

## GUSTAVE LUSSI: The Man Who Changed Skating

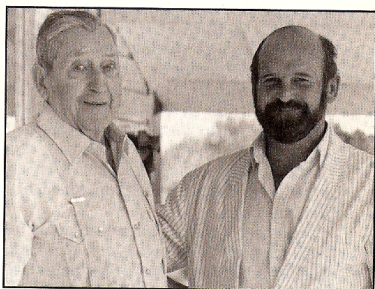
by Mary-Lucile Ager

In November, a thirty-minute documentary, *Gustave Lussi: The Man Who Changed Skating*, will be aired in Plattsburgh, New York on PBS station WCFE. A skating legend in his own time, 91-year-old Gus Lussi has coached students to 23 World Championships, 6 Olympic gold medals, and countless national, sectional, and regional titles.

A native of Switzerland, Lussi turned to skating after a skiing accident cut short that career. Disappointed but unfazed, he determined, "If I can't be a champion, I'll make champions" . . . and that he did. Among the many: Dick Button, Dorothy Hamill, Hayes Alan Jenkins, Canadian pair Maria and Otto Jelinek, Eileen Seigh, and Gordon McKellen, Jr., whose nine years as a pupil led him to three national men's championship wins.

Lussi came to the United States in the very early 1920's, seeking the "American Dream" . . . that given talent, drive, and strength, a person could try anything and be anything he wished. In the 1970's Cecily Morrow of New York became one of his students. Now, also a coach, she was so inspired with his techniques she began a manual that she hoped would explain many of his methods and capture the spirit of the man. Lussi had settled in Lake Placid, New York because it reminded him of his native country.

Visualizing a local interest in the story, plus national and worldwide interest in figure skating, Cecily contacted WCFE with her idea for a program. The station became interested, and successfully sought a grant from the New York State Public Television Production Fund. Filming began with Morrow as consultant and Joanne Taylor, Executive Producer. All of the crew became so infatuated with the sport and its subject they thought a more fitting title would be, "I love Lussi."



Gustave Lussi and Dick Button.

The finished product—a year in the making—is a skating masterpiece. It skillfully cuts across time with rare, old film of skating champions, and recent interviews with some of them, including Button, Hamill, Ronnie Robertson, Eileen Seigh, Tenley Albright, Jenkins, John Curry, Toller Cranston, the Jelineks, and Don Jackson, who became a pupil after winning Worlds.

Comments from coach Carlo Fassi, echo the title and words from these champions. The program has appeal, for those dreaming of becoming a champion or those who just admire the skill and grace of figure skating. The core of Lussi's profile comes through strongly throughout.

Miss Seigh, former National Junior Champion, said, "He rewrote the book." Without a doubt, some of his multi-jumps were a first. A Lussi spin is easily recognized anywhere in the world, and he was first to choreograph skating programs to recorded music. He inspired his students with confidence just before performing by saying, "Go out there and show them how good you are." She added, "I thank him for my life, which you pursue a long time after skating."

Lussi and his wife Thelma served up large doses of family life during off-ice time. Etched deep in the memories of every one of his pre- and post-World War II skaters, are the Sunday nights at their beautiful chalet mountain home. There was fishing, swimming, games, and the never-to-be-forgotten rides on the "pulley" across the man-made lake. A highlight, still remembered, "the decision" to hang on and ride across, or drop off into the lake en route. No roller coaster today rivals that thrill. This was topped off by Thelma's spaghetti dinners, another memory that still whets the appetite of those skaters lucky enough to have been guests there.

Ronnie Robertson, who was famous for his blur spin of 240 turns a minute, said, "Gus made you feel you were his only student." About Robertson, Mr. Lussi said, "I knew I had a gem on my hands."

Dorothy Hamill was ten when she first met Lussi. "He made me the skater I wanted to be. All that I'm famous for—the delayed Axel, Hamill camel—were all Gus. He wanted you to be the best that you could, every time you did anything."

Dick Button claims, "Gus taught me to skate." McKellen's parents said, "He made Gordie like skating." The Jelineks worked with him to strengthen their solo skating. "You now needed single skating in pairs," replied Otto. Don Jackson: "He made us all enjoy not just skating, but life."

Seigh's remark summed it all up, "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. He helped me to become a better person."

From February 15-17th, 1990, the first "Gus Lussi Invitational Competition" for Novice, Junior, and Senior skaters, will be held in Lake Placid, during the 10-year anniversary celebration of the 1980 Olympics. Lussi has had a major hand in planning this event in his honor.

Recently WCFE hosted a lavish reception at the Grandview Hotel-Holiday Inn,

in Lake Placid. More than 100 invited guests, students, judges, coaches, and Town officials were treated to the first public viewing of the film. Although fresh from the hospital, Gus Lussi was there for the special showing, a magical evening because of his presence.

The documentary is cleared to air in New York State. WCFE's spokesman, John Flanzer hopes to secure necessary releases and funding so that it can be shown nationally. Since material from the archives of ABC-TV and other media outlets was used, the station has not been able yet to secure release outside of New York State.

This video documentary is a bit of skating history, still being lived, and never to be forgotten.