from the European or American centres, quite frequently they allowed a New Zealander to be a technical delegate at Australian races or an Australian to be at New Zealand races other than for major races like World Cups. Then it was always a European or an American technical delegate. But I acted as a technical delegate at the World Cup in Bad Gastein, Austria, for instance. I was on the jury of the World Championships in Bormeo. That was, I think, in 1980. No, in 1980 I was a team manager at Lake Placid for the alpine section of the Australian team at the Winter Olympics, so Bormeo must have been 1982.

Then again when we were running the World Cup in Thredbo, I was the Chief of Race, but we had a European as a technical delegate who was overseeing that I was doing everything right.

Edie: Is there great difference in the race when you did these duties in Europe versus Australia because of the snow conditions in Australia and the conditions in Europe?

Kurt: Well you do have good and bad days in Australia and you have good and bad days in Europe and America as well. There have been postponements of races world-wide, so the various weather conditions do affect ski racing world wide. You see, we do international races in South America too, which have a similar temperature range although their mountains are higher than ours, they still have warm periods. There is a difference of course. American and European courses usually have higher altitudes and therefore better than the snow conditions than we get here but we have had some beautiful snow conditions here too at various times.

During the World Cup we were very lucky – it rained two days before the World Cup. We had prepared all the courses and we were very lucky and thought that the snow was going to be sloppy and soft for the World Cup. In fact we had snow hardener – ten tons of it at the top of the course. On the morning of the first race, we got up at day break and went up the lift in the dark and we thought we would have to use this snow hardener but overnight we had a very hard frost. We got off the lift at 6.00 am, and just after day break at 6.30 am, and couldn't put our stock into the ground. It was as hard as a rock. The race went off beautifully and the last runner didn't have ruts at all. Everybody thought it was fantastic.

In fact, the Swiss coach who was an Austrian actually, who had previously said to me "What do you know about ski racing to me?" at the end of the race came over and dug his elbow into my ribs and said in Austrian dialect "Guat Hast Gmacht!" which meant "You did it very

well!” And that was worth more to me more than anything else. From an experienced European coach – the coach of the Swiss team – to do that to me and say “well done” basically, that was a real thrill. We had a very, very good race, right through. In fact some of the Austrian racers had phone calls during the break between two runs, from their families in Austria, saying that they were watching it on television – it was wonderful – sunshine, blue skies and hard ice. So we were very, very lucky.

Edie: Kurt, would you donate this to the Thredbo Historical Society and do you mind if it is transcribed?

Kurt: Of course not, not at all. That’s fine. It is just part of history, I guess.

Edie: Thank you very much.

Kurt: It is part of my life. Skiing has been part of my life. Not just my business. It’s been my sport and very much my life. So I am thrilled to death to have it recorded. Thank you.

Post Script: There are many others that helped to bring about the success of the culmination of “The World Cup”; Otmar Dorfer, Beryl & Allan Smith, David Price, Malcolm Milne (as a runner), John Kean (from Dept. of Sports & Recreation), Laurie Rose, Adrian Studley and many others. Without them I could not have achieved what I did. *Kurt Lance*

COPYRIGHT OF THE ORAL HISTORY OF KURT LANCE IS HELD JOINTLY BY
KURT LANCE AND THE THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY INCORPORATED,
PO Box 6, THREDBO NSW 2625.