



Former top tennis player Torben Ulrich has been involved in journalism, music, film, radio and Buddhism. He also paints pictures by volleying a tennis ball marinated in paint against an easel

Philosophy and absorption

- a breathing space



The conference gave an opportunity for 71-year-old Torben Ulrich to share his thoughts on movement and play

By Marie Venø Thesbjerg

»Excuse me, Mr Ulrich. Should we wear Esports clothes for your event over in the sports hall?« I venture.

»No, I don't think so,« he replies. »Actually, yes - you can hang on the wall bars or run around a bit if you like. But we will certainly not be doing any gymnastics.«

»OK« I tried again - »so are you giving a speech?«

»Um, no, I hope not,« he smiles.

And he is right. Unlike the rest of Play the Game's delegates, Torben Ulrich does not offer a traditional speech from the podium. Although the 71-year-old man with the long grey beard cannot be categorised, his talent is undoubtedly still blooming. Multi talented, with a musical, sporting and journalistic background, Torben Ulrich still plays tennis (even though it sometimes involves an easel and a tennis ball coated in paint), writes, participates in sport and has even made a film detailing everyday motion and exercise in his adopted home city of Seattle.

And this evening in the sports hall he fills the air with his soft, eloquent tones. He takes us with him into a world where philosophy and motion merge to become one. A million miles from the conference's debating points on doping and corruption, he shares with us his belief that we should practice sport with deep feeling, and compete as friends, not enemies. Instead of focusing on winning and losing, we should strive to realise sport's deeper values. The ability to participate in sport is a gift, he says, that allows us the opportunity to reflect, and examine our selves.

Afterwards Torben Ulrich is asked whether he can play tennis without allowing aggressive,

competitive thoughts to emerge. »Yes, well, I think it is possibly to be friendly and still beat the shit out of people,« he jokes. But seriously, the answer is yes, he thinks so.

»For me, it's all about finding other ways of playing. To be close to the game, to become at one with the ball, the physical exercise and the play. To move deeper into the game before it develops into a simple question of winning and losing.«

Even during his long career as a professional tennis player, Ulrich has always decided which events should take priority in his life. He famously arrived late for an important match at Wimbledon because he had been out listening to jazz the night before, and on another occasion he decided that he would rather watch the football world cup final on TV than play in a national tennis final.

»I am so old now, and I know that greed has always been a feature of sport,« he says. »Now there are just a few more zeros added on to the figures. But for me, sport is not always about achieving a goal - it's more to do with moving forwards. Seeing moment - seizing moment - bingo!«

Torben Ulrich is a renowned artist, and this outlook manifests itself in his pictures. His philosophy is to view everyday situations with a fresh approach and react differently to the norm. In this way, he feels, it is possible to achieve change.

»I cannot say if there is a purpose in sport,« he says, »But for me, the thinking behind sport is to play deeper.« A reference to his beliefs on the spirituality of sport, in which the five elements of Buddhism - water, earth, fire, air and space - are both a part of the body and a part of the game. ♦

