

Modern ice-skating visionary now soaks up Hernando sun

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BROOKSVILLE — Gustave Lussi spent the better part of his career on the cutting edge.

For seven decades, he sketched stick figures on a chalkboard and twisted wooden dolls into graceful positions to illustrate his vision of artistry on ice.

Standing on the sidelines, Lussi — now 91 — spearheaded a revolution in figure skating.

"He worked out the aerodynamics of the sport," says Dale Mitch, editor of Skating Magazine and director of the World Figure Skating Museum in Colorado Springs, Colo. "From the 1930s to the 1960s, Lussi was the master coach in the United States and probably in the world."

Perched on the front porch of his home in Hernando County, surrounded by sunshine and citrus groves, Lussi reflects on his years as a world-class ice-skating coach.

The tall, lanky Lussi never laced a pair of

skates until he was 22. By the time he mastered spins and intricate footwork, competition was out of the question. So he decided to train others — to win.

"I said if I can't be a champion myself, I should make champions."

And make them he did.

With a sharp eye on the edges of the ice blade and new techniques for jumping and spinning, Lussi trained 16 world champions and coached six ice skaters to Olympic golds.

His career began with borrowed skates on an outdoor rink. It sputtered along until a twist of fate, discovering a diamond stick pin in the snow, helped him launch his teaching career.

Figure skating brought Lussi from a tiny apartment in Brooklyn, N.Y., to a world of ice in Paris; Milan, Italy; Vienna, Austria; St. Moritz, Switzerland.



Tribune photograph by TIM JACKSON

Former ice-skating coach Gus Lussi carves flowers and other designs on cypress stumps outside his home.

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Skating pros recall their master coach

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At age 91, Lussi's passion for the sport hasn't thawed: He still teaches part time during the summer in Lake Placid, N.Y., an international training ground for ice skaters.

Among his students was two-time Olympian Dick Button, the first American man to capture the gold in 1948, a feat he repeated in 1952.

Other Lussi students include Olympic figure-skating stars Dorothy Hamill, John Curry, Tenley Albright, David and Hayes Allen Jenkins, and Barbara Ann Scott.

Button remembers

Button says Lussi's techniques made all the difference.

"It meant everything to my skating," says Button, 58, who narrates world and Olympic figure-skating competitions for ABC-TV. "He taught me everything I knew ... He was way ahead of his time."

A tall man with steel-gray hair who always wears suspenders, Lussi grins as he recounts the first time he set eyes on Button.

At the request of Button's father, Lussi attended an ice show in New Jersey where he watched a chubby 8-year-old hop on his toe picks around the rink, dressed in a frog suit.

Little more than a decade later, under Lussi's tutelage, Button became the first figure skater to land a triple jump in world competition.

Visionary of modern skating

Back in the 1920s, when Lussi began coaching, figure skating was in its competitive infancy. Skaters sprinkled their free-skating programs with single jumps, concentrating on edges and footwork.

Lussi's methods, such as altering arm and leg positions of skaters entering and landing jumps, led to today's dazzling arrays of double and triple jumps.

But Lussi knew competitions couldn't be captured on jumps alone.

He also trained his skaters to spin like a top, centered on one spot. Revolutions on the ice (spins) and in the air (jumps) reinforce one another, he insists.

Lussi says many skaters were

reluctant to spin at first.

"They didn't want to ... they thought they'd get dizzy," Lussi says.

His deep blue eyes twinkle as he speaks in a lilting Swiss accent.

'Killer spin'

Lussi takes pride in developing a spin that came to be known as "the killer spin" — a move rarely performed in modern-day competition because "nobody knows how to do it anymore," he says. Skated correctly, the spin was so fast that features of the skater blended together.

Although he couldn't complete the jumps his students became famous for — the double axel, the triple loop, the delayed axel — Lussi could spin with the best, turning 80 revolutions without stopping.

But all that supersonic spinning took its toll. A surgical hip fusion — a result of years of throwing his free leg into "killer" spins to build momentum — forced him to pack his skates away three decades ago.

Today, figure-skating meccas such as Colorado Springs and Wilmington, Del., are taking the aerodynamics of the sport into a high-tech arena.

Computers calculate the physics of figure skating. They determine how skaters can spin faster and jump farther through the air.

Skate designers are also developing new blades and boots to absorb the impact of triple jumps, Mitch says.

Began as skier

Mitch says Lussi's insight into the aerodynamics of figure skating, while others focused on footwork, may have stemmed from his ski-jumping past.

A native of Stans, central Switzerland, Lussi spent much of his youth springing off ski jumps.

But after a bad spill at age 17 knocked him out cold for three days, Lussi shied away from the sport. A dent in his skull at the top of his forehead still marks the fall.

The death of his mother and a falling-out with his father prompted Lussi to hop a ship for the United States, where he worked at the uncle's riding academy in Brooklyn.

After cleaning horses and saddles for several months, Lussi realized his opportunity at the academy



Tribune photograph by TIM JACKSON
Gus Lussi and wife Thelma live in Hernando County during the winter months.

was limited. So he jumped a train to Manhattan and found a job as a dishwasher at the St. Regis Hotel on 57th Street.

During the evenings, Lussi and a Swiss friend, an ice-skating professional, rode the subway up to 181st Street to glide around a rink.

Soon Lussi's friend left New York to teach skating at the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society, promising he would send for Lussi to be his assistant.

When the call came a few months later at Christmas time, 1920, Lussi was despondent: He had no money to pay the train fare to Philadelphia.

Pin was 'godsend'

Hanging his head on his way home from his dishwashing job, he spotted a glitter of hope outside the Nevin Street subway stop. It was a diamond stickpin in the snow.

"For me that was the biggest godsend," Lussi recalls, "to be so low and to rise so quickly from a low to a high."

He pawned the pin for \$75, bought a one-way ticket to Philadelphia and started "dragging people around the rink."

Twenty years after he began washing dishes at the St. Regis Hotel, Lussi arrived in the lobby in a dark suit and a top hat, ready to produce an ice show.

It was one of many theatrical ice extravaganzas Lussi produced,

complete with elaborate costumes, kick lines and choreographed numbers.

His teaching and ice shows took him to Philadelphia, Toronto, Quebec and Buffalo until he settled in the small mountain village of Lake Placid, N.Y.

It was there he established the first summer ice program in this country, enabling skaters to train year round.

On the sidelines of a rink that bears his name, Lussi taught his students to blend art, music and physics on ice.

Hamill was student

Dorothy Hamill, who captured an Olympic gold in 1976, learned her first jumps and spins from Lussi.

"Gus Lussi taught me how to skate," Hamill says in a documentary filmed in 1989. "He played such an incredible role in the young life of mine."

Hamill says Lussi developed many of the ice-skating moves she is famous for, such as the delayed axel and the Hamill camel.

"That was all Gus. ... Technically, there isn't a better teacher."

This April, PBS television stations around the country will air a documentary on Lussi's life. Yet to be scheduled on Tampa-St. Petersburg market stations, the documentary is titled, "Gus Lussi: The Man Who Changed Skating."