

Genius on ice: If there were no Gustave Lussi, would there be a flying camel?



With wife Thelma outside their Florida home, Gustave Lussi cradles what he likes to call "my bread and butter for over sixty years." About that lifetime of innovation, Lussi is typically modest: "We just got out on the ice," he says, "and scrambled around."

Gustave Lussi

anyone who has ever been thrilled by world-class figure skating knows the terms: double axel, triple axel, triple toe loop, flying camel, flying sit spin. Just as familiar may be the names of the daring ice artisans who perform these feats: two-time world champion Scott Hamilton, national champion Rosalynn Sumners, Elaine Zayak, John Curry, Toller Cranston, Dorothy Hamill. Considerably less familiar is the name of the man who virtually invented most of freestyle skating's dazzling leaps and spins—a true giant of the sport who has guided and tutored dozens of world champions and Olympic gold medalists. He is 85-year-old Gustave Lussi.

Two-time Olympic champion Dick Button, a student and lifelong friend of Lussi's who is now a commentator for ABC Sports, puts it this way: "He is responsible for changing the face of skating. I think he's the greatest teacher that ever existed because of his common-sense approach to the sport. He revolutionized spinning, and it hasn't been done as well since he stopped teaching."

Lussi "retired" in 1978, but he hasn't exactly stopped teaching. From May to August, he can usually be found in Lake Placid, site of the 1980 Winter Olympics. He will honor certain special requests for assistance. He will instruct as a favor. The rest of the year he lives in a modest old house in Florida with his wife of more than fifty years, Thelma.

Lussi is a tall, bulky man with ruddy cheeks and a sprightly twinkle in his eyes that belies an often stern expression. He moves slowly, because his own experimentation with spinning led to severe osteoarthritis in his left hip, eventually requiring a surgical fusion in 1960. But his energy remains undiminished. Spending an afternoon with Lussi is like attending a seminar in logic, physics, Olympic history, human body movement and the wisdom garnered from a career spanning more than sixty years.

Born in Stans, Switzerland, Lussi grew up as a ski jumper, but turned to ice-skating after an accident caused a "skull fracture that damn near scared me to death, and I lost my nerve." He took up figure skating at the urging of a friend, and came to the United States in his early twenties, where his competence developed rapidly. Before long he was offered a teaching job at the Philadelphia Skating Club, but Lussi, who was supporting himself as a dishwasher in Manhattan, couldn't afford the move.

Then came a stroke of luck. On his way to work one morning he found a diamond stickpin lying in the snow outside a Brooklyn

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Solo figure skating is a unique Olympic event. There is no time to beat; no distance to measure. There are few objective guidelines. Mastery of technique must be surpassed by artistic expression. When technique lacks efficiency, the skater's grace and presentation are lost. The margin that separates success from failure is infinitesimal.

Gustave Lussi has never taken a physics lesson, but his grasp of the biomechanics of human body movement and his ability to break down complex movements into their component parts are two keys to his mastery of the sport. He found, for example, that moving directly into a spin at top speed—rather than the more frequently used method of crescendo and decrescendo—allowed him to discipline the inner ear to overcome dizziness. His pioneering work in lead-ins, precise equal-sized circles and exact posture in spins and jumps have become part of the grammar of the sport.

Yet if you ask Lussi to explain how he developed championship maneuvers such as, say, a triple jump, he will simply explain, "We just got out on the ice and scrambled around."

"Well," says Button, "I think that's a good quote. We worked with things. There was a move that I invented called the flying camel. He perfected it. And there were other moves that he invented, and then pulled me along. But he really invented the means by which you perform these feats. That's where his genius lies. He understands the dynamics of the body when it is moving on ice, where the balance is and where the position should be. He broke down the moves into the simplest of simple things."

This inventiveness is also reflected in Lussi's teaching methods. A perfectionist on the ice, he imparts similar discipline to his students. During one coaching session, which Lussi shows on video-

tape, a student threw his weight too far forward and scratched the ice with his toe pick. Lussi promptly tossed out a handkerchief and said, "Now clean off the ice."

But there is another side to this gruff exterior, a clever and vivid use of imagery—both physical and verbal—to convey his message.

To illustrate displacement of the body's center of gravity during a spin, he will remove his ring and spin it, starting with the heavy side down. If the ring is spun with sufficient vigor, the heavy side eventually rises



Tenley Albright struck Gold in 1956.

to the top. "Weight, through force, rises," points out Lussi. Similarly, this is how he explains why he wants a skater to enter a jump-spin at full speed, springing off the toe of a skate. "Most everybody jumps from the blade. I want to go directly off the toe as much as I can, like an animal. Take a cat; she grips it. Take a dog; he slips. The cat you have high in the air. The dog?" He laughs.

Success through the years has brought him his due in acclaim. The Lake Placid Olympic Center has named its ice rink for him. He has been inducted into the Lake Placid Hall of Fame and the United States Figure Skating Association Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs. A thirty-foot bronze statue of Lussi stands in Philadelphia. This past December he was crowned King of Winter Sports at the annual Lake Placid celebration. Dorothy Hamill was his queen. "Mr. Lussi was undoubtedly the single most important influence on my career," she says, "both personally and professionally. He is absolutely the best in his profession."



Lussi helped Dick Button change the face of skating.

While he acknowledges these accolades, he just as quickly shrugs them off. Gustave Lussi maintains his sense of priority. "We are never finished," he once said to Button. "We always have something new to tackle."

Marianne Battistone teaches and writes about conditioning, movement analysis and therapeutic exercise for dance/athletics. This is her first contribution to GQ.