

FAREWELL, GUS

By Eugene Turner

Naturally you've heard of the phrase, "Larger than life." It has to do more with personality than with shape; more with character than height; more with breadth of living than size. Churchill fills the bill. So does Lyndon Johnson. Napoleon charmed even his bitterest enemies.

Maybe it's presumptuous, but how about putting two skating figures alongside these legendary individuals. One is the late Maribel Vinson Owen. We've just recently lost the other: Gus Lussi. Both made such deep impressions on whomever they met, and particularly on their pupils, that they will probably never really leave us. Though I took no lessons from either one, the impact of their personalities is with me to this day -- especially Lussi, who we'll talk about first on these pages.

Teaching in Lake Placid with Gus Lussi for three summers was an adventure. For one thing, you always knew where Gus was. Like the clock at one end of the rink and the coffee shop at the other, Gus in his corner "teaching patch" was a rink fixture. Early morning, mid-afternoon, late at night, there he'd be commanding his area, an area no larger than a normal patch. In it he taught figures, jumps, spins, even entire routines. Occasionally a pupil would try something on the large surface, but would always return to this "postage stamp."

Gus's voice wasn't loud, but it carried well. Yet what you heard more often was the laughter and giggling from a coterie of his pupils surrounding him while he taught his free style lessons. Call them kibitzers if you want, but they were more like an audience which Gus played shamelessly. A burst of laughter from that corner of the rink meant his pupil of the moment had either pulled a boner or was the butt of a Lussi jibe. Since each of the "audience" would eventually have a turn, the laughter was generally sympathetic, even though the victim might not feel that way.

What comes to mind next is an ancient phrase: "To make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." Many teachers take good skaters and make them better. Gus Lussi made minor jewels out of nothing. Skaters barely acceptable under normal circumstances, blossomed under his teaching. For one thing, no one was considered a reject. Each skater was made to feel important. Each individual quality was isolated, examined, and then either squeezed or cajoled or even bullied out.

A skater would arrive at the start of a summer looking like Mopsy and in a few weeks' time begin looking like a coming champion. It was like seeing one of those before and after advertisements: a dowdy, overweight, ill-dressed female flowering into a skating cover girl. And like any magic act, the trick was difficult to spot, especially day by day. It was the weekly transformations that made it fun -- no illusions, but the real goods.

And so with Lussi routines. His competitive routines were distinctive, crisp, clean, easy to follow, and rarely boring. But his exhibition routines were what interested me. Each skater seemed to have a type of "folk number", complete with matching music and costume. Some had several. And they were all different. Since Saturday nights were devoted to exhibitions, these colorful numbers lighted up the place.

But this hardly tells you about the man himself. Perhaps nothing could. He seemed massive, yet he was of normal height. His face sometimes appeared made of brown granite, sometimes of heavy leather.

Invariably, there was an expression of a secret amusement known only to himself. The voice uttered pronouncements, declarations, commandments. Sometimes he sounded like a declaiming Moses. And his eyes focused like laser beams. You felt surrounded by his presence. Other humans may doubt; Gus, never.

But perhaps that still doesn't tell you anything. Maybe the following two stories will help you see the man better.

The first is about a young skater named Yvonne Sherman. Gifted with quality figures, but hexed with inferior free style, she spent years in the national Juniors -- six or seven, I think -- determined not to go higher until she had proven herself worthy. It was a rough road. Year after year, her usual lead in figures would disintegrate during the free skating.

Blessed with a lovely style and musical taste, she at the same time appeared slow and weak, jumped poorly if at all. When her patience was finally rewarded it was not through any free skating improvement but because of the normal attrition at the top. And her arrival in the Senior ranks, which showed off her immaculate figure technique, also continued to display her inadequate free. The results were not promising for the future.

So she decided to go to Gus Lussi for help. Along came a national championship in Washington, D.C. and she found herself up against a veteran opponent, Sonya Klopfer. Sonya was a natural free skater, with all the jumps, but she also had good figures. Even so, Yvonne was expected to get the lead in figures and as usual try to hold on. Then came the earthquake. Sonya won the figures! There as no way she could out-free-skate Sonya. It wasn't possible. Everyone at the competition shrugged and gave up the idea.

One person did not. The old magician now took a hand in this crisis and went to work. What Gus Lussi said, what he did, and how he managed to will Miss Sherman into pulling herself together, into making up her mind, into believing and fighting -- and if need be, dying -- will probably remain a mystery. But when the crucial night arrived, a miracle unfolded. True, Sonya was not up to her usual standard. Slightly lackadaisical, and possibly convinced she had nothing to fear, she performed adequately, but with no spark, no fire, no glow.

All the conflagration was provided by Yvonne Sherman. She appeared transformed; a human floodlight, a graceful dynamo, an electrical storm on skates. She was actually unrecognizable, as if she had decided to sell her soul to the devil for one huge performance. But it wasn't the devil who was responsible. It was that master hypnotist, Lussi. And perhaps that's what Gus Lussi did -- hypnotize.

Because, consider this second story. Here was a young Englishman by the name of John Curry who had spent years trying to break through into the top ranks of men's skating. Occasionally coming close, he would then fall apart disastrously. People would tell him he was too old at twenty-three, that he'd never be able to do it. When he considered joining an ice show, the owner told him he might as well, that he would never be any good, that he could never beat anyone in competitive skating.

This made him more determined than ever, but when he came to the U.S., his newest instructor started by telling him that he was far too old to learn anything. "There seemed to be an American belief," said Curry, "that something not learned at three weeks of age was something that would never be learned."



John Curry: *Life via Lussi* (Walker)

He returned home soon after, tried another teacher, and with some lucky financial backing, trained well enough to place third in the European Championships. Encouraged, he went to worlds that year. There he skated so poorly that, as Curry said, "The judges came to me unanimously and told me that I must give it up."

Depressed, he yet was resolved to "... not go out of skating through the back door." At that point, someone told him to try Gus Lussi in Lake Placid. He arrived to start work and found he was going to be taught on a piece of ice about 20 by 30 feet, "... no larger than an average sitting room". There then began a drastic disassembly of everything he had been taught.

"I fell on an average of 30 to 40 times a day," he said. "There I was, supposedly one of the best skaters in the world, and all that anybody ever saw of me was an endless series of slides across the ice, ending -- all to soon in that confined space -- in a heap, crumpled against the barrier. My embarrassment knew no bounds. There came a point, after three weeks, when I could not even do an axel. Even that was beyond me."

And then something happened. He began to understand. Things began to click. Occasionally a jump would work, and better than before. He felt more elevation, more "air" in the jump. The improvement was gradual but consistent. He was on his way. "I had been told so often by people, 'You're twenty-three. You're too old. You'll never do it!'" And now all those people who giggled at me began giggling less and looking more. I was no longer told that at my age it was impossible to change. I had changed."

It was the old Lussi magic at work again. (His theory? Everyone jumping on the ice relies on momentum, but in a confined space, one has no

momentum and is therefore dependent upon achieving height by one's own muscular coordination.)

You know the rest, how John Curry came in second in the 1975 Europeans and third in the worlds, and capped it off with the 1976 Olympic title. "I astounded everybody," he said. "Lo and behold, there was life in the old dog yet." Just as that old dog, Gus Lussi astounded people for years with a life that is now a legend.

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Gustave Lussi, one of the world's foremost coaches, died at his home in Lake Placid on June 23, 1993 at the age of 95. It was Lussi and the modern techniques he developed for multiple revolution jumps, spins, and combinations that made possible the free skating programs seen today. Born in Switzerland, Lussi was a ski jumper in his youth and became interested in figure skating after a serious ski jumping accident. He became an accomplished skater with a natural gift for teaching. He moved to the U.S. when he was 20 years old and quickly established a reputation as a teacher with his first of many champions, Egbert S. Cary, Jr., the 1924 U.S. Junior champion. Among those to follow were Dick Button, Barbara Ann Scott, Hayes Alan and David Jenkins, Ronald Robertson, Gordon McKellen, Jr., Dorothy Hamill, and John Curry. Lussi wrote *Championship Figure Skating*, a figure skating textbook, in 1951. One of the sport's earliest proponents of the idea of "teaching the teachers how to teach," Lussi himself regularly taught in Lake Placid from 1921 until his death. He was elected to the USFSA Hall of Fame in 1976. Perhaps his greatest tribute lies in the fact that years after their skating careers ended, the champions he taught still profess a familial kinship to him, remembering not only the ingenious teaching methods he used, but also the spaghetti dinners he invited them to. Lussi is survived by his wife Thelma, his sons Craig and Sergei, 5 grandchildren, 3 great-grandchildren—and scores of students.