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ACHIEVING JUMP COMMAND

by Cecily A. Morrow

"Don't ask for your jumps - command them!" urged Gustave Lussi, as he and his students repeatedly raised freeskating standards by pioneering the multi-rotational jumps now routinely expected. He admired a quality he termed "guts": courage, with persistence and hard work. "You can't just dream what you want to do ... you got to make yourself do it!" Strong motivation, appropriate off-ice conditioning, and constant effort, do yield encouraging results, especially in ice facilities full of leaping, whirling, youngsters inspiring each other competitively. Being physically small, light, and neuromuscularly quick helps.

But then...oops. It happens: physical growth, maturing, external conditions (flu, "jet lag", new program, boyfriend, girlfriend) contribute to a sudden, dismaying faltering in hard won maneuvers. Such occurrences remind us of the need for an unvarying, systematic teaching approach. In Dick Button's words "(Mr. Lussi) gave them a method they could rely upon."

Generations of coaches have utilized Lussi technique, as it evolved over seven decades, adapting, changing it in various ways. Certain underlying principles, however, are central to his successful work. These fundamentals, which assist in achieving ease of jump execution, are presented here in skating chronological order.

A. Preceding connecting moves.

We know that, whether during program footwork, or in practice session warm-up, laxity in a skater's posture, physical sloppiness, carries over into subsequent jumps. The difficulty is in finding the time and securing the skater's willingness, to address the problem, especially against a background parental chorus of: "she'll be more graceful later - maybe do something with her arms...?", "you know how boys are, he's embarrassed to...", "...don't you love her Spotlight costume...?", "...the judges are only looking for jumps, now-yeah, the other stuff's important, but...", "...she needs more encouragement..."

In the wings, moreover, is another coach, pleasant, friendly, who is willing to baby-sit your ex-student. We serve neither our students, nor the industry, nor in fact other coaches, by overlooking basics.

1. Secure hip alignment over each skating foot.

Even a hint of sideways, "wagging", motion in skaters' hips will initiate problems. Crossovers frequently reveal evidence of such instability. The only cure: reteaching edges.

Example: Backward Crossovers

To ensure a strong back outside edge, the push must be rapid and along the line of travel (where skater came from - not way outside the curve); the strike should be clean, with sufficient body lean, torso unified, the skating leg progressing actively in the direction of travel. Natalia Dubova exhorts "Take ice!" - meaning to move the skate receiving body weight along the flight path (in this case, backwards) in a positive, progressive, manner.

Then, as the outside foot crosses in front to receive the transferred weight over a back inside edge, and the new free leg pushes down against the ice, a firmly integrated torso permits the legs to work smoothly, independently, without disturbing the central body unit.

Efficient use of the blades' flowing quality, with skater's gravitational center secure, assures aligned preparation for jumps and requires less physical exertion during program performances. Any scratching noises from the blades indicate an exhausting "driving with the brakes on" condition.

2. Integrated strength across shoulders and back.

Involuntary shoulder twisting, failure to maintain control of ribcage and waist, presages difficulties, especially for an upcoming jump. Such errant motions occurs subtly, requiring that we perceive the slightest twisting in the rotational direction in anticipation of jumps. Coaches of beginners perform valuable service by being alert to this counterproductive tendency.

We need to intervene if skaters' arms hang limply, or move erratically in any way, as such unintentional actions disturb torso integrity.

3. Center of gravity over the skate.

In today's rush to jump, with increasingly stiff boots recommended for youngsters who may not yet have sufficient muscularity to force leather to bend, we see struggling skaters "sitting on air" - their behinds sticking out as they skate. With school figures abandoned, it's difficult to impart the feel of being centered, or not, over the blade. First-class, consistent, jumping absolutely requires centering of the body weight over each skating hip during approach moves. Strong ankle and knee flexion, positive forward pelvis adjustment, assure this.

A skater's "bum-out" position in the air and on landing may result from similar posture well before the attempted jump, quite likely far down the ice surface.

B. Set-up

Preparatory pattern, arm, head, and free leg positions immediately prior to jump takeoff vary with coach and student, but successful jumpers demonstrate consistent attention to three basics.

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1. Torso held firm.

There is no twisting and alignment is clearly over the skating foot.
Example: Axel.

The change of body axis (i.e. from balance over takeoff skate to alignment over landing skate) in this jump necessitates a strongly unified torso during the approach. Any twisting of shoulders or at the waist in rotational direction causes a skater to leave the ground misaligned, rotating prematurely and around the takeoff side. This makes it difficult to rise into the back scratch spin position in the air.

2. Set-up rhythm maintained without hesitation.

Takeoff must be prompt. Any waiting permits body parts to wander.

Example: Loop jump.

"Telegraphing" this jump, with elaborate, lengthy, preparation, may cause the skating hip to sag inward on the curve and the upper body to drift out of control. Upward spring is thus impaired and misalignment in the air yields a faulty landing.

Uninterrupted, rhythmic, flow into jumps is essential to command the process. "Be a 'Countess'!" said Mr. Lussi, advising students to count systematically while jumping.

3. Set-up pattern designed to prevent premature rotation.

In moves just preceding takeoff, turning in the jump direction tends to prevent full expansion up into an optimal air position. Ideally, rotation occurs at the apex of jump trajectory. Training in single jumps can establish a habit of jumping up and out, postponing rotation until maximum elevation is attained.

"Distance, height and beauty" distinguish the finest jump performances.

C. Takeoff.

Push off action should be extremely rapid. Propulsion into the air is most effective when the mechanical force acts over very little time, with the skating ankle and knee flexing and extending softly and swiftly.

1. Edge jumps (Axel, Salchow, loop)

From takeoff position, skater utilizes lightning-quick ankle and foot action, full upward force from a spring-like contraction and expansion of the takeoff leg.

2. Toe-assisted jumps (toe-loop, flip, Lutz)

The best skaters "bounce" upward into these jumps, rather than shoving themselves off the ground with heavy, disconnected, force of the free leg ("bashing"). Quickness and lifting the body center strongly, lightly, over the skating leg, before and during the toe-in, assures an effective "pole-vaulting" action, permitting plenty of time for rapid turns at the top of the jump.

D. Action in the air.

Beginning skaters have minimal awareness while airborne; with more experience, learned actions become somewhat automatic, allowing for more conscious control of details. Outstanding skaters attain a significant cognitive feat - they think and react during that fraction of a second air time; Neuromuscular and intellectual input during flight completes a good takeoff and may save an "iffy" jump. Expanded mental concentration will cause time to stretch, to appear longer, to allow for physical adjustments. A book which illuminates

a similar process: W. Timothy Gallwey *The Inner Game of Tennis*, published in 1974.

In the airborne instant we need:

1. Body awareness in space.

Feedback as to orientation, alignment, timing, using visual, aural, and kinesthetic clues.

2. Rapid pull-in.

Once sufficient height is attained, the "reverse-under (pivot) into optimal aerial position: weight over landing side, crossed legs for maximizing rotation, arms firmly held below chest.

3. Straight body.

Squarely held torso, shoulders pressed down, body erect, legs stretched with both knees pointing forward.

4. Rapid checkout.

"Unhinging," disengaging of free leg, and quick expansion of upper body outward, well before landing, which permits the skater to "float" down onto a clean edge.

E. Landing.

1. Check against rotation.

During the quick jump conclusion, the head turns against rotation direction (i.e. to right counterclockwise jump), arms snap out to sides of body, shoulders and hips perpendicular to line of travel.

2. "Foot reserve" landing.

From the crossed position in front, the free leg "unhinges," lifts, holds beside the landing foot, "in reserve," then expands along the flight line.

3. Flexible landing action.

With torso erect and lifting upward, the landing leg, especially in the ankle, flexes softly to cushion body weight as the blade is eased onto the ice surface on a shallow outside edge. The skating knee and the free leg then expand, so that a distinct increase in edge flow, as well as stability, is experienced.

4. Completion of maneuver.

The landing is held, enhanced, by the skater's taking time to lift up, elegantly stretched, head elevated and turned over the skating shoulder, fingertips extended expressively, inviting our attention. To demonstrate technical and artistic command, in all practice sessions as well as performance opportunities, our students should be encouraged to skate away from the landing, pushing well, into a step sequence which "makes a composition."

Positive training will reinforce physical and mental sense of commanding the jumps - from initial preparation to a conclusion satisfying to skater and audience. The "great ones" in skating also notably conceal glitches, errors, by leaping, gliding, away confidently from a problem, convincing us that all is well.

At any jumping level, waltz jump (hey....bunny hop!) to quadruple toe loop, we serve our students - and ourselves - best by being "picky" about technical details such as those outlined here, from the beginning.

Among those who walk through our rink doors, lisping their intention to "go to the Olympics," only a few will. But thousands can achieve personal command of skating performance, thereby reinforcing their self-esteem and perpetuating our most elevating sport. ❄️