



Gustave 'Gus' Lussi

Skating legend Lussi dead at 95

By GLENN NARDELLI
Enterprise Staff Writer

LAKE PLACID — Figure skating pioneer Gustave Lussi of Lake Placid died Thursday morning due to natural causes. He was 95.

Lussi's innovative instruction of such Olympic greats as Dick Button and Dorothy Hamill, which many believe redefined the sport's entire ideology, earned him the moniker, "The Father of Modern Free Skating."

"He did more to change and develop the sport than anyone," said Button, who, with instruction from Lussi, won gold medals in the 1948 and 1952 Winter Olympics. "He taught me everything I know about skating."

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Under Lussi's tutelage, Button, now a commentator for ABC Sports, developed the "flying camel," a standard move in many of today's repertoires. While working with Lussi, Button was the first to perform a "double axel" in competition.

Other maneuvers Lussi is credited with inventing include the "Hamill camel," which he devised with gold medalist Dorothy Hamill, and the "flying sit spin."

"He was the god we all looked up to when I was little," said Cecily Morrow, who took skating lessons from Lussi as a girl and recently produced a PBS documentary of his life. "He produced countless World and Olympic champions."

Morrow, who is writing a book on Lussi's life and skating theories, said he became an instructor after coming to the United States from a small town in Switzerland, known as Stans, in 1915.

Morrow said Lussi studied the physics of skating and the capabilities of the human body while posing as a model for Philadelphia sculptor R. Tait McKenzie. Feeling that he was a bit too old to perform in competitions himself, Lussi said if he couldn't be a champion, he would make champions.

Family members and friends viewed Lussi as a loving patriarch who respected people who worked hard to reach their potential — regardless of the endeavor.

"When it came to coaching, he was very tough," said Lussi's grandson, Arthur. "He would challenge his students to push themselves beyond their physical limits."

"As a pupil, you would do anything for him," Button said. "He was a wonderful teacher. He gave you the enthusiasm to respond to him."

"He was a great guy who lead a great life," said his granddaughter, Cristina L. Griffin. "What more could you ask for?"

Griffin, who like Morrow, took skating lessons from her grandfather when she was a girl, said he expected as much effort from her as he did from his world class skaters.

"I think a lot of skaters came to Lake Placid because of his tremendous ability to inspire and instruct skaters to the point where they became Olympic medalists," said former Lake Placid Mayor Robert Peacock. "He did a tremendous job for the area and for the world of figure skating."

In his later years, Lussi never stopped teaching, instructing a student as recently as last summer. Spending the winters in Florida and summers here with his wife of more than 60 years, the former Thelma MacDowell, Lussi developed a myriad of hobbies, painting flowers on cypress planks and making lamps out of wagon wheel hubs.

The Lussis had two sons, Serge and Craig; five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A reception in celebration of Lussi's life will be held July 17 for friends, family and students at Swiss Meadows on Averyville Road in Lake Placid.

Memorial donations may be made to the Lake Placid Sinfonietta.