

Gustave Lussi - 1898-1993

A Great One, Gone - Leaving His Legacy

by Cecily Morrow

The worldwide family that is figure skating, lost one of its most historically influential, innovative personages during the night of June 23, 1993. Gustave Francois Lussi, who'd turned ninety-five three weeks earlier, left us.

Members of the Lussi family and close friends were on the phone to me in Lake Placid; simultaneously, Mom in Maryland got a call from *American Skating World* - as she and I discussed this obituary, we, uncontrollably damp-eyed, knowing the devotion of those who'd studied with Mr. Lussi, sixteen world and Olympic champions, and hundreds of other skaters whom he'd elevated to superior achievement, thought of how the news would go out among Mr. Lussi's admirers, through an electronic communication network in a world so different from that in which he'd emigrated to New York City from his birthplace of Stans, Switzerland. His memories of that 1919 boat trip were vivid, crossing the Atlantic in a boat "full of American soldiers returning home after the (first world) war."

Mr. Lussi died, as he lived, with "guts," the quality he firmly recommended to his students. After experiencing breathing problems, when his physician was called and prescribed hospitalization, the man refused, and went to sleep.

Mr. Lussi's ideas radically changed skating in this century and continue still to do so. Everyone involved in figure skating today follows Lussi skating methodology, perhaps without realizing it. Those of us currently participating in summer skating schools have Mr. Lussi to thank for introducing summer skating in Lake Placid in 1932. He helped establish the competitive performance as a composition set to a timed piece of music; prior to this a competitor took to the ice and skated until the referee stopped the music. He closed the figures, which, before this, were left open at the center. He introduced the "checked" landing position in jumping; until then, skaters were landing backwards and turning a backward three to a forward inside edge. He made the original design for what is now the widely used "Pattern 99" freestyle blade.

He invented many maneuvers: the flying sit spin; the flying camel, or Button camel, with Olympic Champion Dick Button; and the Hamill camel with Olympic Champion Dorothy Hamill. He brought in the delayed jumps. Dick Button, under his tutelage, landed the first double Axel in competition. His students were the first to do triple jumps, facilitated by Mr. Lussi's invention of the crossed-leg position in the air that everyone used today in the triple and quadruple jumps. "His influence is everywhere in skating," said 1960 World Pair Champion, Maria Jelinek, in a 1989 video interview for the subsequent PBS documentary *GUSTAVE LUSSI: The Man Who Changed Skating*.

Mr. Lussi, the son of Joseph and Philomena Widmar Lucay, grew up in Switzerland with several brothers and sisters, the families of whom are still in Switzerland. When he arrived in the United States, at the age of twenty-one, Gustave changed the spelling of his name to Lussi because, he said, he "didn't like to make 'y's'." Three years later, as a young skating coach starting out at The Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society, in a similarly minimalist way, he was trying to eliminate any extraneous movement in

his student's skating. Dick Button, who studied with him in the forties and fifties, said of Mr. Lussi's skating philosophy that "There was a reason for everything, so that there was understanding... He was the first important teacher to thing things through and understand where the body should be and how it should be."

Brought to Lake Placid to study with Mr. Lussi by his coach, Arthur Bourke, World Champion, John Misha Petkevich, says that Mr. Lussi "was a man who uniquely understood the subtleties of the physics of skating beyond what anyone else understood... People who have significant education in the technical aspects [of skating] haven't even gotten to the stage he was able to achieve without any formal education or training." Mr. Lussi's discoveries of the fundamental laws of physics sometimes came about quite by accident. "One day," he said, while "setting at a marble soda fountain, I started to play around with my ring." He spun it and, all of a sudden, the heavy part encasing the stone, flipped over and spun upright. From this he "got onto spinning," deducing that "weight through force rises," and "increased the spinning terrifically."

He credits his understanding of anatomy and "all what the body could do" to a sculptor, R. Tait McKenzie, for whom he modeled as a young man in Philadelphia. One of Dr. McKenzie's sculptures, a relief entitled "Brothers of the Wind," depicting Mr. Lussi as a speed skater, was reproduced for the entranceway of the 1988 Calgary Olympics Saddledome Arena.

Gustave Lussi is survived by his wife, Thelma MacDowell Lussi; two sons, Craig M. Lussi of Chevy Chase, Maryland, and Serge G. Lussi of Lake Placid, New York; his grandchildren, Arthur S. Lussi, Christina L. Griffin, Katrina D. Lussi, Craig H. Lussi, and Diana L. Austin; and three great-grandchildren.

A memorial gathering of family and friends is planned for the afternoon of July 17th in Lake Placid. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to the Lake Placid Sinfonietta. Several people have expressed a desire to make memorial donations to the preservation of the Gustave Lussi legacy. Those who wish to do so should speak with Arthur Lussi in Lake Placid. Many of us who knew Mr. Lussi will be at the Swiss Meadows/Edelweiss gathering, reflecting not only upon his personal being, and his pre-eminence in his field, but also upon the way in which cultural messages are transmitted from generation to generation. During the last decade, Mr. Lussi became concerned with preserving his skating methodology, developed during training seven decades of pupils. After seventy years of refining his teaching techniques, he sensed the need for a permanent record of his work.

As a former Lussi student, I have found myself - quite by chance, really - faced with the task of adequately preserving this legacy. Working on it, I realized that this meant more than simply compiling a list of his spinning and jumping instructions. His method of teaching extended much more beyond a "technique," because, says Sara Grosvenor, a former Lussi pupil and now photo editor at *US News and World Report*, "he took a direct interest in his students' personal growth." Eileen Seigh, a former Lussi student and world competitor, remembers that "he required you to be a lady." It was a form of respect which he showed you and that he expected in return. After a lesson he would shake your hand or, if you were a girl, he'd offer his cheek for a kiss. He was a "natty



ASW PHOTO BY SARA GROSVENOR

dresser," always taking pride in his appearance, and he expected his skaters to do the same.

He shared with his pupils other notions and activities. "He'd take us to the movies...invite us all out to Little Alpes [his home in Lake Placid that he built] for spaghetti suppers." His granddaughter, Christina Griffin, told me how "he made a whistle out of a young sapling, out of a tree...lubricating it with butter." This reminded me of a visit to his Lake Placid home last summer when he was battling an overpopulation of rodents in the garden behind his house. We sat, as always, in the living room which overlooked the infested greenery. On the table beside his easy-chair was a large box of chewing gum. Spying the quizzical look on my face, when I noticed the gum, he explained that he "put peanut butter on a stick of chewing gum and dropped it down each hole." The rodent ate the peanut butter and, consequently, the gum, and that was the end of the problem.

Maria Jelinek remembers, "He was always teaching us things; he showed us how to catch a fish; how to plant a tree." Her brother, Canadian Minister of Parliament, Otto Jelinek, recalls Mr. Lussi being "like a second father... He instilled discipline in us... and I think you can extend that into business, politics, or anything - self-discipline... You were a better person for having taken lessons from Mr. Lussi."

Christina Griffin, who has "wonderful memories of [Gustave and Thelma] as just her grandparents," said she looks upon skaters like Dick Button, the Jelineks, and (Olympic Silver Medalist) Paul Wylie, not as champion skaters, but more as "part of the family."

Hearing of his death, within the last two days, former students and skating friends have called and spoken of him as if he were a family member whom they had lost. In the same breath they talked about his life and their own parents, interchanging the two almost imperceptibly. I began to see a pattern. Each person who spoke to me had been inspired in some way by his firm influence.

At this time, former pupils, others connected with skating who knew him, as well as his fiercest competitors (detractors,

even) seemed willing to pull together, to help preserve his legacy, because in some way then consider themselves part of his larger family, the world of skating excellence, aspiration.

I feel honored to have been associated with a coach who trained such greats as two-time Olympic Champion, Dick Button; Olympic Champions, Tenley Albright, Dorothy Hamill, and John Curry; World Champions, Hayes Alan Jenkins and his brother, David Jenkins, Otto and Maria Jelinek, Emmerich Danzer, Aja Zanova, and John Misha Petkevich; Olympic Medalists, Montgomery Wilson and his sister, Constance Wilson; U.S. National Champions, Arthur Vaughn and his sister, Jane Vaughn Sullivan, Yvonne Sherman, Gretchen Merrill, Lois Waring, Joan Tozzer, and Gordon McKellen Jr.; World competitors, Ronnie Robertson and Eileen Seigh; National Junior Champions, Egbert S. Carey, William Grinditch, Carol Wanek, and Lorilee Pritchard; National Novice Champions, Jo Bamum, Mabel MacPherson,

Mary Batdorf, and High Graham.

He gave lessons to Olympic Champions, Barbara Ann Scott, and Trish Shuba; World Champion, Don Jackson; Olympic Medalists, Suzanne Morrow, Toller Cranston, and Paul Wylie; U.S. National Champions, Dorothy Goos, Laurence Owen, Dorothyann Nelson and Pieter Kollen; Canadian Champion, Linda Carbonetto; Italian Champion, Carlo Fassi; Austrian Champion, Wolfgang Schwartz; Evy Scotvold and countless other greats.

When asked years ago why he felt that his students were the best - was it their unusual talent? He replied: "I wouldn't say it was talent... I hate the word. They worked hard. They had determination and desire, and sacrificed."

If you did something well, he'd take your hand and offer "Congratulations...you made a job of it." In June of 1990, during one of his skating lessons, MR. Lussi repeated that gesture to Paul Wylie, who remarked at the time, "Now I know where Evy (Scotvold) got that...occasionally he'll shake my hand and say 'Congratulations.'" From Mr. Lussi that was the ultimate compliment, that and being asked to demonstrate something for another one of his pupils.

"We believed in him... a supreme psychologist, he knew how to get it out of us," says a beautifully poised Eileen Seigh in her television interview.

He had a tremendous ability to focus on the student and the work to be done, to get to the root of the matter immediately - it was that way with everything he spent time doing - and he expected the same kind of concentration from a student. "He engendered tremendous desire in us." His measure of a good lesson was seeing you sweat, not so much from an aerobic workout, because he'd teach you on only two strips of ice, but from applying yourself so concentratedly to your task. That focused attention, combined with the effort he demanded you exert to achieve the ultimate spin or the most delayed jump (from almost a standstill), would make you perspire.

"He had a definite method. There was

A Great One, Gone

Continued From Page 8

a timing in the jumps." He wanted you to have control going into a jump or spin. Speed over the ice made a spin travel, and speed going into a jump that a skater was just learning would necessitate accelerating the timing of a take-off for which the student might not be prepared. Rather, when learning, or working to make a jump bigger and better, he wanted a skater to rely on his own timing, strength, and accuracy of technique. The jump, when developed to full potential, with added speed, became spectacular, an event, a show-stopper.

Dick Button, from a 1989 interview, said that Mr. Lussi "taught the principles of great skating - lean with the curve, simple but pure..." That's what he was after in skating - flow, beautiful, effortless, unencumbered, movement, with breath-taking, gravity-defying jumps and spins.

He never catered to the trend. During the last decade of his life, as we discussed the details of a permanent record of his skating methodology in a book on which we were collaborating, we'd sit in the cafeteria of the arena, overlooking the 1980 Olympic speedskating oval and, in the distance, the ski jumps, and he'd say: "What are they doing with the quadruple jumps? 'Why do we go into this world which doesn't exist?' and 'Where do we go from here?'" Every day - the same questions. Finally, one day I understood his meaning: the skaters and coaches weren't necessarily pioneering with the quadruples. With their tremendous strength and ability, these talented athletes were adding another revolution to an already existing jump and would follow this practice until we'd have five-revolution jumps. But, by following this trend, the sport would be no further along in developing new jumps and spins.

"It's a great shame that he couldn't teach... today... because he could contribute, obviously, to the last moment," said John Misha Petkevich, calling from his home after hearing of Mr. Lussi's death. "Unfortunately most skaters don't know exactly what they're doing, but if they paid more attention to the fundamental techniques which [Mr. Lussi] taught, they would have an opportunity to advance their technical capability and still do the quadruples."

Mr. Lussi was not interested in just landing the triple or quadruple jumps; he was more interested in how you did them. If he felt that you were landing a jump with too stiff a knee, for instance, he'd quip "I'm gonna rub some Absorbine Jr. into your knees."

He wanted to give all jumps a suspended quality, be it single, double, triple, going for more distance, height, and beauty. He believed that one should apply the same amount of energy to a single jump as a double. If he wanted you to do a bigger, more delayed Axel, at some point he'd say: "Dick Button had a jump of twenty foot." And you'd start measuring your own and try to give your Axel more distance by employing his techniques.

Eileen Seigh was part of his "revolution from this old fashioned type of skating into this new brand of American freeskating...He had them rewriting the rulebook." Mr. Lussi was never concerned with pleasing the officials. During lessons pupils were often treated to the story of how the delayed Axel was invented: "Barbara Jones had a terrific split jump. One day I said to her 'Why don't you leave your leg out like that in an Axel?' Then the officials called me down to the committee

room and told me I shouldn't teach a jump like that to a girl, it was 'unladylike,' 'dangerous,' 'likely to hurt her.' Glancing out over the expanse of ice in the '32 rink, seeing girls doing triples, he'd let out a huge chuckle. Our lessons were peppered with stories like this, illustrated examples designed to inspire.

It wasn't just the things he taught us, or how he taught them, the way he combined words, his accent and eccentric usage of English (his second language) that made you remember what he said. He'd employ hundreds, perhaps thousands of mnemonic devices and anecdotes to make the training come alive to the student. He'd lay \$100.00 in twenty dollar bills out on the barrier and say: "I'll bet you a hundred dollars that you can't do a forward outside eight without changing edge." You'd think, "no problem," and carefully start a forward outside eight on the right foot. When you then rushed off at the center onto the left foot, he stopped you, saying: "There, at the push, you changed edge." And with that, you realized exactly what edge you were on for the forward push. He didn't just tell you what to do, or feed you a list of instructions; he made you think and discover for yourself how things worked.

Mr. Lussi's technique is as fresh and useful today as ever, and his standards of performance, his exhortations to excel through "systematic" training, and his positive influence, remain. "His really is the foundation of technique in skating. And no one will ever, ever be able to get away from it, because it's based on sound, fundamental concepts," confirms John Misha Petkevich.

Shortly after Mr. Lussi's death, Eileen Seigh, on the phone from her home in Colorado, expressed concern with the current skating trends: "Mr. Lussi made skating fun - exciting, challenging, and fun. The kids today seem to be on a treadmill. I wonder if they are having fun." Mr. Lussi "was a teacher, a mentor, a father figure, a friend. I always thank him for making my life...the way he loved us and the things he taught us about becoming people...because you're a person a long time after you're a skating champion."

Typically, he remarked to one of my students, a few years ago: "You can't dream of what you want to be...you got to make yourself do it..." Thus, I was reminded of his own determination to excel in life: "If I can't be a champion, I shall make them." And he did. ASW

Memories Of Gus

Dear American Skating World,

The article in your July issue on Mr. Gus Lussi by Cecily Morrow was particularly factual and entertaining. It brought back a lot of memories. I would like to mention that Hayes and David Jenkins were Olympic, as well as World Champions. Also, Ronnie Robertson, in addition to being a World Team Member, was Olympic and World Freeskating Champion. Mr. Robertson is currently helping to keep the Lussi Legacy alive by sharing his knowledge with skaters such as Brian Boitano and, this July, Kristi Yamaguchi in Paramount, California.

Sincerely,
Lorin John O'Neil
West Los Angeles

Dear Lorin,

Consider it mentioned.

ASW