

Essential Tennis Podcast #138

Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you love tennis and want to improve your game, this podcast is for you. Whether it's technique, strategy, equipment or the mental game, tennis professional Ian Westermann is here to make you a better player.

And now, here's Ian!

[speaker] Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast, your place for free, expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

Today's episode of the essential tennis podcast is brought to you by tennistours.com and tennisexpress.com.

A big thank you to all of you who are joining me on today's show-- I really appreciate that you took the time to download this episode and give it a listen, no matter where in the world you might be or what time you are listening to my voice. I always really appreciate your support by being a listener.

Today I've got a tennis gear expert on the show. He knows everything having to do with strings and rackets. Even the pros equipment which we talk about for a while which is interesting.

So let's go ahead and get to our interview. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music]

My guest today is Dustin Tankersly, he's a USTPA certified teaching pro. A master racket technician and he's been a stringer at the US Open among other professional tennis tournaments and he's going to be a guest today on the show talking about tennis gear, strings, rackets and all that stuff.

So Dustin thank you for being with me on the show.

[speaker] Thank you.

[speaker] First of all, those who have been listening for at least a couple shows here, I was looking for a gear expert to start doing some articles in the gear review blog at essentialtennis.com. And I got in touch with Dustin and he's actually already written his first article.

Why don't you tell us a little about yourself and we'll talk about that first article briefly and then we're going to talk about a few questions from listeners of the show having to do with tennis gear.

So tell us about your background as a tennis player, teacher and a little bit about your background as a gear expert as well.

[speaker] I've been playing for 20 years. Teaching tennis for the last 13 years or so. And I've been stringing rackets for 18 years.

I've been a tour stringer for the last four years. And I've always been into gear and what the pros are using and what kind of string and what kind of racket.

I've always been into that kind of stuff. As a MRT I have to be up to date on all the new technologies with the rackets etc. I guess that's how I've become a gear expert I guess.

[speaker] So how exactly do you get into becoming a stringer at professional events and especially the US Open. Is it tough to land that job?

[speaker] It's not easy. The US Open team has 13 guys. 4 of us from the States and the rest of the guys all over the world.

My roommate was from Hong Kong. We had guys from Australia, two guys from Japan. A guy from Argentina.. So guys from all over.

I actually got started tour stringing because I called a guy up, Craig Brotman who has a company called Pro Circuit Stream which was about 4.5 years ago and I told him that I was interesting in stringing at pro tournaments and he invited me to string at a national junior tournament and later that year, I strung the Legg Mason with him and then I did a few tournaments with him and there was a racket stringer symposium in Texas from GrandSlamStringers which is a website.

I went to that symposium and I knew the guy that runs the Wilson team that was there. He let me string a racket in front of them. They said I wasn't quite ready yet.....

And then the next weekend I was going to a pro tournament. I thought I was ready because I was stringing at pro events but looking back, I'm a much better stringer now then I was back then.

Anyway, the following year, I went to Florida for the same conference and he watched me string [inaudible] close I think with the training you'll be good. I went to [inaudible] last year and did the training and then I got invited to the US Open last year.

I did the Sony Ericsson this year and then the US Open again this year.

[speaker] Awesome. Who are some of the players whose rackets you've worked on?

[speaker] At the US Open I haven't done a lot of the bigger players because I'm one of the short stay guys. I have four kids so it's tough for me to get away for more than a week.

The big time players aren't going to give them to me because I'm only there for a week. They give them to the guys who are there all two weeks.

I've strung for [inaudible] at the Legg Mason, the weekend before, I do that one too and I was able to string for Layton Hewitt, James Blake, Fernando Gonzalez-- quite a few of the upper end guys there.

[speaker] If you do Legg Mason again next year, let me know. I teach in the DC area so let me know if you are going to be back in town.

Let's get to some questions now that everybody is familiar with your backgrounds and how much expertise you have in this area of rackets and strings and all that kind of stuff.

First question is from Ernie from LA, California. He's a 3.5 level player and his question is a few sentences long-- 'I was in the first set of a league match and I snapped a string on

my first serve. Rather than use my girlfriend's hot pink Wilson from Target my opponent lent me his Babolat aeropro drive GT which was strung and gripped exactly as Nadal uses it. I had been using an old Head IS1 mid plus for 6 years. Unfortunately for my opponent, after he lent me that racket, I won the next two sets and I played one of my best matches of the year.

Under normal circumstances, I would have never considered such a high end racket at that price. Should I invest in this racket or am I just getting over excited? I didn't think a piece of equipment could effect my game so much but this racket enhanced every shot I hit. Maybe you've had similar experiences and could let me know what happened with you."

So Ernie is wondering if this racket is actually legitimately helping out his game or maybe he just had a good day. Is it possible that upgrading his equipment could actually make that big of a difference in his game play? And I'm interested to hear your thoughts on this because not only do you know what you are talking about when it comes to gear but you're also a teaching pro who has been teaching for a long time. So you are very familiar with recreational tennis players.

So I'm curious what your thoughts are?

[speaker] It could definately make a difference. I would suggest demo'ing the racket again and trying it again to make sure that it wasn't just one of those days where you are playing unbelievable no matter what you are playing with.

I know the swing rate on that racket-- I play with that racket and it feels really good. The swing weight, the weight and the balance of that racket. So I could see him picking up that racket and definately playing better with it.

I think the racket he used before was a much lighter racket if I'm not mistaken. I've always tried to get people to use rackets with little mass because you do get more power with a heavier racket. Your swings are definately more controlled so I think he could definitely pick up that racket and play better and it could be the racket helping his game.

[speaker] I tend to steer students and clients towards a little bit heavier frame as well. Please tell my listeners why in your opinion that's typically better as opposed to a lighter frame.

[speaker] For everyone that plays tennis that I do a racket for them is the heaviest racket that they can swing comfortably. If it's a little too heavy, then it can cause elbow problems if you are catching the ball late. But most of the time, most people don't realize that mass absorbs shock and vibration.

So if you have a heavier racket, it's going to be less shock and vibration on your arm. It won't hurt your arm as much as long as you can meet the ball up on front and you don't get fatigued playing with it. That's something I always tried [inaudible] and your swings are also more controllable because you aren't having to swing really fast to get the power. You can just have a nice controlled swing and you can still hit the ball hard.

[speaker] I tend to find.. and tell me if you agree with this Dustin.. feel free to disagree with me by the way.

I tend to find that usually students with heavier rackets, in my experience it tends to

promote a bit better technique as well because I think that a lot of times lower level players when they are given a really light racket, it's a lot easier for them to kind of use shorter, quicker, choppy swings as opposed to a little bit longer racket path, little bit longer follow through. Is that something that you've found as well?

[speaker] Yeah, if you have a powerful racket, you don't have to swing very hard or you don't have to hit through the ball, you can kind of poke it back and it still goes in. But if you have a racket with some mass, then you have to hit through the ball but when you do and once you get the racket moving, it kind of finishes the stroke for you.

[speaker] While you were talking, I looked up the specs on that racket-- the Head i.s1 it's 102 square inches, 27.5" and 9.7oz. So definitely on the light side.

For him being a 3.5 player and looking to move up hopefully in the near future, now that we know the specs for sure, is that definitely a racket that you think might be too light for him?

[speaker] I would think so. Look at either adding weight to his racket or investing in a new racket. It sounds like you really liked the Babylot racket so I would try that again. If he likes it after a demo of a or so, then definitely I would invest the money.

[speaker] Before we get to our next questions, I want to remind everybody about the official sponsor of the essential tennis podcast and that is tennistours.com. They specialize in travel packages and ticket packages to both WTA and ATP professional tennis events all over the world.

Definitely check them out if you are making plans for next year to go to any of the grand slams, they have wide ranges of different tickets and packages available for all four grand slams and a lot of the ATP 1000 and 500 events too.

So definitely go check them out and when you make a purchase, use the promotional code essential. You'll get a discount and you'll show them that you appreciate their support of the essential tennis podcast.

Let's go ahead and move on to a few other questions here from my listeners who go to the forums at essentialtennis.com. And by the way to all of you all on the forums, thank you very much for posting your questions. It was a little bit short notice so I appreciate you guys coming up with some questions here.

First one here from Charles in Maryland-- 'How much do the pros vary their string jobs from day to day or from tournament to tournament?

[speaker] Most of the guys in my experience are pretty stubborn as far as changing very much-- they don't like change. They are comfortable with something and they kind of stick with it.

I think the times that they do vary a little bit is when it comes to altitude wise or temperature wise. If the temp are way hotter one day they are going to go up in tension a little bit. If it's cooler the next day, they may go down a couple of pounds. Usually it's a couple pounds up or a couple pounds down but it's generally kind of in that range from my experience. There are some guys that have personal stringers that when they are in the hotel stringing, it's not like if the temperature goes up they can send their racket to the stringer room and have them string it. They pretty much have those guys in a hotel so they

are not going to be able to get them any rackets so they probably do, I would guess, a couple tighter and a couple looser just in case. But I think that's about it unless they are experimenting with some stuff. For the most part, they like a racket, they like a string, they like a tension and they kind of stick with it for most of their career.

[speaker] Interesting. You've mentioned that on a substantially colder day, a player might have his racket strung a little looser-- is that because things kind of tend to be dead on a colder day and they are looking for a little bit more pop or power off of the racket then?

[speaker] Yeah. I think so and the same as when it gets much hotter the balls fly more, the strings lose a little bit more tension [inaudible] want to go up a little bit [inaudible] cold day it feels like sometimes your strings will feel really stiff.

So I think it helps the drop tension a little bit to kind of balance that out a little.

[speaker] OK, second question from Charles-- suppose I had money to pay you to optimize my string job, how would you go about doing this?

[speaker] First thing I'd want to know is what level you are, what playing style you are. What you are looking to get out of the strings... Do you want more control or power? And then I would gauge what you want out of the strings and then maybe even make a couple suggestions and if you had multiple rackets strung one way and another the other way and just kind of tweak them a little bit and see what you like better. I've always recommended [inaudible] my favorite string and I recommend that for a lot of people who wouldn't normally use polyester but I dropped tension way down. So this [inaudible] 56 NXT I would say let's try 46 with [inaudible] and then try that. And then maybe another combination [inaudible] and soft [inaudible]

So it would basically take some trial and error I think to optimize something. There are so many options out there, there are so many different strings I think you really have to test a little bit and kind of see what feels good to you and what helps you get the most out of your strings.

[speaker] OK. I think it's interesting that you mentioned possibly having a lower level recreational program try a full luxalon string pattern. He even had a lower tension... Is that a string that you've had good success with, with 3.0 or 3.5 players with lower tension?

[speaker] Definitely. I've tried it with a few people and it really... there is not a lot of shock and vibration with that string. It's kind of a dead feel but I love the feel of that string. It's something that if you string it well enough, you are going to have plenty of power but you still have control because it's polyester and it's not going to hurt your arm like most people would think because it's much softer. I don't know how they make it that soft but it's something that I know even other manufacturers have tried to take that strain melt it down and use the same inexpedience and still not be able to make it as soft as the [inaudible] .

[speaker] You know, that's one string that I really haven't tried yet. I'm a fan of dead feeling strings so the racket I teach with even has full polyester in it. I haven't tried any [inaudible] once or twice. I'll have to give that a shot and put [inaudible] and see how I like that.

[speaker] And if you are going from a poly, then you probably won't have to drop off too much because you are already using a polyester string. I'd definitely recommend when

you are going from a synthetic to a poly that you drop at least 8-10 lbs because it's better to go on the safe side. If it's something that is going to bother your arm a little bit if drop off enough tension then you shouldn't have any problems.

[speaker] Alright next question comes from Zach in Washington State. I'm really looking forward to your answer-- 'there is a major belief that most pros are using old rackets that are repainted every year with a new paint job in order for companies to make money. Are there any pros to your knowledge that actually use their signature racket? I've heard that Roddick has used his racket from right off the retailers rack.

What are your thoughts on that Dustin?

[speaker] There are definitely guys using the newer models. It's kind of hard to tell on some of them because of the paint jobs that they do, they are so good that it's kind of hard to tell some times. The manufacturers aren't going to tell us anything. Even at the US Open, we'll see some rackets that are made by Wilson and they don't look like [inaudible] but the guys that work for Wilson will tell us. They are pretty secretive about what they do. I know some of them may have different [inaudible] where the graphite is stiffer in certain areas that you may not get off the one on the rack.

I know there are a lot of guys that are using some of the older rackets but it's not a old racket. It's a new racket, it's just the same mold that they've used for a long time. A lot of guys, James Blake for instance, he's using old rackets that he's played with for a long time. When he went to Prince, he used his old Dunlop because he never found a Prince racket that he liked. But this rackets were so old, that the [inaudible] had broken down so the frame became softer. He likes that soft or dead feel of the frame and now every time he picks a new racket up, it doesn't feel as good as an old one.

So he's gotten used to an old dead frame and now it doesn't matter who tries to make the racket, he's not going to like it.

So they actually go through frames pretty quick.. They probably get six... depending how high they are, they get 6 to 12 frames ever 4 or 5 months and they'll go through them so that they don't go dead and then they'll discard them and go to new rackets.

But in fact, there is no question there are some guys using the rackets but almost all of them are customized. I've seen Roddick's rackets and it looks like the racket that you get off the shelf, but I couldn't tell you whether it is or not.

[speaker] You'd have to put it on a RDC and measure all the specs.

[speaker] Yeah and I know that his rackets are customized so even if you took one off the wall and then his racket, it wouldn't be the same swing weight and balance.

[speaker] It could be the actual mold is what you are saying?

[speaker] Yeah. Same racket you get off the shelf, but his rackets are sent to [inaudible] so his rackets are sent there, [inaudible] customizes them to his specs and then strings them up for him too. They actually travel with him pretty much all over the world, wherever he goes.

[speaker] Are there any pros that you are aware of that literally use the frame from off the wall without having them customized at all?

[speaker] I'm sure there are, but I don't see many of them. Most of them you can look at and see that there is some white on the sides or if not it's under the head guard-- you can kind of tell because it's a little bit heavier than the one off the rack. I'm sure there are a few out there.

Most of them, if you buy rackets off the rack, let's say you buy three radicals just to name a racket. And you buy three of them off the rack, they are not all going to be identical. So you go out and you play with one and you string them all up the same and you play with them, you might be able to tell the difference between one or two of them. But if you are a pro and you are playing that much, you can probably tell a little bit better than we can.

And you don't want to go out there and break a string in a match and go to another racket and even if you don't feel the change, it takes you a little while to adjust to the different swing of the racket.

If there is money on the line, they are going to want their rackets all identical so that they don't have to worry about it.

[speaker] It's really nice to hear you be open and honest about it Dustin. I've talked to a lot of-- obviously the manufacturers they are not going to talk about it but I've talked to even a lot of other pros who know a lot about gear who still don't talk much about it and aren't very open and honest about the fact that the pros do very often use different frames because they are trying to protect their sales at their pro shop.

So it's nice to hear you actually be open about it, that's great.

[speaker] I don't think it's any secret out there. If you see the rackets that they are using, they are not all the same. And even if they are, I think they could have a different layout so it could be a little bit different but I understand why they are going to say that Nadal is definitely using the Aeropro drive or the.. He is using that racket though it's maybe a little different than the one off the rack though.

[speaker] Before we get to our last few questions, I want to remind our listeners about the 2nd sponsor of the podcast which is tennisexpress.com. You can go there for all of your gear rackets, strings, shoes, apparel or whatever you need, they got it. And they've got excellent prices and free shipping for orders over \$75. Use the promotional code essential when you check out and you'll show them that you really appreciate their sponsorship of the essential tennis podcast.

Alright a few more questions here before we wrap things up-- our next one comes to us from Shelley in New Mexico. She wrote and said, what is the benefit of the cross string? I love guts and could play well just with full gut. But I've noticed that when I hybrid with a cheap synthetic gut or nylon, I don't really feel much difference and it becomes a lot cheaper to use gut only in the mains rather than a full set.

So what exactly does the cross string do for you?

[speaker] That's a good combination-- I've always had a lot of people using gut and then a [inaudible] synthetic because it lowers the price of the string but it still plays really well. I think the mains are more responsible for the feel and the play of the string than the crosses aren't as much. So you can still get the great feel of the gut and as long as it's a softer string, it's not [inaudible] it'll still play really well.

I think the only downside to that is you're going to get about 45 hours of playing time before that string goes dead. If you use [inaudible] you get about 60 hours of playing time before the string goes dead. Playability is going to be a little bit longer if you go all gut versus the hybrid.

[speaker] Alright good stuff. Lastly two quick questions from John M in Texas. Number one, what strings were the pros using most often at the US Open?

[speaker] The [inaudible] is probably the most popular string. Definitely a lot of polyesters [inaudible] is a popular string. Nadal and [inaudible] were using that and then there is a lot of other players using that too.

Most of it is all poly or poly and gut. There are a few that are still using all natural gut but it's not near as many as it used to be.

[speaker] You know what? Before we get to Jon's last question, I'm curious, you mentioned the RPM Blast, the new string that Nadal has been using and has made popular. What are your thoughts on that string? Is it really making much of a difference as far as spin creation? Or is it just another polyester string?

[speaker] I don't know. I've tried it myself and it feels a little firmer then what I've normally used [inaudible] . It's a little bit firmer and I think it's about the same spin potential. Most of the poly, if you string it a little looser, you are going to get more spin because the ball stays on the string a little longer and you'll be able to generate more spin that way.

I don't know if the RMP Blast would generate more spin. I think for Nadal he could use anything and he's going to generate spin.

[speaker] I've used it as well. I have it in my teaching racket right now. I use the same racket for teaching and the rare times that I do hit, I use the same racket. I've definitely not noticed any big difference and in general I'm a really big skeptic when it comes to technologies, both in strings and in rackets.

So I wasn't surprised. I wasn't expecting any big chance but it was getting so much hype-- which tournament was it? They announced it right before one of the grand slams... Do you remember which one it was?

[speaker] I think it might've been the French. I know [inaudible] switched to it for the French and ended up winning the French. So I think that helped a little bit too. And then Nadal is using it so everyone wants to try it.

[speaker] Seems like it's been successful. OK let's go to our last question from Jon and it simply, 'how heavy a racket should a recreational player use?' What are your thoughts on weight? I know that we briefly earlier talked about usually pushing our students towards heavier rackets in general. Let's talk specific weights-- what weight range are you normally putting into the hands of your average recreational player when they are demo'ing a racket and looking for something new.

[speaker] For most recreational players, I generally try to start off low and then [inaudible] but I think probably around the 11oz range is not too heavy but I think it's something that has a little mass to it so they can get some power behind the ball and the

mass absorbs the shock.

And then from there, I think it kind of depends on the player because I like to do a lot of on-court stuff as far as adding weight to the rackets and letting them hit with it a little bit here and a little bit there so they can feel the difference. Just adding a little bit of tape to the handle can make a huge difference but it doesn't affect swing rate of the racket so they don't feel it as much when they are swinging the racket around or the maneuverability. When you are at the net, you can still move the racket back [inaudible] quick volleys when the weight is in the handle.

I think the 11oz range and then maybe a little bit more than that depending on the player.

[speaker] We are going to start to wrap things up with that and I want to make sure everybody goes to checkout Dustin's first post at the Gear Review blog at essentialtennis.com. Just go to essentialtennis.com and in the main heading there is a menu option that says blogs-- go down to gear review and he wrote his first blog on [inaudible] ALU power which is a string that it sounds like he's enjoyed using the most now.

Give us a quick preview on that write up? What were your thoughts?

[speaker] I've used that string for a while and every time I try other strings, I end up going back to that string because it has a soft feel but I still can hit out on the ball with control.

I think it's one of the best strings on the market and there is a reason why most pros are using that string? Then I talked about how what different types they have. They have a spin and rough version, they have a [inaudible] that is a little bit softer and thinner string. And then the regular [inaudible] 1.25 which is one of the most popular ones on the tour.

So I just kind of talked about those a little bit.

[speaker] Good stuff. I want to thank you very much for your time, both in writing that article and also in being here with me right now to talk about rackets and strings and thank you for answering the questions from my listeners.

I hope to continue having you on the show because I can tell that you are definitely a huge resource as far as knowledge goes for here.

Thanks very much for being here. [music]

That does it for episode 139 or the essential tennis podcast. Again thank you very much for joining me on today's show. I hope it was helpful for you and informative and before I sign off I just want to remind you guys of the forums at ET.com which is where most of our questions came for today's show.

Very often when I have guests on the show and I'm looking for a couple extra questions to ask to maybe fill in a bit of time, I always go to the forums. So if you want to get a jump on getting advice from myself and from the guest's that I have on the show, definitely go sign up and it's a great place to spend some time anyways to just interact with other people that are passionate about the sport and trying hard to improve their games.

That does it for this week. Thanks again everybody. Take care and good luck with your tennis.