

Skating great Lussi dies



Gus Lussi

By **GEORGE DeCHANT**

The man who made champion figure skaters has died at the age of 95. Gustave "Gus" Lussi died in his home on Thursday, June 25 of natural causes.

"He was a very well rounded person, with a head on his shoulders," Dick Button, 1948 and 1952 Olympic gold medalist, said.

Button dominated the world of figure skating from 1947 to 1952, winning five World Championships and runner up once, all under the guidance of Lussi.

"I took my first lesson on my 13th birthday," Button said. "He was like a second father to me."

Button has gone on to become a television broadcaster, giving figure skating analysis of several Olympics and is often referred to as "Mr. Ice Skating". Button said Lussi's ability to communicate skating technique helped him both as a skater and as a broadcaster.

"Everything you learn helps and he (Lussi) was magnificent," Button said. "I'm glad he had 95 good years."

From one jumper to another

The man who is given credit for developing the Hamill camel and the delayed axel for 1976 Olympic gold medalist Dorothy Hamill,

laced up a pair of skates at the age of 22 after spending much of his youth in Stans, Switzerland as a ski jumper. Lussi suffered a fractured skull in a fall that left in a coma for three days and ended his ski jumping career.

Lussi, who was born June 2, 1898, came to the United States in 1915 and worked at his uncle's riding academy in Brooklyn. After several months he found a job as a dishwasher at the St. Regis Hotel.

Lussi spent his evenings with a Swiss friend, who was a ice-skating professional, skating. Lussi's friend left to teach skating at the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society. The friend eventually sent for Lussi to be his assistant.

Lussi at the time did not have the funds to make the trip until what he referred to as, "the only real miracle in my life," happened.

He found a diamond stick pin lying in the snow outside a Brooklyn subway station. He used the \$75 he got from a pawn shop in exchange for the stick pin to get to Philadelphia and begin his coaching career.

Shortly after moving to Philadelphia, Lussi became an instructor and would later return to the St. Regis to produce and direct ice shows.

Lussi's ski jumping accident may have been the reason he often teased his grand daughter, Katrina Lussi, about participating in freestyle aerial ski jumping.

Cristina L. Griffin, Katrina's sister, said her grandfather often chided her sister for being a freestyle aerialist, but supported her none the less.

On one of Katrina's birthdays, Lussi gave her a statue of a Lipazane (?) stallion with a note that said, "From one jumper to another."

Griffin said many thought of

him as a strict disciplinarian, but Lussi had softer edges.

"When he got older, he flat came out and said, 'I love you.'"

More than skating

Lussi trained 16 world champions and coached six ice skaters to Olympic gold medals, but Lussi taught his skaters there was more to life than skating.

Eileen Seigh-Honnen, former Junior National Champion, has been quoted as saying, "Gus Lussi taught us a lot of things off the ice as well. He told us that you're a person long after you're a figure skater. Gus Lussi helped me to become a better person."

Lussi did this by getting his skaters to perform as well as they could all the time.

"He taught you anytime you were performing whether it was practice or not, you were making a performance," Cecily Morrow, a former student, said. She added you didn't show up with dirty skating boots or he would send you off the ice.

"I was told how to lace my skating boots and to polish them," she said.

In spite of his demands, Morrow said, he would gain his student's respect.

"He respected his pupils as people so he made you feel like someone," Morrow said. "He had faith in me as a person, much more than he saw in my skating."

Morrow took lessons from Lussi in the 70's, but recently worked with him in his later years on videos and a forthcoming book of his life.

"You had a tremendous amount of respect for him," she said. "You felt a part of his coral ... his skating family."

Being part of his family was just a fact of life if you were a student of Gus Lussi, according to Morrow.

Lussi coached Button, Hamill, Scott Hamilton, Hayes Alan Jenkins and a host of other skaters. Morrow said not only the top skaters gained from their experience with Lussi.

Morrow said she has talked to several of his former students in the past few days and the one thing that continued to come up was a sense of family.

"In some ways they considered themselves a part of his larger family, of skating excellence," she said.

In the 1950's, Lussi taught his skaters to fish, in the 1970's he would have them over for spaghetti dinners.

"They were great parties," Morrow said. "He was always interested in what people had to say."

"He loved to share ideas ... or tell you his ideas," Morrow said with a laugh.

Creativity

One of the main reasons Lussi endeared himself to his family and extended family of skaters was his unusually approach to life.

"He was one of the most creative persons," Button, who was the first skater to land a triple axel in competition, said.

Lussi's creativity came out in the way he communicated to his students.

To show them that spinning would lift a skater he would take

off his ring and spin it on a table with the stone down. Eventually the spinning would bring the heavier stone up off the table.

Another anecdote of his was how he showed skaters they needed their upper body to jump.

Lussi would lay a \$100 bill on the ice and tell a skater to hold his or her toes, and if they could jump over the bill they could have it.

Griffin, who took lessons from her grandfather, said you always lost the bet, but learned a lesson.

Idea man

Of all the things Lussi was, what he was not was a marketing genius. Both Griffin and Morrow told of stories about Lussi how he would come up with a good idea, but often the plan would fail because he wasn't very good at marketing.

"He was a great idea man, but his marketing was horrible," Griffin said.

She added it was Thelma, his wife of 61 years, that kept the family losing all their money.

"She (Thelma) made the finances work," Griffin said.

Lussi met Thelma MacDowell, a 1928 Saranac Lake High School graduate, in 1932 and they were married later that year, a marriage that continued until Lussi's death. He is also survived by two sons, Serge and Craig, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Still teaching

Lussi may have slowed down in his final years, but he never left skating. Last summer at the age of 94 he gave several instructions to Nicole Austin, 12 at the time, expanding his career to 73 years.

For 20 years Lussi championed the idea to eliminate school figures from competition. He lived to see this idea come to fruition two years ago.

Lussi also had the honor of having a rink named after him at the Olympic Center.

A champion's champion

Lussi was often quote as saying, "If I can't be a champion myself, I'll make them." And Lussi made many champions, both on and off the ice.

Those who knew him will remember him for many things, but most all know, without winning a single medal, he was a champion in his own right.

A reception in celebration of Lussi's life will be held at 1 p.m. 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.