



File photo  
**Tenley Albright, one of Gus Lussi's stars, trains in Italy in 1956.**



File photo  
**Dick Button jumps during practice in St. Moritz, Switzerland, in 1948.**



Times photo — JACK ROWLAND  
**Thelma and Gus Lussi relax in Hernando, where they spend winters. Their summer home is Lake Placid, N.Y., where he teaches Olympic hopefuls.**



# Glory days are frozen in time

## Coach basks in icy memories during Hernando winters

By CHARLOTTE SUTTON  
Times Staff Writer

BROOKSVILLE — When Gus Lussi is served a cold drink, he removes the ice. He doesn't like his beverages quite that cold.

And before putting them aside, if he has an audience, he'll look the cubes over and announce, "This is my bread and butter."

Ice — specifically, ice skating — has provided Lussi his living for more than 60 years. But he gave the sport much more. For the 89-year-old Lussi may well have done more than anyone to transform skating from a spin around a frozen pond to glittering displays of art and athleticism that fascinate millions of people.

"I don't think there's anybody that compares to him," said two-time Olympic gold medal winner Dick Button, one of Lussi's star pupils.

"He was a work of art. They broke the mold when they made him," said Button, who as ABC-TV's Olympic commentator probably watches as much championship skating as anyone.

When Button talks about flying sit spins and triple axels and triple toe loops, he is saluting his teacher, who invented or developed many of the dazzling maneuvers.

Dorothy Hamill, another of Lussi's famous pupils, has called him "absolutely the best in his profession." Tenley Albright, Barbara Ann Scott and David Jenkins — Olympic gold medal-winners

all — also skated under his careful eye. Altogether, Lussi coached his students to 23 world championships and six Olympic gold medals.

These days, Lussi avoids the cold weather. He and his wife Thelma, 77, have spent the last nine winters in eastern Hernando County, in a comfortable old house filled with mementos of a life on the ice. He reads, watches television, tends his fruit trees.

There is a youthful vigor about Lussi, in his sharp eyes and probing intellect. The only thing that slows him down is a surgically fused hip, a relic of too many and too fast skating spins.

But in the summertime, the Lussis

drive home to Lake Placid, N.Y., where Lussi gives lessons to young Olympic hopefuls on a rink that was named for him.

"I'm getting old gracefully," Lussi says with a smile.

The man whom Dick Button calls "the most forceful teaching personality I've ever known" didn't put on a pair of ice skates until he was in his early 20s.

As a youth in Switzerland, Lussi was a skier. But he lost his nerve for jumping after he took a tumble that cracked his skull. Even today, there's an indentation near his hairline to mark the accident.

Lussi came to the United States from Switzerland when he was 21 and found work as a dishwasher in a posh New York hotel. One day, he lurched his way around the 181st Street rink and found a new career.

Most people, he said, didn't see his potential at first.

"People looked at me and said, 'Look at that big, gawky fellow — he'll never do anything.'"

Just to show that first impressions don't mean a lot, even today Lussi says



File photo

**Two-time Olympic gold medal winner Dick Button, shown in 1948, calls Gus Lussi "the most forceful teaching personality I've ever known."**

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he can't tell which of his young students will be champions until he's spent a few years with them.

"No one can tell you a thing about it," he says of predicting skating greatness. He says that what impressed him most about Dick Button, for instance, was his enormous determination and willingness to learn.

Despite his own lack of encouragement, the young Lussi stuck with skating, and before long he was offered a teaching job at the Philadelphia Skating Club. One problem — he had no money to get there.

Enter what Lussi calls "the only real miracle in my life."

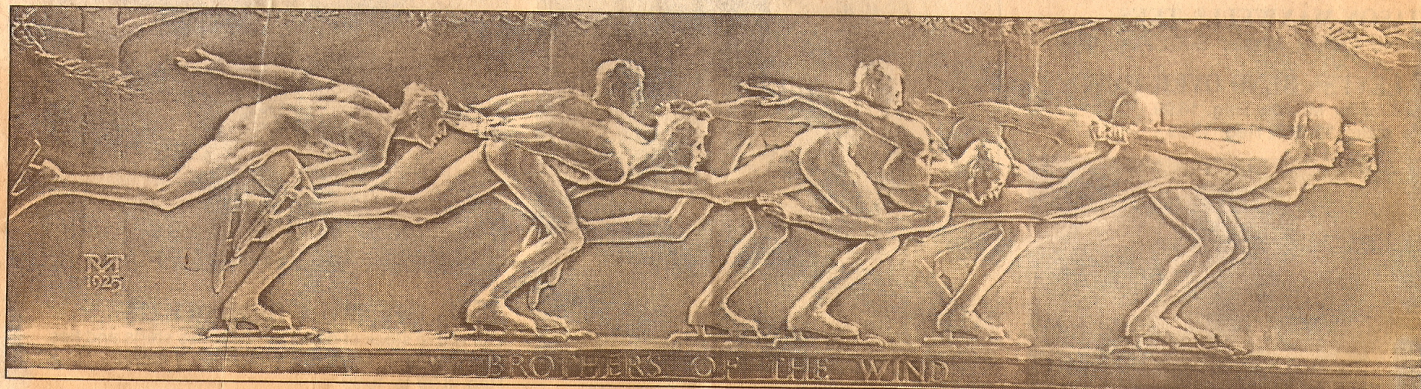
On the way to his dishwashing job one day, he found a diamond stickpin in the snow outside a Brooklyn subway stop. He took the pin to a pawn shop, where he got just enough money to get

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File photo

Dorothy Hamill, one of six Olympic gold medal winners Gus Lussi has coached, has called him "absolutely the best in his profession."



Gus Lussi modeled for R. Tait McKenzie's *Brothers of the Wind*, a frieze of speed skaters, since the artist thought speed skaters' legs were too bulky.

Times photo — JACK ROWLAND



## Frozen

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to Philadelphia.

In the decades to follow, Lussi put together ice shows in the United States and Canada, extravaganzas that bring to mind the old Busby Berkeley films when he describes them. Extravagant historical epics were skated out on ice that Lussi had devised a way to paint. There were even special effects — sometimes, skaters went onto the ice with acetylene torches to provide sparks where needed.

Lussi skated in his own shows, and he could spin like no one else. In one show, he wore a 154-foot-long sash around his waist and spun as another skater pulled one end away from him.

"I could do 94 turns without stopping. That's why I have a hip fusion today," he said.

And he was a very handsome young man. So handsome that artist R. Tait McKenzie used him in the 1920s as a model in his famous sculptures of skaters. He was even used in a McKenzie frieze of speed skaters, since the artist thought speed skaters' leg muscles were too bulky, Lussi says.

An original cast bronze of that frieze, *Brothers of the Wind*, was installed at the entrance to the Olympic Oval in Calgary.

In the 1930s, Lussi said, no one had ever heard of indoor, summer-time skating. No one, that is, until he took it into his head to try it.

One of the highlights of his career came in the 1940s, when he was putting on an ice show in the lavish St. Moritz Hotel in New York. During a rehearsal, he took a sentimental trip down to the kitchen, where 20 years before, he had washed dishes.

There are so many other memories, like the time the *Queen Mary* was held up four hours at the docks for Lussi and Dick Button so they could complete an ice exhibition for the mayor of London after the 1948 Olympics.

Despite the fond memories, Lussi stoutly maintains that he never looks back, only forward.

For a man who says he could easily stop teaching, Lussi has strong opinions about how his sport has developed. He closely watches today's figure skating champions and often doesn't like what he sees.

"The spins are not what they used to be," says the man who taught his students a spin that came to be known as "The Blur," since that's what the spinning skater looked like. One former student

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— Gus Lussi

even sent him a cartoon depicting the move.

But the blur is a difficult move.

"They don't know how to do it," Lussi said of today's champions. "They don't want to learn. All they want to do is jump."

Leaping into the air may make the crowds go wild, but Button agrees that some subtler moves are seldom seen because of their difficulty.

"Jumping and spinning took a quantum leap forward" because of Lussi, Button said. Lussi "pioneered a great deal of it, and together we worked on a lot. But a lot has been lost. The teaching of blur spins has not been maintained. They're very difficult, exhausting and extremely hard. Most skaters can't do them."

In fact, Button saw only one skater in the 1988 Olympics perform a flying sitspin, a move Button invented in the 1940s.

That skater, the Japanese woman Midori Ito, also was one of Lussi's favorites in the competition. "She was marvelous, dynamite," Lussi says.

He says he saw moves in her skating that were characteristic of his own students and is certain that a Japanese man he coached years ago had something to do with Ito's training.

Lussi doesn't have kind words for most skating coaches. He says it's rare today for a coach to stick by one skater all the way through his or her career, and it shows. East German Katarina Witt, who won the gold in 1984 and 1988, is one of the few who has had the same coach.

Lussi says he fought the judges when they insisted on moves he found ridiculous. Most coaches, he says, are frightened of judges and counsel their skaters to do as the judges say.

Although Lussi teaches in Lake Placid during the summer, he no longer coaches skaters in competition. If he were still actively coaching, the skating event Lussi would most like to develop would be pairs skating. He has tired of all the jumping and wants to see more ballet.

"The skaters should be in a love affair — they should answer each other with skating, moving back and forth. When there are too

many stunts in a routine, that's not pairs skating, it's tumbling."

"Today, triple jumps seem to be so stupid. We were doing those 40 years ago. What can you see in them?"

Despite the criticism, Lussi holds great hope for the sport to which he devoted his life. "We have not struck yet the best part of skating," he says.

But he doesn't think he'll be the one to help strike that pinnacle. Lussi says he wouldn't mind if he never taught again. "I could leave it alone," he maintains.

During their winters in Herndon County, the Lussis carefully guard their privacy. Their phone number is unlisted, and they give the number only to their closest friends and family. They say that at this stage of their lives, they need a rest from the demands of skaters and coaches seeking Lussi's expertise.

But ask Lussi why, each spring, he makes the long trip back to Lake Placid, where everyone knows him and where he spends hours at the Lussi Rink, and his reply is very different.

"It's home," he says.