

A TRIBUTE TO GUSTAVE LUSSI

A Man with a Vision



Photo: Sara Grosvenor

The flashing electronic sign in front of the Olympic Regional Development Authority complex stated "July 17th is Gus Lussi Day." The traditional Saturday evening show was dedicated to him; by proclamation, the Village of Lake Placid, the Town of North Elba and the Olympic Arena staff thus honored the renowned local citizen and coach, who for many decades, attracted fine skaters to the Adirondacks and trained numerous champions with his precise and innovative techniques and forceful, inspiring, personality.

Gustave Francois Lussi died, at ninety-five, during the night of June twenty-third. With characteristic intractability, he refused medical intervention after experiencing shortness of breath that week; on the morning of June twenty-fourth, he did not awake.

Mr. Lussi's exit generated considerable interest. Phones rang. Faxes were sent. A prominent New York Times obituary. Why? PS Magazine readers may recall (see Jan/Feb 1993 issue: Coaches Training) top coaches honoring him for the invention of key freestyle moves and for the establishment of now commonly used techniques, such as the crossed leg rotation position in jumping.

After emigrating to this country from Switzerland in 1919, at age twenty one, Mr. Lussi began studying skating. Nine years

later, in 1928, he produced his first international champion.

Bill Grimditch, former Lussi student and 1941 National Junior Champion, says "Gustave Lussi was responsible for the 'free skating revolution of the 1940's.' Mr. Lussi 'was first the first to choreograph every move of his skater's program to classical music' (until that time the competitor simply skated until the referee stopped the record). He developed techniques which enabled his skaters to be the first to execute - double Axels and triple loop jumps." While producing sixteen World and Olympic champions, Mr. Lussi was constantly inventing: the fly-

ing sit spin; the flying camel; or Button camel (with five time World champion and 1948 and 1952 Olympic Champion Dick Button); the Hamill camel (with 1976 Olympic Champion Dorothy Hamill); the closing of the figures at center; the design upon which the "Pattern 99" blade is used. He introduced "delayed" jumps, bringing new vigor to figure skating and with Dick Button, who landed the first double Axel in competition, established totally new standards for those thereafter.

And the man never really stopped. In his eighties, still teaching and making significant refinements in his techniques, Mr. Lussi asked me to document his skating methodology. He'd start the daily interviews saying: "I always ask the question, what can we do better than that which we already do? Where do we go from here?" He wanted change - not just more revolutions but bigger, more spectacular jumps and faster, more dynamic spins, presented with elegant, clean lines, no extraneous movement. "He taught the principles of great skating - lean with the curve, simple but pure," explains Dick Button.

Yet, people in our profession and others, too, remember vividly the **way** in which Mr. Lussi did what he did, his charismatic quality. 1971 North American Champion, John Misha Petkevich, who studied with

him at the recommendation of his coach, Arthur Bourque, cites Mr. Lussi as "a great coach, teacher, mentor, friend. Almost any accolade which one could assign to Gustav would be an understatement." Perhaps most importantly, "remembers the Rhodes Scholar, "he taught us to think, to analyze and, off the ice, to respond to others with kindness, gentleness and style. His impact on us was profound and lasting."

In the weeks following Mr. Lussi's demise, there was much anecdotal talk of his influence upon the sport, his ability to make it happen. Few of us will register such an impression upon our world; we might do well, however, to consider our lasting imprint upon student's minds. Decades later, they'll remember.

On July 17th, there was a memorial gathering for family members, friends and former students on Lussi property in Lake Placid. We walked along a dirt road and over a dam/bridge which Mr. Lussi had planned, designed and worked on physically himself, incorporating trout ponds and a pleasing disposition of native rocks and water flow. Just beyond, on a grassy rise, members of the Lake Placid Sinfonietta performed, music drifting out among evergreen-covered hills.

Mr. Lussi's widow, Thelma MacDowell Lussi, was present, despite illness. His sons, Craig and Serge, expressed respect and affection for their extraordinary father. Grandchildren, Arthur Lussi, Christina Griffin and Craig Lussi, Jr., provided insight into Mr. Lussi's personal effect upon family and community, as well as skating; their accounts dealt with childhood impressions of a man with much more to offer than skating instruction. Katrina Lussi, youngest grandchild, was at her grandmother's side. A great-grandchild was running about.

Dick Button read a marvelously detailed tribute to Mr. Lussi, thanking him "for showing me the color blue in a Gentian. For the summer I lived in the cabin above the lake at Little Alps. It had an iron bed, a light bulb and a lot of mosquitoes. But you could hear the night. It was heaven. For teaching everyone as if he or she was

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the best. For never losing faith in us. For being ahead of your time. Life through those years was like a quick step - but you slowed it down. Showing us how to look at the trees and smell the pine needles." Many from the Lussis' early years in Lake Placid talked fondly of "Little Alpes," the house that Mr. Lussi built himself, "probably without plans," mused Cliff Thael, longtime friend of the Lussis. "The house was a very pleasant place, reminiscent of Switzerland, sort of a graceful, towering effect; it was high and stood on high ground and the water was down below. They (Gus and Thelma) used to have good, big skater's parties there - spaghetti suppers - over the weekends and everybody, **everybody** was invited. And they used to have a big, long rope that the kids could hang on to and swing across the water. It was quite exciting to do."

Mr. Lussi bought the land upon which we were standing in 1955, naming it Swiss Meadows. He had an idea to dam the river which runs through, creating the trout ponds. Here he built a restaurant, Edelweiss, where the customers could fish for their dinner. All this and skating champions, too.

The memorial gathering was sprinkled with skating notables. 1962 World Champion, Donald Jackson, who studied with Mr. Lussi as a professional after he had already won Worlds, interrupted his busy coaching schedule, driving down from Ottawa to pay his respects.

Among condolences from those unable to attend - a message from Soviet Olympic Pair Champions, Oleg and Ludmilla Protopopov, who had no opportunity to study with him, hailing Mr. Lussi as "the greatest teacher of this century."

As I stood listening the Mr. Lussi's highly successful progeny and legendary students sharing their personal messages, I saw, among the assemblage, other Lussi students, like myself, that Mr. Lussi knew would never win a world championship. I recalled then his kindness and patience with me, a skinny twelve year old, afraid to jump, looking up at him day after day through eyes swollen with tears of frustration, remembering his piercingly clear blue eyes. Perhaps he saw something I wasn't aware of; he had a way of keenly assessing an individual's character and potential for life beyond skating.

The Sinfonietta played Edelweiss. I thought of how Mr. Lussi had given my life direction and inspired me to become another sort of champion. As the music

ended, I noted that my eyes weren't the only damp ones.

Gus Lussi Day in Lake Placid was a nice send-off for a man preeminent in his professional and significant in a positive way to so many others. Gustave Lussi left us a notion of grandeur and athleticism of elegance, of systematic, precise thinking, in skating, upon which to build.

And so I say, "Goodbye, Mr. Lussi, **thank you** and we'll miss you." ■

Dear Editor,

Thanks for the great tribute to Gus Lussi. Like many others, I was very touched by this wonderful man who knew as much about life and people as he did about skating. He truly was a "teacher's teacher" and has shaped skating for many years in the future.

It was good to have known him.

Sincerely,

David Shulman
Rochester, MN