

Data, Instinct, and the Art of Skiing

30/10/2025 Interview with olympic champion Aksel Lund Svindal on performance, technique, and intuition

Two-time Olympic champion and one of the greatest alpine skiers of his generation, Aksel Lund Svindal has always been fascinated by performance – whether on the slopes or in business. Known for his analytical mind as much as for his fearless racing style, he has successfully transitioned from professional sports to entrepreneurship. In this interview, Aksel talks about the role of data in skiing, the connection between sport and business, and why human instincts still matter more than any algorithm.

Aksel, skiing is a typical action sport – practiced in a natural and unpredictable environment, full of risks, highly dependent on individual skill and the athlete's actual condition. Is skiing really a good case for data crunching?

Aksel LundSvindal: You can't really plan a ski race – that's the unimaginable part. But there's definitely good data you can use in skiing. Of course, we don't have as many data points as you might have in Formula 1. In car racing there are sensors and computers everywhere. In skiing, the sensors mostly go straight to your brain rather than into a computer. But the product we deliver is data – it's speed. The

clock tells you everything you need to know. We use data all the time in training to find the fastest line, the best material, the right technique. But once you're in the race, it's about trusting yourself and your instincts. You become your own data processor, making decisions in split seconds based on all the input you've gathered before.

So, in general, do you believe in data?

Svindal: Yes. When you have a goal, data shows you whether you're moving in the right direction. It builds confidence and improves team dynamics. If I tell a teammate, "That wasn't good enough," and it's just my opinion, we'll probably argue. But if I say, "That wasn't good enough if you want to win," and show the data to back it up, then we can have a constructive conversation about how to improve. Data takes emotion out of the equation and helps everyone focus on solutions.

Have you ever won races because of better data analytics?

Svindal:I'm sure I have. On the Norwegian team, we used some very specific methods to get better data. For example, we'd always send a coach with a camera to film the racecourse from the opposite side of the valley. That gave us one steady, helicopter-like view of the whole run. By filming every racer from exactly the same angle, we could overlay the runs and see precisely where someone was faster or slower. The race organizers might give us five split times, but we could create five hundred by doing our own overlays.

Data told you, where to ski?

Svindal: Most of the time, the data confirmed what I already felt. But knowing instead of thinking gives you confidence, and that confidence definitely won me races. Execution is about commitment, and commitment is much easier to build when you trust the data.

Is skiing a technology sport?

Svindal: For sure. Every run we do is training, but it's also equipment testing. We always record snow conditions, temperature, slope steepness, everything. We can see trends and figure out which skis perform best under which conditions. That's technology and data working hand in hand.

Do you also use data in your personal life?

Svindal:I'm less data-focused in daily life. I don't wear smartwatches or track everything. When I was an active athlete, I sometimes used data to calibrate how I felt. But there's also a downside to tracking everything. Sometimes it's healthy to just let your mind go free – go for a run or ski without looking at numbers. You can actually train yourself to feel your body – to know when you've pushed too hard or not enough. Once you've calibrated that through data, you can also trust your instincts. I think that's important, both in sports and in life.

Skiing isn't exactly healthy, is it?

Svindal: No, not really. Very few top athletes would say that competing at the world-class level in their sport is healthy – you push your body too far. And in skiing, you add the risk factor, which makes it even less healthy. But there's also mental health, which is just as important. Sports have huge value for me mentally. If I don't work out or do something active for a while, I don't feel good. So even though skiing can be hard on your body, it's great for your mind.

Are you still like to feel the risk of skiing today?

Svindal: These days, I still challenge myself, but in a much safer way. There's no need to take crazy risks if you're not chasing a gold medal.

What's your take on sport and business?

Svindal: People often joke that companies hire athletes to talk about motivation and teamwork, and that it's a bit of a cliché. But I don't think it is. Sports are incredibly data-driven – the performance result is the data, shown live on TV. That makes sport a great example for business. Everything happens in real time, in front of an audience. The teamwork is totally transparent. If we don't work well together, everyone sees it. That level of visibility forces collaboration – and that's something many businesses could learn from.

After your professional skiing career, you ventured into the startup world. What fascinates you about it?

Svindal: Entrepreneurship feels a lot like being an athlete. It's not a nine-to-five job – it's a lifestyle. You're constantly thinking about your project, even if you're not physically at work. I love that challenge. Business is another form of competition. Competing and improving – that's what drives me.

Is being an entrepreneur comparable to being an athlete?

Svindal: Absolutely. Both require full commitment and a strong mindset. In both worlds, you must be focused, resilient, and ready to take risks. You win some, you lose some, and you learn along the way.

Sounds like a new career option?

Svindal:I'm not sure that I see myself as a CEO right now – that would be a huge commitment. After 17 years in professional sports, I need a bit of a cool-down phase. But I love learning from smart people in business and exchanging ideas. It's a different kind of teamwork, but just as rewarding.

Then where do you see yourself in 20 years?

Svindal: Twenty years is a long time! I hope I'll still be in this hybrid position – connected to sports,

involved in interesting businesses, learning new things. That balance makes me happy.

Will there then still be live ski races, or will robots and AI have taken over?

Svindal: I absolutely believe that there will still be live sports. The emotions in sports – the joy, the heartbreak, the goosebumps – you can't replace that with AI. The human factor makes sports so powerful. And that will never go away.

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