

Creutzverhör #1 · · · · ·

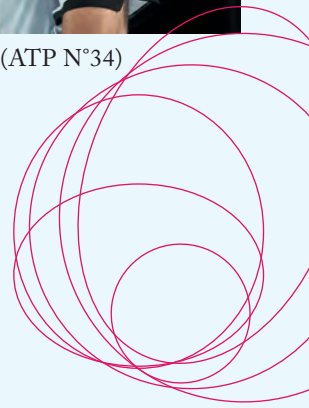
How are athletes weathering the current crisis?



Carsten Cramer - Managing Director Borussia Dortmund



Jan-Lennard Struff - Professional Tennis Player (ATP N°34)



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How are athletes weathering the current crisis?

»A tsunami of solidarity«

In the first of a series of paired interviews – for which we have coined the phrase »Creutzverhör«, a play on words based on the German term for police cross-examination – Alain Goblet and Tom Rasqué speak with Carsten Cramer, Managing Director of Borussia Dortmund, and Jan-Lennard Struff, ATP N°34 tennis player.*

Alain Goblet (AG) – The Corona pandemic brought global sports to a brutal halt. How did it happen for you personally?

Carsten Cramer (CC) – Playing on March 11th in Paris in an empty stadium was a very strange experience. As fans, we all know how important our support to the players is. At first, it was difficult to grasp the full consequences of the situation. Macron's »we are at war« speech then awoke me to the fact we are fighting an invisible enemy: a virtual conflict with real deaths so to speak! A lot has happened since then. With the experience of the past weeks, we can say we arrived at the center of the cyclone. Although we have been extremely fortunate so far, as none of our employees has been infected, this of course doesn't mean we are not impacted at all by this pandemic crisis.

Jan-Lennard Struff (JLS) – I realized the pandemic for the first time when I was leaving Australia after the Australian Open this January. Back then the bush fires in Australia were all over the news. When I arrived home, the first football matches in Germany were played without spectators. Our Davis-Cup Tie in Düsseldorf beginning of March was the last match we played in front of spectators. I flew on the following day to the USA to play the ATP Masters events in Indian Wells and Miami. Indian Wells then got cancelled on the day that I landed. At that point of time this hit me by surprise. Things accelerated quickly from there onwards. Soon after, Trump declared to close the borders with Europe. Luckily, I was able to leave from LA with one of the last flights back home. My only thought was getting home to my family. I'm now home and focus on essential things, trying to stay safe with my family.

Tom Rasqué (TR) – How did you adapt to the situation?

JLS – When I returned home from the US, it was a big relief to be with my family. In these difficult times I'm grateful that my loved ones are healthy. I'm grateful to spend time with them.

Trying to adapt to the situation, my team and I developed a plan to keep my physical fitness on a solid level. As all tennis courts and fitness areas were closed, my first move was to get an indoor bike for home sessions. I'm in permanent FaceTime contact with my fitness coach, mixing bike sessions, runs and home workouts.



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Since a bit more than three weeks I can again use the Tennis Facility in Kamen, one of the German National Tennis Centers. Due to sanitary obligations, I can access the court only with one person that is either my coach or my sparring partner. In the beginning, I was happy to hit some balls, but at this stage we don't know when we will be back on court, competing, on tour. All Tournaments including Wimbledon remain cancelled. And, to be honest, playing without any concrete goals for the next weeks is impacting motivation. So, we decided to keep a very light tennis schedule to maintain a bit of rhythm. It is generally more important to face the big picture: keeping everyone safe and caring for others.

CC – Solidarity and disciplined decision-making are of essence in the current situation. I frankly do not believe it's easy to be in the shoes of our politicians these days. They are, by the way, doing an excellent job. I'm deeply convinced that football currently must subordinate itself to the greater good: ensuring that civil society benefits from protective measures to the maximum. In our day-to-day jobs at Borussia Dortmund, we immediately switched to crisis mode, putting the protection of the health of our players and their families, our employees and our fans center stage. The current situation has indeed forced us to first cancel and then re-organize the team's training schedule. A fair share of our employees has been supporting the club from their home-offices and it works well.

Once we had taken the necessary measures to ensure that everybody was safe, we took additional organizational measures ensuring the future of our club. Many clubs had to take painful measures, with employees and players being forced to work reduced hours or even being laid off. So far, we were able to avoid this thanks to a tsunami of solidarity. I here particularly salute our players and management team who accepted temporary compensation cuts. I also acclaim our partner Rewe that is currently employing some of our part-time employees that cannot work for us these days. Our fan shops have even been able to re-open their doors at least partially, making our dedicated employees happy.

Of course, the Borussia family spirit goes way beyond our athletes, their families and our 850 employees. We try to assist as individually and broadly as possible. We also have responsibilities towards the inhabitants of the Dortmund region, the members of our 950 fan clubs and our fan base across the globe. The same goes for Dortmund restaurants, bars and shops whose revenues indirectly depend on our club. Therefore, we created a digital matchday – firstly, to bring some happiness to the living rooms of the Borussia family. But in this context, we also launched a crowdfunding campaign where our fan base can consume virtual beers and coffees in the bars they are used to going to every match day. This allowed us to collect a six-figure amount directly supporting these men and women. Beyond that, several players, such as [team captain] Marco Reus with his »#helpyourhometown« initiative, have been launching individual actions that are not necessarily covered by media. In cooperation with public health authorities we also transformed our home stadium into a Corona diagnostic center.

I must also thank our sponsors: this crisis has brought us even closer together. In times like these, solidarity is key. A solidarity that all Borussia stakeholders, from our fan base, our players, our employees, our sponsors to the inhabitants of Dortmund carry in their heart: *»Borussia verbindet«*.

AG – Experts always make a strong distinction between independent athletes, like tennis players, and team sport players, like footballers. Is this also true during times like these?



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CC – Athletes are first and foremost human beings caring just like ourselves for the health and security of their loved ones. We listened carefully to their worries whether training sessions would expose their loved ones to unnecessary risks. From the beginning of the lockdown we individualized all training units, and now train again in a broader way in our club facilities. We were not able to organize business-as-usual trainings for some time. This does make a big difference compared to independent athletes like Struffi who are already used to organizing their training units more autonomously.

JLS – Yes, professional tennis players need to organize their daily routine themselves. This is different from my professional athlete colleagues playing a team sport where everything is more or less organized and catered for.

CC – The mental challenge you mentioned is the same however. For instance, we have this silver lining on the horizon with the news that the »Bundesliga« has been granted green lights for a restart in May, even without spectators. Until that was confirmed, it certainly was challenging for our athletes to keep their motivation at the usual high level. Players naturally maintain their physical fitness at competition level, but it's difficult to keep on delivering fully when you don't know for sure when you will be able to play man against man and hit the ball.

Furthermore – and in contrary to independent athletes – team sport players often live where their club is established. For the players that moved with their families to Dortmund, the lockdown period is of course more bearable than for the players that moved alone. This is creating an additional stress and strain for the latter, despite the support of our club, considering that the people they care for most are not close to where they live on a daily basis.

JLS – Professional tennis players are, to put it quite simply, independent professionals. They have to organize everything for themselves and learn from a very young age to manage their revenues autonomously. For example, tennis players pay for their travel to tournaments, their accommodation, as well as the salaries and expenses of their professional support teams that are more or less systematically composed of a trainer, a fitness coach and a physiotherapist. They finance their running costs generally speaking from tournament prize money or sponsorship agreements. Considering that all tournaments have been cancelled and that some of my colleagues have lost sponsorship contracts, there is currently a smaller or even no revenue base to cover all these costs.

I had the luck to play well over the last couple of years, resulting in a good ATP ranking, and I earn my life accordingly. This means that I will not have problems to financially weather the next couple of months. Whereas I had planned to use first round prize monies of tournaments to cover my running costs, I now have to cover these with my savings. In this context I also decided to stay loyal to my trainer and my fitness coach who is also my physiotherapist. I will even support them if they run into financial problems themselves. Sponsors are of course impacted by the current crisis as well. Some more, some less. I have decided to remain loyal to my sponsors, also in difficult times.

Some tennis players do not have this luxury and will have to let go of their support team as a consequence of the current crisis. Athlete careers are short and end commonly in the mid-30s for tennis players, apart from very prominent exceptions of course. This means that you have a relatively short timeframe to develop your first career in sports and flourish financially. After all, salaries published in the media are expressed in US Dollars, before taxes and before travel and personnel costs.



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Playing tennis at a professional level is very expensive, especially in the beginning. I started my professional career at the age of 19. This was only possible through the massive financial support of my family that paid for my travel costs, essentially in Europe, accommodation and so forth. With first successes I could travel farther away and play tournaments with higher prize monies. It is still today very difficult for players ranked above ATP position 100 to 150 or further up to earn their life decently by playing tennis.

TR – Are there lessons to be drawn from the current crisis? Can they be avoided in the future?

JLS – As I said, only tennis players in the top positions earn a good living. For young players it is hard to rise in the ranking and it takes vision combined with strict discipline and determination to be successful. I must admit that I am not sure that I would still be playing tennis professionally today if the Corona crisis had struck when I was at the beginning of my career and ranked between 200 and 300. And it is precisely for this reason that talent will drop out of tennis in the current context.

There are currently discussions in the media to financially support tennis players and other athletes that ran into financial problems sparked by the Corona epidemic to prevent them from dropping out of professional sports. For tennis players, exchanges focus on the ranking level from which athletes should be supported. I salute this initiative because we all have been beginners.

CC – It would be presumptuous to say pandemics can be avoided in the future. The issue is beyond our area of influence. What counts is to keep a cool head and provide proportionate and focused responses against unravelling risks and situations. In this context Borussia Dortmund may have incorporated some resilience, considering we went through a series of crises over the past 15 years: the terrorist attack on our team bus three years ago at the time of our game against Monaco, or the fact that the club nearly went bankrupt in 2004-5. These events are still very present in our minds. I don't want to say that crisis management ever becomes a routine, but we have unfortunately been forced to gain some experience in this area. Our typical Westphalian serenity naturally helps in this context.

AG – Thank you for your insights ...

TR – ... and good luck for the future!

* Alain Goblet advises athletes and sports organizations as Relationship Manager at Creutz & Partners.

Tom Rasqué, as Creutz & Partner's Director of Development & Proposition, initiated the *Creutzverhör* series to exemplify the wealth management boutique's unique approach towards cultivating meaningful relationships.

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