

INTERVIEW WITH TOM PURA, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

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Special Feature

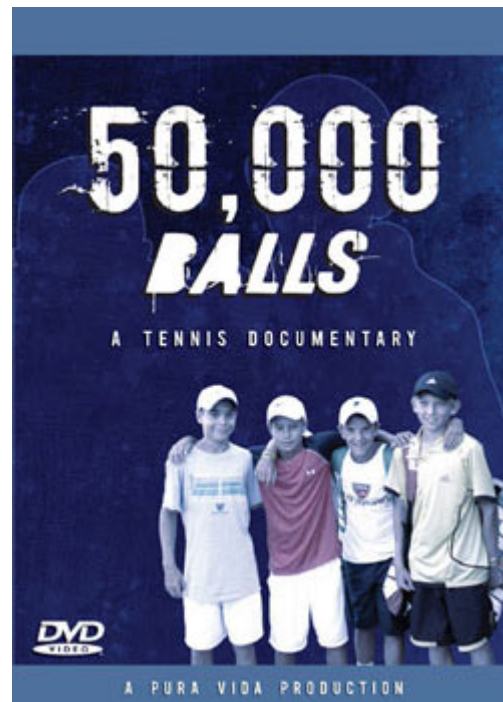
A Conversation with Documentary Filmmaker Tom Pura

by Colette Lewis, 8 May 2008

Tom Pura is a tennis parent, a Harvard grad and a Wall Street retiree. He is not, as he would be the first to tell you, a movie producer. But several years ago, Pura decided that if he wanted to chronicle the tennis life of his 13-year-old son TJ, it was up to him to become one. The resulting documentary, entitled *50,000 Balls*, delves into the hearts, minds and tennis games of TJ and three other boys, Joseph Di Giulio, Mitchell Krueger and Mitchell Polnet. Centered on the boys, their coaches, and their families, the film culminates in North Little Rock, Arkansas, the site of the 2006 Boys 12s National Championships.

I spoke with Pura by phone from his home in Los Angeles about the project, which he funded himself.

(Disclosure: I was asked to critique several early cuts of *50,000 Balls*).



Q. Could you explain the title of your film?

A. It's from the opening statement by Billy McQuaid, who was Joseph Di Giulio's first coach. He says, 'We used to think it took about 25,000 balls, but now we think it takes about 50,000 balls to hit before you kind of have an idea of how to do it. It doesn't mean you are going to win a match; it doesn't mean you are going to win a tournament... most kids have hit their 50,000th tennis ball by the time they are 18. Some, like these boys, have already hit it.'

Q. Was there a specific moment that convinced you that you needed to make a film?

A. Yes, TJ was nine years old and had an Eastern sectional tournament; it was a Friday, and he played a match at nine o'clock at night after spending the whole week in school. It ended about quarter to eleven, and driving home, he was asleep in the back of the car. I wanted to capture that moment, a moment no one else would really know about, except a few kids who played. There's a subculture of highly competitive junior tennis in this country and if you don't really see it, you don't really know it.

Q. How did you select the other boys?

A. At the time we were living in Bedford Hills, New York, and I wanted a geographic distribution. I knew Mitchell Polnet first because he and TJ played very early on in the Little Mo tournaments, so my first call was to them. I heard about Joe Di Giulio because someone told me there was a kid out in California who you could not tell whether he had won or lost a point. I went to see him play, at the Copper Bowl, and it was true, it was amazing. So I called them up, wrote them a note, to see if they would consider it. TJ knew Mitchell Krueger from the Little Mo too, and he had started to do well, both parents played tennis in college, and I called them up and they were happy to be asked. Since then, we've all become good friends.

Q. What were the biggest challenges?

A. Since I was a rookie, not really a movie person, once I did the filming, I didn't really have a story, I just had a bunch of film. I had no narration, I had 65 hours of film, 2400 clips, and how was I going to piece it together? I didn't want the movie to be just about who was going to win in Arkansas, I wanted it to be about the lives of these boys and their support group and the world of junior tennis. I wanted lessons to be shown, so other kids could learn from it.



Q. How does it differ from the Jim Courier-produced documentary Unstrung, now being shown on ESPN Classic?

A. I think they're more different than similar. Obviously, they're about tennis, about very talented boys, and show the sacrifices, the hopes and aspirations of junior players. In *50,000 Balls*, the boys are 11 and 12 years old, and they're not at the cusp of making a decision about turning pro and going to college. These boys are young, they don't have cars, don't have girlfriends, they're more innocent, yet they're playing the same difficult competitive game out there on their own.

Q. What has been the reaction from those who have seen it?

A. Kids seem to be inspired by it. They go out and play; they want to hit balls against the garage door and start counting. The tennis community - junior players 15 and under, coaches, parents who live this life - identifies with this movie very much. But I wanted to create a movie that is about sacrifice, about passion, about dedication, whether you're playing the clarinet or hitting a tennis ball. Work hard, have fun and be focused, while trying to be the best you can be. If *50,000 Balls* inspires more kids to play tennis, to pursue their passion, to believe in themselves, I'm really happy about that. But what I did do was capture a special moment in these four boys' lives that they'll look back on, and think of as an incredible moment in their lives.

FULL INTERVIEW AVAILABLE AT <http://www.tennisrecruiting.net/article.asp?id=531>