

# Torben the FIRST

**T**his first of 98 Davis Cup ties for Denmark was in 1948 with the same poetry-in-motion touch control that has characterized his game ever since. His first major film production, "Motion Picture" (1970), is, by his own description, "a catalogue of movement." Although Torben Ulrich never has been a great winning match player, watching him play his delicate brand of tennis is rather like attending a ballet. And the individualism involved is a quality he brings to everything else in life as well.

He talks about these things in a lilting soft and spiritual manner, precisely stating details — all of them — with a unique and thoughtful, disarming and confidential whimsy that has earned him love and respect as Numero Uno among world-class tennis characters for over 20 years. And it has often been said that what is normal for everyone else is not so for Torben. His view of things can frequently appear as upside-down contemplation, like standing on the head to bathe the brain.

Visit him privately in his room (makes little difference where) as a new day is getting underway. You'll soon get the picture. In this case, it happens to be Chicago's Marriott at the conclusion of the Sportface International Championship, with Torben about to depart for Miami's Aventura. But little matter. It's merely another mental hop-scotch morning (not that time really matters either or that it's really 1 p.m. and the curtains are still drawn) in the Awareness (not life) of the ageless Ulrich masterpiece.

*On the bed before you rests the shirtless, extraordinarily fit (for any age) figure of a man who's vastly more than a tennis player. An accomplished jazz connoisseur and musician (with a special penchant for flute), art critic, radio and tv personality, writer, and self-styled sophisticate with a poet's soul, he's reclining in the classic Renaissance posture, his braided hair and Nordic look resembling an Albrecht Dürer woodcut.*

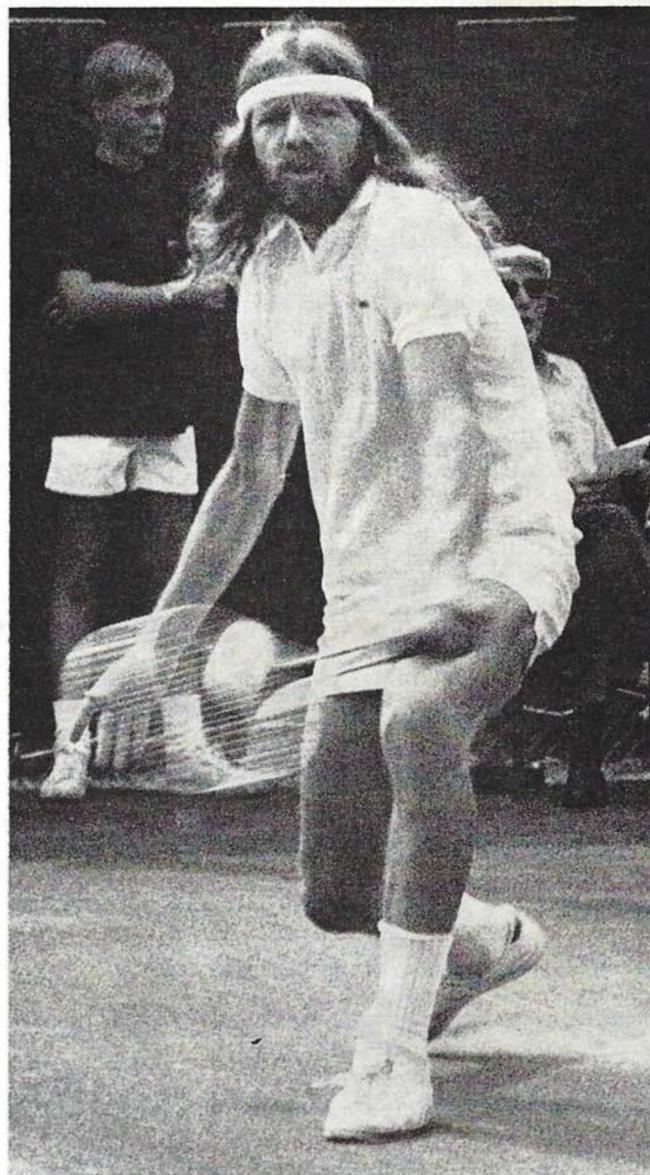
Right now, he's talking about his film. His style of speaking can be variously described as free, blithe, and far-away. "Two years ago, some Danish fund-raisers came to my house in Copenhagen asking if I'd be kind enough to draw them a pink elephant or something . . . a painting to be sold at an auction attracting some of the best-known people in Denmark.

"'Noooo,' I told them. 'Too limited. Besides, it wouldn't be a very nice elephant, you know . . .'

"'Oh please!' they persisted. 'Please give it some thought.'

"So finally I thought about doing a painting by hitting tennis balls on a canvas stretched against a wall. So often, you know, we have played against these walls, and I had often wondered about that. What would it look like? If we had left our imprints, what would be the pattern of the experience? Maybe this was the occasion to find out.

"We got a black canvas and all these luminous oils



which the fund-raisers paid for. The rules of the painting were that we would also be filming the action (to be later incorporated as an integral center enclosure of the canvas like a play within a play), and since there were exactly 71 minutes of film in the machine, that's when the painting would be finished.

"Soooo, we went out to this place and lots of people came with food, coffee and all that. There was music. At first, I was hitting the balls by myself, starting with black balls on the black background — interesting effect. Then others joined in too, and we all began using the day-glo colors. My wife would really dip the balls and — SHHWUUSH! — they'd leave these lovely, enormous splashes. Even my seven-year-old boy played the game. Only he chose to *throw* his tennis balls.

"What's nice was that it became a collective experience



TEXT AND COVER PHOTO  
By ROBERT H. BRADFORD

with everyone wanting to leave their own imprint. At various stages, certain people would think that, now, *that* was enough, or, please hit more to the left-hand corner. So it was good fun you know. Quite a happening, really. Nice to live through the shaping of a painting while it's being done without breaking any of the rules."

Pause. Torben's now engaged in the always intriguing and unpredictable adventure of packing — an experience which he says may well become the subject of his next full-scale film feature. He opens a lower bureau drawer expectantly as if ready to be surprised by whatever mysteries may lie therein. There are plenty: tennis sweaters, shorts, socks, jocks, an assortment of wandering wristlets and headbands . . . and above all, a motel courtesy fly-switch.

"Ahhh!" Torben exclaims triumphantly, seizing the swatter and leveling it through a few trial strokes, knees bent in forehand grace. "My new Wilson racquet. Wonder how it plays?" The expression is dead-pan until, suddenly, "Ho! Ho!" — a rich, plangent laugh that is utterly contagious. His Danish blue eyes twinkle like the stars.

Two battered luggage items stand ready — one, a suitcase with dry leather straps; the other, a canvas, rucksack-style touring bag that zippers on the top between the handles. Both have served their master for over 20 years and, thus, are possibly history's most traveled carriers.

The apparently bottomless bag, explains Torben, functions on a kind of reverse Schnappes bottle principle. That is, "when it appears full, you set it down and there's always room for just a little more." Right now the bag is stuffed to overflowing. Torben demonstrates, grasping the handles and pounding it twice on the floor. Sudden space appears for still more hidden surprises. And there are many.

His books, for example, lurking under towels on the dresser: *The New Religions*, *Meditation In Action*, *The Imitation of Christ* (again, the Dürer woodcut image), and



splendidly illustrated production of the Rhama Foundation titled *Be Now Here*. This one Torben hands over. It opens on a spectacular double-page spread called "The Butterfly:"

"I am without form;" it reads, "without limit; beyond space; beyond time . . . I am in everything; everything is me. I am the bliss of the Universe . . . Everything am I." The signature is Sanskrit — Rham Tirtha.

*You recollect Forest Hills three years ago when Torben was shocking John Newcombe two sets to love in the fourth round and a butterfly flew in his face on a crucial volley play causing him to lose the point. Ultimately he lost the match. Afterwards he was asked about the incident in the press room. Thoughtful silence while the international press waited. Then with typical misty aplomb, Torben quoted the ancient Taoist Chuang-tzu: "Was I then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or am I now a butterfly dreaming I am a man?"*

Press conference Ulrich, in fact, has long been legendary. Another classic was Forest Hills '69 after his tight, five-set loss to Gonzalez (today, at 43, five months Ulrich's senior). Did Pancho's big serve give you any trouble, one writer wanted to know. Torben thought about it, then looked perplexed:

*"Oh, I think his serve is a thing of beauty and how can a thing of beauty give anyone trouble?"*

Earlier that same year, and prior to his signing a 25-week per annum professional contract with the WCT tour ("Imagine just turning pro at 41," Executive Director Mike Davies had exclaimed. "I retired at 31!!"), Torben had already become a "pro" in a widely publicized ceremony where he paid himself four cents under the watchful eyes of two cigar-smoking "promoter" friends wearing derbies. It was characteristic Ulrich and, of course, made a serious underlying point. The gesture rendered him ineligible for further Davis Cup competition in its present form. A particularly poignant fact when you consider that Torben, with younger brother, Jorgen, and father Einer, had represented a proud and unmatched Cup dynasty for Denmark for over 40 years — or a collective 287 rubbers played of which 146 were victories.

*This unique Ulrich irony is no different in Torben's treatment of his tennis colleagues. During a practice with Nails Carmichael, the following exchange was overheard: Nails—"Want any more lobs, Torb?" Ulrich—"Do you have any more, Nails?"*

And discussing who would receive in left court with his new WCT doubles partner, Roy Barth, just before their very first match at this year's Philadelphia International: Barth (a steady right-hander) — "I haven't played left court in five years, Torb . . ." Ulrich (a steady left-



hander) — “Well, you know . . . it’s not a question of who can play it better but who plays it worse.”

“Torben is the only person I know,” says Arthur Ashe, “who responds literally to my customary, casual greeting, ‘What’s Happening?’ I’ll say this to him and it may take him 10, possibly even 20 minutes, to answer.”

Such an inverted and rarified approach to living — refreshing as it is — often befuddles many of the “conventionalists” who constantly pursue the Ulrich legend wherever Torben goes. One of his favorite recent pieces of evidence is a newspaper clipping lying on his bureau. “Delightful,” he calls it with an odd chuckle and a little sigh as he reads a few excerpts:

The Interviewer: “I keep trying to get straight answers out of you but you won’t give me any. I guess I’m just wasting your time. I don’t know why you’re being so hostile to me. You haven’t given me a single thing I can use. What I want to know is this: if you don’t read books and don’t listen to records, where do you get your input from?”

Torben: “General Electric.”

The truth is that in other than the straight, stereotyped, quickie interview format, few people in the world are better at communicating the very well-springs of existence. The rambling Ulrich line of reason is well worth waiting for. Consider the following:

“I can’t describe my game. I don’t play in conventional terms. I don’t consider myself an expert in anything, in fact, much less in terms of placements or rallies. Every day even less and less. A good feeling, really. Being a complete beginner, you know.”

Well, what *does* happen on a tennis court then? “I’m trying to find out myself. Most of the time I’m caught up in circumstances. I mean the ball is coming, you know, and I’m at the mercy of whatever happens. So the object for me is to try and be open to whatever happens there and yet not be thrown by the circumstances. That is, to have as much intensity of awareness as possible.

“And having this awareness, there’s no set pattern, no ‘What kind of game do you play?’ at all. For once there is this awareness, you move from moment to moment, from movement to movement, and your attention takes care of business as it were.”

Is this an almost abstract sense of freedom then? “Well, maybe, but I’ve never defined it. To me, it’s a very practical constant. So concrete, in fact, that it scares me most of the time — the single-mindedness of it all. Because it’s *so simple*, you know: keeping attention but not forcing it. Almost the simplest thing you could demand of anyone playing a ball game.

*“Everyone talks about concentration. But that means*

*focusing with force — something almost like schizophrenia. Part of you is forcing and part of you is forced, meaning that part of you is not really into it. So you’re pressing, not reacting from instinct.*

“There are some people, in Japan I think, who can catch arrows. Their reactions are quick enough. O.K. So obviously if you can catch the arrow, so to speak, you also can catch most serves and shots. And once you’re in that class of attention, there’s no such thing as ‘missing a return.’ You don’t have to talk about ‘power games’ and ‘styles’ and this or that ‘approach.’ Basically this is what interests me about tennis. It has neither to do with youth nor age.”

Speaking of age, do you have any plans for when the time comes to quit the circuit, when you ultimately decide to stop? “But you’re taking for granted that the time comes. I don’t even do that. I could play tennis forever or I could stop. If I went along with that question, then there would be a certain structure to the future. I have no particular structure. I hate getting too involved in schedules and specifics. The only certainties I permit are things like obviously if we don’t eat in the next seven hours, we will be hungry. So I’ll probably eat something. And there are many possibilities — grapefruit, tomatoes . . .”

*What, then, is the secret of staying young? “Really, I don’t do anything. Actually, I’m not even concerned with it. I think how old you are depends on when you died last, you know. Maybe if you die every minute, then you can last a long time.*

“I mean if you don’t establish a past — not being concerned with age and trying to live fully every minute so that once that moment or day is gone, *it’s gone* — then when you lie down to sleep and journey into night, you can wake up as a new person or whatever you are in the morning. But you’re certainly not dragging the day before along behind you so that finally you’re walking around staggering under this bag of yesterdays: yesterday’s scores, bad shots, rankings. I don’t say that I always succeed in this, but I’m constantly aware of the trap and I always try not to fall in.”

From *Be Now Here*: “You finally understand the message you communicate to another human being has nothing to do with what you say; has nothing to do with the look on the musculature of your face . . . Much deeper than that, much deeper, my friend. It’s the vibrations that emanate from you.”

This, says Torben, is a favorite passage. He gives his Schnappes bottle bag a few more thumps; considers taking the room-service ironing board along to Miami for surfing; allows four errant pennies to remain on the floor where he dropped them — a symbol of not getting too particular, he explains.

The packing adventure is just about over. No more surprises to uncover this mornig. Only the unglamorous prospect of one more flight that leaves in an hour or so. He stacks his metal Wilsons as the very last act of the ritual and a worried look appears. He inspects two of them closely. “Oh my! Something’s wrong here. The letters are black. . .”

“Is that bad?”

“Yes, I think so. Because the racquets I left to be re-strung had red ones, you know.”