

ROVING EYE

by Richard Evans

It was good to see **Trey Buchholz** has assumed some of his father's passion for the game of tennis. Butch's son was justifiably proud to be heading up a press conference during the **NASDAQ-100 Open** to announce new developments from the initiative called **First Serve** emerging from activities at the **Ashe-Buchholz Tennis Center at Moore Park** in Miami.

Proud not only because First Serve is indulging in one of the most worthwhile initiatives that can spring from our game – an international attempt to empower young people through tennis – but also because he was surrounded by just about every important entity in the sport. **Larry Scott** was there for the **WTA**; **Chris Clouser**, president of the **ATP** tour; **Tony Trabert**, president of the **International Tennis Hall of Fame**; **Jim Baugh**, the former **Wilson** boss who is now a **USTA** board member and president of the **Tennis Industry Association**; **R.J. Tessier** of the **USPTA**; **Dan Santorum**, CEO of the **PTR**; **Jim Courier**, a First Serve board member and others were all there, united in their conviction that this is the right thing to do.

The irony of it all was not lost on Trey. "For decades, many of the organizations within the tennis community have been challenged to come together on issues ranging from governance to marketing," said the younger Buchholz. "It is somewhat ironic, yet particularly gratifying, to see these organizations unite around the common and noble cause of contributing to the positive development of children."

Well said. It was something that needed saying and needs to be done again and again until everyone in the sport realizes that nothing is impossible if we unite as one game, and a great many things will never be achieved if we do not. Although it was wonderful to see the Buchholz family step forward once again to take a lead, I also found it slightly embarrassing that the idea of getting the game's leaders around a table was considered such a big deal. It should be commonplace. It should happen all the time, not simply to support a worthwhile cause, but to give professional tennis a coherent policy and a clear direction so that it can speak with one voice to the outside world and offer those who seek to deal with it one centralized office to turn to.

In a recent conversation, **Fox Sports** CEO **David Hill**, an Australian who knows and likes the game but won't put it on his network, said, "Who runs tennis? The game needs a Commissioner."

Hill is not the first person to have made that observation, but the need to do something about it is becoming increasingly obvious. **Butch Buchholz** has been saying it for years, and even with his track record, people will ignore him, if not at their peril, then certainly at the game's peril. It is a viewpoint so widely held that it cannot remain unheeded for very much longer.

Golf is not exactly faultless in this respect. The **PGA** is a law unto itself in America, and if tennis tried the European tour's gambit of setting off for a series of tournaments in Asia and Africa, it would get held up to ridicule. But there is no question that, broadly speaking, golf is better organized and more approachable than tennis, and it was no surprise that Trey Buchholz turned to **Joe Louis Barrow**, executive director of **The First Tee**, for some advice on how to make First Serve work. As Barrow explained so eloquently at the press conference, The First Tee is a multi-level life skills curriculum designed to reach hundreds of organized programs, hopefully enveloping half a million kids by 2005.

The young golfers are taught how to present themselves effec-

tively as rounded and confident individuals, and judging by the young lady tennis player who read a prepared statement at the **NASDAQ-100 Open**, some of the young players in our game are learning those skills as well.

"Learning from The First Tee has helped First Serve hit the ground running," said Trey Buchholz. "Happily, The First Tee does not view us as competing for resources. Their view is that tennis and golf are both helping kids and there are tens of millions of kids out there."

With one particular youngster in mind, I scoured the big merchandising tents at the **NASDAQ-100 Open** for something bearing the name of the tournament to buy my 6-year-old son. Of course I didn't bother looking for anything with a player's name on it because, as we know, tennis doesn't do that. But I did think I'd find something for the next generation so that they might start identifying with the tournament. But no such luck. A few dresses for

little girls with no identification. Nothing at all for little boys. So my son will go on wearing his **Arsenal** soccer shirt, with the name and number of **Thierry Henry**, his favorite player, on the back and wait for the game to catch up with his enthusiasm for tennis. It's a good thing his Daddy is not going to give up the fight; otherwise, another one would be lost to our sport.

Which reminds me of a story **Luke Jensen** told me at Indian Wells. He was on a plane recently sitting next to **Snoop Dogg**. Luke noticed the rapper was wearing **Rod Laver** retro shoes. "Cool," he thought. And then, like me, he thought as well as all this retro – the **Stan Smith** and **Ilie Nastase** models are also on the market – wouldn't it be great if we had a little "advance-o" and got our acts together about the future.

In marketing, no one seems capable of making that happen because the clothing companies have an unhealthy stranglehold over the way tennis conducts its business in the marketplace. And the market research doesn't help, either. One company has been told that the kids who visit sports stores are so unfamiliar or disinterested in tennis that it is not worth bothering to put the names of players under their photographs on promotional flyers. In other words, they think the kids are just too dumb to be interested in putting a name to someone they might have seen on television – but couldn't recognize because the name at the top of the screen has been shortened to 'Rod' or 'Cor' or 'Fed' and there are no names on their shirts to help identification.

I find this attitude appalling. It is nothing more than gratuitously offensive. It is also counterproductive. For the price of printing a name under a photograph, you are eliminating the chance of catching the eye of just a couple of half-interested young tennis fans who just might become real fans. And a couple is a start. The trouble with these big-bucks marketing firms is that they are only interested in millions. The seed of an oak is small. It is a little detail that no one seems to care about. But as so few are capable of standing back to look at the big picture, either, it is hardly surprising our game is making so little impact on the sports-buying public. Treat 'em dumb and they come right back and spit in your eye.

At least a program like First Serve is trying to treat youngsters as intelligent human beings with a view to helping them develop their full potential. Unite, think positive, reach for the stars. Could this be a start?

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