

# Essential Tennis Podcast #139

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!

Ian Westermann : 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 ET podcast is brought to you by [tennisexpress.com](http://tennisexpress.com).

Though we've got a lot of good questions, two good questions to get too on today's show, I'm really looking forward to talking about them.

Before we get to that, I want to remind you guys about the different social networks that ET is on and you guys can keep in touch with myself and ET in that way and kind of see what is going on with the website.

First of all, we are on facebook at [facebook.com slash essential tennis](https://facebook.com/essentialtennis). If you are on twitter, it is [twitter.com slash essentialtennis](https://twitter.com/essentialtennis) and lastly YouTube-- you can check out our youtube videos at [youtube.com slash essential tennis](https://youtube.com/essentialtennis).

Alright, let's go ahead and get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music]

Let's go ahead and start talking about our first question today on episode 139 of the essential tennis podcast. And it comes to us from JT in British Columbia, Canada. He's a 4.5 player and he wrote and said this, 'I'm a 45 year old former teaching pro. In my late teens and through my 20s I taught and he's just getting back into the game and looking to start competing again. My question is about game styles-- I'm a former serve and volley and attacking player-- more touch than power. Given changes in the game and reduced explosiveness as we age, do you have any ideas on how to model an attacking game style in today's hard hitting game as an older player? Thanks.

Well JT, that's a great question and this is something that a lot of pros are starting to have to ask themselves-- not starting, it's been a while now that obviously the more modern power game has been taking over especially from the baseline and so playing a more attacking style of play which was extremely common, in fact the way most players played back in the day is becoming more and more difficult and even at the recreational level it's gotten easier to hit the ball harder because of new rackets and strings and also players are finding out ways to use better technique and use more powerful technique. So it becomes tougher to move into the net.

I've got 4 different ways for you to improve this and continue using your attacking style of play because I want you to stay true to yourself. I think that's how you are going to have the most amount of fun as you continue to play and as you start to compete again and it's probably how you are going to be most successful if you do it wisely and you are smart about it and you practice it and you develop the things that are necessary to be successful at it. I think it's how you are going to do the best because you've identified your strengths and your weaknesses. So I think we should stick with that.

So I have 4 subtopics here-- some things for you to work on so you can continue using your favorite style of play. #1-- You have to continue working on and developing your serve. Against today's returners, you cannot serve and volley after just hitting an average serve. It's just not good enough. It used to be way back in the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s that you could come in off just about anything and coming to the net was seen as the ultimate attack. And it was very difficult to hit powerful shots from the baseline because of the equipment that they used and because of that coming to the net was the way to go because you put a lot of pressure on your opponent who had a very difficult time hitting the ball around you or over you consistently.

Well it's not that way anymore, so we have to be really smart about when we do come to the net. So you have to develop your serve in order to serve and volley consistently and be successful at it.

Now three different ways that you can work on your serve or improve your serve-- Number 1- develop more power and you can do this through technique improvement and also through practice. You can do it through strengthening your body. We just talked about weight lifting and tennis.

So in 137, we talked about weight lifting. You can get your body stronger, improve your technique and just general practice can help you develop more power on your serve.

I'm going to assume that you definitely know what the big factors are as far as technique is concerned. If you'd like some feedback on your serve, feel free to send me an email with a link to a video of yourself serving. Or you can post it on the forums at [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) and I can give you some feedback that way.

But technique is definitely big.

So that's the first way to improve your serve to be more successful serving and volleying is to develop more power on your serve.

Number two, develop more spin and different types of spin on your serve. And again, this is largely technique. You can improve your technique and racket head speed to create more spin. You can also use different techniques to create different types of spin.

So that's another way that you can improve your serve. Mix this up with your power serves to keep your opponent off guard and that will make it easier for you to sneak into the net and serve and volley and be successful up there.

Thirdly, develop more accuracy and variety of targets-- meaning different places that you can aim in the box in both the deuce side and the ad side with every type of serve that you hit. It's not good enough to have all your flat serves go down the T and have all your spin serves go out wide. You should be able to hit both types of serves-- maybe you have a flat serve and a slice serve and a kick serve. You should be able to hit all three of those types of serves to all three main target areas-- out wide and down the T and at the body. If you can't do that currently, working on it and developing that is going to make a huge difference in your ability to be successful coming in right behind your serves because as you mix your targets up and you mix up your different types of serve with those different targets, you are going to really keep your opponent off-balance. You are going to keep them guessing and it's going to be much more difficult for them to get into a groove and hit tough returns of serve where it's difficult for you to serve and volley.

So that's #1, working on your serve. I gave you a bunch of ideas there to develop your serve so that you can be more successful. This was a great question by the way. We are going to be using most of today's show to talk about this so we a quarter of the way through now. That was way #1 to be more successful with your style-- work on your serve.

#2, work on your approach shots. So once the point has gotten started and you see an opportunity to move into the net and to attack and pressure your opponent, you need to work on developing your approach-- the actual shot that you hit before you hit your first volley. And just like the serve, you cannot come up to the net after hitting any old shot. At least not against 4.5 players which it sounds like you'll be playing against or maybe even 5.0 players. You can't just hit a medium paced shot down the middle of the court and just waltz in behind it. It just won't be good enough. You are going to get passed all day long unless you are playing against somebody that you make nervous and they just don't have good passing shots but you really can't count on that so I want you to work on your approach shots as well. And I've got three different ways for you to do that-- number 1, work on creating more depth and more pace to your top spin or drive approach shots.

So your low to hi type swing-- whether you hit with top spin or heavy top spin or maybe more of a drive and you like to hit through it a little bit more. I don't care which one you use, but you need to work on creating depth and pace while keeping your approach shots in play as you do that. The more pace that you hit your approach shots at, the less time that your opponent will have to get to the shot and prepare for their passing shot.

So definitely work on the pace of the shot that you hit. The more depth that you hit on your approach shot, the less amount of time your opponent will have to react to your approach shot after it bounces. And so both depth and pace play a huge role in how successful you are going to be when you do come up to the net after hitting that approach shot.

Now obviously you want to work on the width as well. You want to be able to place your approach shots reliably and accurately somewhat close to the sideline. You shouldn't be aiming a foot from the line-- you should probably be aiming 2 or 3 feet inside the sideline and probably 3 or 4 feet inside the baseline. That's a pretty close target... 4 feet inside either line will probably be safe for you. You are giving yourself some margin for error. But basically working the placement of your approach shot-- that's #1.

#2 is having to do with hitting that approach shot. Develop a slice approach shot for lower shots that you hit, meaning your opponent hits low and short and you are not getting up to the ball until it's below your strike zone. Having a reliable slice approach shot can be really useful in that type of situation and it's also a shot that you are going to want to use to mix into your regular approach shots when the ball is in your strike zone and you have your choice between a drive and a slice. It can be really useful to mix in a slice during that situation as well. It's a shot, that if you hit well, can bite and stay low until it can be really effective as a approach shot.

Keep in mind also that depth is also really key on the slice. If you hit a short slice approach shot, very often those type of shots tend to sit up and sit in your opponents strike zone and make an easy passing shot attempt for them.

So as you do work on developing a slice approach, if you don't have one already, definitely emphasize creating depth as you really hit through that slice nice and

confidently and you put a good amount of back spin on the ball so that it stays low both over the top of the net and once it bounces.

Work on that and keep it deep as you do that and you will make it really tough for your opponent. And you are going to find different opponents like to hit passing shots off of different shots. Sometimes an opponent will like it when you approach with a top spin approach shot. The big detractor to top spin as an approach is that the ball bounces up when it meets the court and so a lot of times opponents will like that. It will come up to their strike zone if they get to it quickly enough and they are going to have an easier time hitting a pass.

Other opponents will have a much harder time with a slice approach shot even though it's a slower shot and it doesn't travel through the court as quickly, they are going to have a harder time with the slice shot because it stays lower and it forces them to have to hit upwards a little bit more to try to pass you which in a lot of times, will result in an easier volley for you.

Lastly on working on your approach shots, number 1 was creating more pace and depth with your top spin shots. Number 2 was developing a slice approach shot. Number 3 and lastly, make sure that you follow the general rules and guidelines for approaching the net in general. Namely one thing that I want to hit on quickly, is make sure that you're approaching down the line most of the time unless your opponent really gives you an obvious reason to not go in that direction. In other words, let's say that you get a short kind of low back hand and you are right handed so you are moving forwards and a little bit to your left to hit a backhand and you hit that down the line like you are supposed to and you hit it well. Let's say that you hit either a slice or a top spin or drive shot, you hit it real solid, 3 or 4 feet inside either line. You get it right where you want it to and you really hit it well which goes to your opponents forehand if he or she is right handed and it just crushes a passing shot.

Once that happens two or three times, now you've got a legitimate reason to start thinking about approaching cross court.

Now if you do approach cross court, you better make it good because it's going to leave a lot of room, a lot of open court for your opponent to try to pass you down the line. And it's just a lot of court for you to cover in a very short amount of time from when you hit that approach shot and when that first volley is going to get on top of you.

And that's why approaching down the line is in general the way to go. So you want to follow that rule for the most part. But there will be circumstances where you want to break away from that rule as well. It all depends on your opponent, but most of the time, you should be hitting down the line. And make sure that you follow that rule most of the time.

OK, so that was #2, working your approach shots. Number 3, work on your reaction time at the net in general. Even when you hit a great approach shot, it might still come back at Mach 5-- you never know and again this is the whole reason behind JT's topic here is that he's playing against players now compared to when he taught tennis before. He's playing players now that have a lot more potential for power. So even when you do everything correctly that I've described so far, you hit a great serve or approach, you place it well, it still might get on top of you really quickly. Even if your opponent is off balance and is falling off of the court-- it's still possible that they are going to hit a really hard, fast, maybe even well placed passing shot.

So you need to spend a lot of time practicing your first volley against somebody who hits big shots off the ground. Now, I've got three different things for you to focus on as you do that. Number 1, work on being calm and relaxed. Even when the ball comes at you faster, and this is very much easier said than done, but very often net players panic especially when the ball is coming to them fast and they have little time to react to it. Try to remain calm, stay relaxed, so that you can hit an effective volley.

Number 2, work on hitting angles off of fast shots. And you have to be relaxed in order to do this, in order to hit an effective angle off of a shot that is traveling at you with a lot of pace. You've got to relax, soften up your grip because you don't have a lot of court to work with when you do angle the ball.

But JT, this is something that you should work on specifically against somebody who hits a hard passing shot or hard ground stroke in general. This would be a great thing for you to work on and focus on.

Thirdly, work on controlling the depth of your volleys off of fast shots. You should be able to hit a volley off of a hard passing shot and place it reliably, deep in the court or relax more, soften things up and also hit it short in the court. You should be able to do either one and I recommend that you really spend a lot of time drilling your volleys, working on your volleys so that you have the ability to do that even when the ball is coming fast at you.

Number 4, work on your general variety. And the reason for that is big hitting players love a consistent ball over and over again. Players who hit big ground strokes love getting a similar shot again and again because it allows them to groove their timing and get into a rhythm on either their forehand or backhand or both.

Since you are a touch player and you know that you are better at feel shots as opposed to power shots, this works out great for you anyway. You should be able to develop good variety around the court because of your skills.

Please don't take this to mean that you should be trying to hit every single shot differently and be super tricky and hit with 4 different types of spin off your forehand side and get all crazy and fancy-- that's not what I mean. In fact, please don't do that.

But against many opponents, you don't have to be creative at all. You can hit your typical rally ball and still be successful against a player who does hit with a lot of power and is pressuring you-- you may want to simply throw in a change up or a change of pace here and there. Every three or four shots you might want to throw in a slice or throw in a high deep looping shot typically known as a moon ball just to change things up and don't allow them to get into that rhythm where after 3 or 4 games really feeling comfortable, really timing their shots well and they are just starting to crush the ball.

You don't want to give them that same look over and over again. But I just wanted to throw in there as well, please don't over do it either because then you yourself will have no rhythm and you'll just be handing these random crazy shots from shot to shot. Totally different each time so I do want you to get into a rhythm as well but you should be mixing things up, using different spins, different placements, different depths to keep them a little bit off balance and to keep them guessing a little as far as what is coming. Don't let them get too comfortable.

So JT, that's my answer to you and that was a really good question. To review quickly, the four different ways that are going to allow you to continue using your net rushing and attacking style of play-- number 1, work on your serve. Number 2, work on your approach shots. Number 3, work on your reaction time at the net and your general volley skills as well. And number 4, work on your general variety around the court.

If you improve all 4 of those areas, you can absolutely be successful at a 4.5 level-- even against these modern players who are hitting the ball hard then what you were used to when you were playing and teaching.

So good luck to you and I hope that this was helpful to you. Let me know if I can be of any further help to you. [music] [music]

Alright, before we get to our 2nd question in today's show, I want to remind all of you listening about the official sponsor of the ET podcast and that is [tennisexpress.com](http://tennisexpress.com). They are an online tennis retailer where you guys can go to pick up gear and equipment of any kind. I mean really, anything you guys want-- shoes, clothing, strings, stringing machines, rackets, grips... They've got everything at great prices. Free shipping on any order over \$75 and when you check out, please make sure to use the promotional code essential. I haven't setup any kind of discount with them yet, however it does show them that you listened to the podcast and you appreciate their support and their sponsorship of the show.

So thank you guys very much, all of you that have made purchases already with the promotional code essential. I appreciate it and so does tennisexpress so hopefully our relationship continues to be good.

Thank you all for your support and to tennisexpress as well.

Let's get to our last question on today's show, and it comes to us from Dustin in California. He's a 3.5 player and he wrote and said, 'Your podcasts on how to beat pushers are great. However, I found myself facing another type of player that is close to a pusher and I can't figure out how to win. I guess you would call him a junk baller. Most shots he gives me are either too low or way above my strike zone. What is the art of hitting a decent shot back to the other side of the court when the ball is above your strike zone. I know I can back up and play the ball so it is decent and I know I can take the ball early as well. However, being only a 3.5 player, I find that most of the time I just have to take a swing at the ball above shoulder level.

What is the best way to do this? Should my grip change to a more western grip? Do I need to be further away from the ball etc?

OK, time for a little bit of tough love having to do with the foot work. We're going to split my answer up into two different sections. One section having to do with foot work and the other having to do with technique. Let's talk about the footwork first and I'm going to quote you here and talk about part of your question. You said, 'being only a 3.5 player, I just have to take a swing with the the ball at shoulder level. So my answer to that, stop playing like a 3.5 player. Stop being a 3.5 player.

If you don't want to hit the ball like a 3.5 player, then stop doing what 3.5 players do. If you want to move up in level from where you are now then start doing things that higher level players do.

Obviously I make that sound easy and we all know that it's not easy to just move up a level otherwise everybody would be above a 5.0 level. It's going to take a lot of work but you'll do it if you are serious about improving-- you'll put in the work and you'll put in the time necessary and you'll start moving your feet the way that you are supposed to in order to be a better player.

So what do higher level players do exactly? They move with the ball. And when I say that, I don't mean just right and left but also up and back. They move up and back very effectively as well as right and left. And that up and back movement happens much much more than most people think it happens or realize that it happens.

When I watch rec players play, just walking through my park or watching players at my club play, it's really easy to pick out what level a player is just by watching their movements around the court. And lower level players just don't move with the ball very well. They are constantly hitting the ball outside of their strike zone because their footwork is poor. And so they hit the ball low or high. They hit the ball close to them and far away. They hit the ball in lots of places that aren't comfortable and when you watch a 4.5 player play, you see them in a comfortable balanced position between themselves and the ball most of the time.

Now obviously some of you out there are saying, great, but those are 4.5 players. So of course they move well. Of course they are going to be in balance most of the time. Well let me ask you a question, what do you think came first? Did they magically just become a 4.5 player and then their footwork starting being great and they started moving well? Or do you think that they worked on their footwork and as a result, started moving well. Started positioning themselves better and so as a result, they became 4.5 players. Obviously they worked on their footwork and they got their footwork the way it was supposed to be first, and as a result, they became better players.

It's just like any other part of your game. You need to decide that you are going to improve something, get the information that you need so that you know what you are supposed to change and how you are supposed to change it specifically and that's my job-- that's why I'm here is to give you guys that information. And then you work your butt off and you make the change. Stop saying well I'm a 3.5 player so it's going to be high. Guess what? As long as you are making that excuse, you are always going to be a 3.5 player because you aren't going to position yourself any better and so you won't be able to hit a better shot.

Alright my rant is over. I just hate when people use that excuse and I don't want you guys to think that way. All of you guys listening to my voice right now, I want you guys to be above that. I want you guys to think in terms of the future and in terms of always being able to make that next step to the next level. So don't get trapped in a mind-set where you are just going to accept the fact that part of your game is a certain way and it's not any better than that-- that's not good enough.

I want you guys to continue getting better. Now, as far as specific footwork stuff and how you can move your feet specifically to position yourself better. Justin, I want you to listen to podcast 109 which is completely dedicated to footwork and I talk about 6 different types of footwork in that episode and you can go download that for free in the archives at ET.com

Go listen to that show and then work on the different types of footwork that I talk about. Work on implementing them into your game and you can stop moving like a 3.5 player--

wouldn't that be great if you could start positioning yourself better, more consistently? That would make your life a lot easier on the tennis court.

Now, let's talk about technique because remember, I said those 4.5 players, I said that most of the time, they are in a balanced spot but it's not always. No matter how hard you work on your footwork, or how good you are at it, there will always be some shots that will be out of your strike zone because your opponent just hit that good of a shot.

When you watch tennis on TV, clearly those players have incredible footwork. They have incredible anticipation and so they know where the ball is going, but sometimes they just can't get in a comfortable place because their opponent hit a great shot. And so you just have to do the best you can.

So I'd definitely agree that sometimes you just have to be able to hit a high ground stroke. I'm going to absolutely admit that-- I have to do it myself and so does every player. So let's talk about the technique of that real quickly. First of all, no I don't want you to change your grip. You don't want to have a different grip for every different contact height that you have on your forehand or your backhand side. You should be able to hit an effective shot from all different heights using the same grip.

Most often, shots hit high and out of your strike zone land short or into the net. Usually they don't make it because it's a difficult height to make contact at-- your body is a lot weaker when you try to hit the ball up at that height so very often the mistake is made hitting the net or just hitting a short weak shot in general when trying to hit a high shot back.

So make sure that even though these shots are high and above your strike zone, you are still lifting the ball up and you are still making an upward swing towards the ball on your forehand and backhand side.

Now there is not as much room to lift the ball because the ball was already pretty high to begin with, so it's difficult, it's not an easy shot. We're going to put that out in the open that this is not easy. But you still want to try and lift the ball as best you can so that you can not only get the ball over the net, but hopefully hit it back deep to your opponents side and give them the exact same shot back even though you are in a difficult position.

Easier said than done but you should be trying to do that.

If you don't have any issue clearing the net but instead you miss these shots long consistently, then you are going to want to close your racket face a little bit more-- meaning angle your strings down towards the court a little more as you make that lifting swing and you make sure that the ball is going to clear the net. And again, I don't want you to do that by changing your grip but rather by simply turning your hand and either closing your hand on your forehand side or opening your hand on your backhand side to close those strings just a little bit more to be able to keep the ball in play.

So like any other ground stroke, it's a combination of lifting the ball to make sure it clears the net and controlling the racket face to make sure it's not too open to where the ball goes too far.

So basically that's it. I'm sorry I had to yell at you a little bit in the first part of my answer. But I really wanted to get that out there and I wanted to make sure you guys knew how serious I was about that and I don't want you or anybody else listening to get stuck in a



mind-set like that. And maybe you weren't, maybe you just worded your question like that accidentally. That's just how it came out, so don't take it personally.

It's something I really wanted to communicate to all of my listeners was that you guys can improve. Stop thinking that I'm a 3.5 player and that's how it's going to be. That was really the main part that I wanted to respond to.

Hopefully my technique talk was helpful as well and if you need any further advice or if you have any further questions about this or other topics, definitely let me know.

Justin thanks for being a listener in California and good luck as you continue trying to improve your footwork and those high contact shots. [music] [music]

That does it for episode 139 of the ET podcast. If you listened to today's show, thank you very much. I really appreciate your support simply by downloading the show and listening to it. I really appreciate having you as a listener.

I hope that today's show was helpful and it gave you guys some good feedback, instruction and ideas on how to improve your game. Each and every week, that's always my goal and I hope I accomplished that this week.

That does it for today's show, I'll be talking to you guys next week when I release episode #140 next Monday.

Until then, take care and good luck with your tennis.