

sportswoman and sportsman of the year



**Sports
Illustrated**

DECEMBER 19, 1994 VOLUME 61, NO. 25

It's a pure and rather uncomplicated part of his nature: the desire to help others. It wasn't instilled in him by personal suffering, poverty, sermons or guilt. Both his parents are doctors, so that may have something to do with it. Whatever the source, the ties binding us to our fellow man are seemingly visible to Johann Olav Koss, as real as pain, more



lasting than glory, strong as hemp, so that when he passes someone less fortunate than he, Koss reaches out instinctively. *Hitch on. Follow me.*

You see this as Koss—hero of the 1994 Winter Olympic Games, built like some Norse god, square-jawed, strapping, straight-nosed—walks to the start of the New York City Marathon on Nov. 6 with the



165 disabled runners of the Achilles Track Club. He helps a wheelchair-bound athlete over a curb, then unobtrusively clears the way for a one-legged runner on crutches. He has the manner of just one more Achilles volunteer. Three days earlier Koss was honored at the Achilles Track Club's annual New York dinner, both for his athletic feats (four gold medals and a silver in two Olympics, and three world records at this year's Games in Lillehammer) and for his work with disabled athletes in Norway. But he goes unrecognized by most of the Achilles marathoners. That's how he likes it. He's retired from speed skating now, unregretfully unwealthy, a third-year medical student with a headful of dreams and almost a lifetime in which to accomplish them.

This marathon is Koss's first and the fulfillment of a four-year-old promise. After Koss won his first world speed skating championship, an all-around competition in 1990, a young Norwegian named Ketil Moe wrote and asked Koss to accompany him in the New York City Marathon. Moe has cystic fibrosis, yet he had run in New York every year save one since '83, when he was 16. Moe, believing that the daily regimen of exercise had helped keep him alive, wanted other young people with cystic fibrosis to know of his accomplishments. Koss's presence would guarantee publicity.

Koss wrote back. He couldn't run the marathon while he was still competing in speed skating, but when he retired, perhaps in 1994, he would gladly do so. The two remained in touch. In '92 Koss and Moe started the Johann Olav Koss Run in Kristiansand, 150 miles outside Oslo, a fun run dedicated to encouraging disabled and able-bodied athletes to participate side by side. Last year nearly 2,000 runners took part in it. It was in this race in '93 that Koss jogged hand in hand with an eight-year-old blind boy, Aud Martin, who, television viewers may remember, became Koss's guest at the 1,500-meter race in Lillehammer. Koss, renowned for his punishing training sessions, would think of Martin when he was on the brink of exhaustion. "When I'm really down mentally, always what comes into my head is a picture of a blind kid who's smiling just to be able to run," Koss once said. "He always is saying to me, 'Come on, come on,' and it makes things O.K., of course."

In this way Koss hears it too: *Hitch on. Follow me.*
The goal of Moe and Koss in New York is to finish, but Moe, now 27, an amazing age for someone with his disease, is also hoping to break 7½ hours. When he was younger he once ran this marathon in 5½ hours. Stopping regularly to cough up the phlegm that accumulates in his lungs, he cannot jog more than a few yards at a time. His usual pace is a fast walk. His legs are reed-thin, his face sallow and gaunt. Koss is part of a support team that includes Moe's physiotherapist, a Norwegian radio reporter and Moe's wife, Astrid, a 26-year-old with blue eyes as round as nickels. Rain is in the forecast. The dawn is tinted red. At 7:45 a.m. an air horn blasts, and to cheers and applause, the Achilles runners begin the windy trek across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. It's a cheerful, determined group facing a long, uncertain day.