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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 Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by tennisexpress.com.

Before we get to today's topic which is a great one having to do with mental toughness and emotions and getting angry on the court. Make sure to go to essentialtennis.com sometime this week and check out the new section of the website that I'm making available for just the next 2 weeks.

If you would like an extra hour long of instructional audio every week or if you would like me to analyze your technique videos every week, definitely go check it out-- it's called Essential Tennis Platinum and it's a new section of the site where you can get personalized instruction from myself on a weekly basis to really turbo charge your tennis improvement-- so go check it out at essentialtennis.com/platinum.

Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music]

My guest today is certified teaching professional Jason Coal. Jason and I were doubles partners together briefly in college. He graduated from the professional tennis management program at Ferris State University and he was an assistant coach at the University of Virginia and now teaches full-time in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Did I get that right Jason?

Jason: Sounds good to me.

Ian: It's good to have you back, it's been quite a while. I apologize that it's been such a long time since you were a guest last.

Jason: No worries. I've been working on my golf game.

Ian: Sorry to hear that, I know the feeling. So let's go ahead and get to our question and I asked Jason to be on the show today to talk about this question on purpose. It's a topic that Jason and I both have a lot of experience with personally and we have different standpoints on it as far as how this topic affects both of us on the court when we compete.

So I think it's going to be an interesting conversation and something that a lot of recreational players need to know more about and need more information about to hopefully play a little better when they compete.

So let's go ahead and get to it. And our question comes to us from Sam from Portugal and he has himself as a 3.5 player and he wrote and said, 'I've been playing this guy who is a bit better than me who has gotten a few sets from me and vice versa, but the way he plays is like this-- every time he misses a shot, he punishes himself either by telling at himself or using off colour language. Now on the other side of the court is me, all calm

and composed playing my game, loving my opponents misfortunes and I've won a few sets like this.

This was OK up until the day he started beating me several times in a row, set after set. I reached the point I could no longer swallow my mistakes, especially after losing a set that I was most determined to win. So this is what I did, I acted just like him and believe it or not, I got the next set 6-4 right after losing the previous several.

Acting like this makes me concentrate more and I don't know why, but I have more guts to hit the ball harder and go for my shots. My question is, is it good to show outwardly my bad moments and the good ones? Or should I just keep it to myself on the court in my mind? It seems like my opponent just weakens me mentally or psychologically throughout the match when after cussing himself or celebrates after a good passing shot winner. I remember one of your guests talking about something similar and likening it to Twinkies-- it tastes good but it will deteriorate you in the long run. Is that the case?

So Jason, was I incorrect in characterizing that both of us, by saying we can definitely relate to this question?

Jason: Yeah. You are not incorrect. I think anybody who's played tennis for a long period of time has run into more than their share of this. And we qualify!

Ian: [laughter] Definitely. Well, would Jason and I kind of come from different viewpoints on this? Let's go ahead and talk about that first, Jason, so that people get a sense of where we're coming from as far as our own tennis background and how we personally can relate to negativity on the courts. I'll start with myself. I can definitely say with confidence that negativity on the court does me no good at all. [laughter] And Jason has definitely witnessed this. I would definitely be embarrassed to show on video the attitude that I have sometimes had on the tennis court. And when I'm angry at myself or when I allow my emotions to get out of control on the negative side of things, my game definitely goes downhill and I deteriorate.

Anything to add to that Jason? Would you say that's accurate in your experience playing with me?

Jason: Yes, you're dead on.

Ian: [laughter]

Jason: Certainly when you get angry, you are not better at tennis.

Ian: No. That's for sure. So that's where I come from on this topic. Now you on the other hand are different. Again, I am vouching for Jason here. He and I have played together with a lot of time on the practice courts, and sometime on competitive doubles court as well.

And Jason and my experience is very unique in that I have witnessed him playing much better, and probably at his highest level, when he actually does get angry angry at himself. I'll let you describe what I'm talking about, Jason.

Jason: [laughter] Well, like you said, I certainly wouldn't be proud to show on video how I've acted sometimes.

Ian: [laughter]

Jason: But usually when I get angry at... Usually it's the other person. Some calls they made or the way they're acting, or something like that. It tends to make me really dislike them and want to focus harder to beat them. I think the entire key there is that I focus on wanting to beat them and not the way that they're acting. So yes, I definitely think that if somebody cheats me, or if somebody is being a real jerk on the court, although I do believe it's rare, I tend to play my best tennis. [laughter] Because it makes me concentrate on beating this jerk on the other side of the net.

Ian: [laughter]

Jason: So then every once in awhile that may lead to me being a jerk on my side of the net as well! [laughter] Certainly I'm not behaving like Pete Sampras out there while doing that. But I can definitely focus in while doing some things that I'm not proud of.

Ian: Now I described your ability to do that as being unique. Do you agree with you on that? How many other people have you seen that are able to take negative emotion, like being angry at your opponent as an example, and actually be able to channel that constructively into more focus or more intensity, etc.

Jason: We're out there! But I would say it's probably in the 5-10% of people. John McEnroe is a good example of that. Whenever he thought he had a bad call or started yelling at a ref, he always went back to the line and played great! You never saw him chuck it away or lose any points really, based on all of his massive arguing. And there's been a couple other people, like [inaudible], a couple other people who had some serious tempers that didn't drop their level at all. But I would say the vast majority of people that I've played, when they get upset with really anything, their level goes down.

Ian: How about some examples of pros that get angry and what happens to me occurs? You know, they lose their focus and they play poorly. [inaudible] comes to mind. He's the guy who would definitely tank at the drop of a hat. Which way do you see Jokavich going? He's a big whiner. I'm not a big fan of his as a result. What do you think? Do you think it hurts him or helps him?

Jason: I think it hurts him. I think it really hurts him. The best tennis I've seen him play is when he just shuts up and play ball. You see it at the Australian Open a couple of times when he gets real whiny about the heat and everything. Maybe the heat's affecting him, but he certainly doesn't start to play better after you start to notice he's having a problem.

Whereas guys like McEnroe, I don't even know if anything was really bothering him, but he fired himself up that way to really get his focus up. That was kind of how I went. A lot of times I'm not sure the person was cheating me or not, but it really helped me a lot to think that they were, because then I would focus harder. So as far as pros who went the opposite way, I would say a lot of the Frenchmen are that way. When things start to go bad, you notice them tanking. [inaudible] obviously tanked tons of matches.

Ian: [laughter]

Jason: You've seen Andy Murray tank. [laughter] With 4 matches in Grand Slams. I mean, that's... Most guys when they certainly start to have a little bit of an injury, or a little bit of an issue, or whatever it is, they're done.

Ian: Simone, I saw him play at the Leg Mason this past year. You said Frenchmen, so he came to mind. I can't remember who he was playing. I think it might have been Al [inaudible]. And just got real whiny! Earlier in the match. It was on serve early in the first set. And just had a terrible attitude out there and ended up losing that match. He's somebody that comes to mind.

Jason: [laughter] Yeah. Absolutely. You see that a fair amount, even with the pros. They're certainly better than most club players about keeping their cool if it's somebody like that. If you're somebody who's disposed to get angry and lose focus. But you see it all the time. It's not rare by any means.

Ian: So Jay, let's talk about the opposite end of the spectrum. Because we can all definitely think of examples of pros who seem to compete at their best when they're just totally even keel. Federer is an example. That Sampras is probably the extreme example of that, just showing no emotion at all one way or the other. So if we're in agreement that most of the time being really outward and allowing emotions to affect us is usually bad, is the opposite always good to just always be even keel? What do you think about that?

Jason: That works for some people. I definitely like the guys you mentioned: Pete is a perfect example! You never saw him go up or down. You had no idea. I think a lot, I would say the majority of players, play best when they can fake positive emotion. So you're not really playing that will in your results. Your score potentially is showing that you're not playing that well. But somehow you can get out there and be pumped up and excited about the things that are going on rather than sitting there and dwelling on the fact that you just [inaudible].

Ian: [laughter]

Jason: I think at the professional level, you see that all the time. They guys aren't playing that well, but all of a sudden they win a point at 30-0. And they're going crazy. It's not the biggest point in the match, but they're just trying to be positive, and trying to not let themselves go down the drain like we're talked about.

Ian: I think a really good example of that would be Nadal. He could be down 2 sets to love in a 3 out of 5 match, and down like 4-0, and win a point down 0-40 on his serve. And all of a sudden get all fired up and pumped up. You know what I'm talking about?

Jason: That's a perfect example. That guy could have not won a point all match long and be down 5 0 0-40, and all of a sudden has the biggest celebration you've ever seen.

Ian: [laughter]

Jason: He is a perfect example. I've seen a lot of Nadal playing tennis and I've never seen him negative. I'm guessing that if he does get negative, he probably plays a lot worse. Which is why he's one of the few people who is able to stay on the very positive side of the spectrum the whole way. All the time. That's amazing.

Ian: Yeah. It's hard. I think a lot of people misunderstand that, and kind of speak about Nadal as if he's really cocky, and I think a lot of people misread that as arrogance where I don't at all. Personally, I love his fight and his competitive spirit. I personally just see that as confidence and just the desire to win in general. I think there's a difference

between wanting to win more than anything in the world and being cocky or being arrogant on the court. Do you agree with that?

Jason: I totally agree. I think that a lot of players--Nadal not being one of them, but Jokavich and Marry being great examples--are a little too caught up in how they look on the court and playing well every day. And just everything that's going on around them. So if a couple of things go bad, they start to get negative. It's easy to see them throw it in the tank. I imagine every listener has seen one of those 2 guys throw it in the tank!

Whereas Nadal really seems like he is 100% focused on how he can possibly win the match. And how he can win the match is by being really positive even if it's going poorly. And then he does it every time.

Ian: Before we continue with today's topic, I'd like to remind all my listeners about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast. That is TennisExpress.com. Go check them out. They've got great deals on all of your equipment needs. They also have free shipping for any order over \$75. When you enter the promotional code "essential" when you check out, it shows them that you're a listener, and you appreciate their support. So definitely go do that. Check them out. And use the promotional code "essential" for any purchase that you make. Thank you very much, and I thank them for their support.

So let's talk a little bit more about ourselves, and how we can apply this to our own games. And obviously the point is [laughter] to apply this to the games of everybody listening.

So how do we--and this is something that I personally have been really searching for for the last couple of years. Because I look back at my college career, and I had some really good times.. I loved it. But I went through phases where I was really unhappy on the tennis court. And Jason knows this. [laughter] Since then, I look back and realize it wasn't worth it to get so down on myself, and to be so negative on the court. It made it so that it wasn't enjoyable for me anymore. Since then, I've been working hard to try to find a balance for myself. In that process, I've tried to [laughter] just be even, you know? And not show any emotion.

But I think I found that doesn't work for me. If I try to just show no emotion, either negative or positive, or maybe just positive. Honestly, I feel like eventually if I just hold all that inside, I'm just going to explode!

What are your thoughts Jay on finding the right balance? Is there a different combination or ratio for everybody, is it always bad to have a negative outburst as long as we control it? What are your thoughts on the random ramblings I'm talking about? [laughter]

Jason: Well for one, it's definitely not always bad to show a negative outburst. There is... You see Seph and when he finally decides to break a record, which isn't all that rare, he plays better afterwards. For me and a lot of people I believe, showing a negative outburst is just a way to let go of that last point and then you move on.

Although for some people, keeping it cool and steady the whole way is their way. It is not for everybody. I don't believe that showing a negative outburst here and there as long as you're not being a total jerk or swearing or that sort of thing, I don't think that's that bad.

Ian: Good. [laughter] It's good to hear you say that. This is an area that I've been searching and kind of experimenting with myself personally, as far as a player and teacher is concerned. What I've been telling my students recently, mostly kids, is when I see them really get down on themselves, I'll walk out there and say, "Listen. I understand you lost the last point. I know that I know that it's not fun to lose, and I don't blame you for that. I know what that feels like. It's OK to be disappointed with yourself for losing a point, but you have to do your best to not let it affect your overall emotional state. In other words, go ahead and be angry about, but then forget about it. Move on to the next point, and just kind of start over again."

Is that basically what you're describing?

Jason: Yeah. I guess to simplify it I would say: Everybody reaches the point to where they focus the most differently. Like we've talked about the whole time so far. For me, I focus the most when I'm the maddest. I've never been so angry or upset that I didn't pay attention well. And that's not just tennis. In most things if I'm angry and upset I'm really focused.

So I would imagine for everybody who steps onto a tennis court, if playing on even keel and keeping cool is how you focus the most, then that's where you're going to be the best. If you get a little angry and that makes you pay attention better, then maybe that's it for you. If you get really mad and potentially start acting ilke a jerk--although I don't condone that--then maybe that's how you're going to play the best. If that's where your focus lies.

I can't imagine a time when someone focused at the optimal performance and doesn't play the best tennis. It usually doesn't happen.

Ian: That's interesting. So everybody needs to find out. And I guess this can only happen through experience, right? Playing as many matches as possible, and trying to control emotions. How do we find this out? Should listeners experiment with going out to play a whole match and being as even as possible and make that their mental or emotional goal for the day, and maybe another match just let it all loose and wear everything on their sleeves? You think players should experiment with this? Or how should they figure it out?

Jason: I think you just have to really be thinking on the court and check yourself here and there. You know? I would say, at least for myself but I think for most people, when you play a point here and there, you can tell if you are really dialed in or not. Why are you not dialed in? What's going on and is not making you pay as much attention? I think for most people when they get angry, they're sitting there thinking about what a jerk, or what a cheater a guy is on the either side of the court!

As opposed to: How do I win this next point so that I beat that guy? Which are two very different mental standpoints. If you're sitting there going, "God, I just hate this person!" You're probably not going to play the best tennis on the next point. If you're sitting there going, "I am so going to win this point! I'm going to hit the best ball I possibly can. I'm really dialed into his serve. I am ready." That's where your good tennis comes in.

Ian: That's interesting. Yeah, sure. And this is not easy, because as we've both pointed out several times, it's going to be at least a little bit different for everybody, if not completely different. So those of you listening, you've got to be really focused in on your performance, what your output is like, what your emotional state is like, what your

mental state is like, and you've got to mix and combine those things and be aware of when your performance output is the best. And then try to get yourself to that emotional and mental state as often as possible. It's obviously probably a lot easier said than done!

Something interesting that I've noticed Jason, when you're talking about getting angry, it sounds like most of the time, you're projecting that, or focusing on your opponent. I think a big difference on yourself and me is that when I get angry, and I'm negative emotionally on the court, I reflect that back in on myself. I think my emotional state real quickly goes to how bad of a player I am, how bad of a day I'm having, how bad my backhand is, and really quickly I have a pity party, and that's when things really go downhill for me. Would you say that when you get negative it's usually on your opponent's side? Or do you ever have days where you find that you're negative on your side as well?

Jason: You know, I'm almost always negative about my opponent. [laughter] I know that when I go out there I'm not the greatest player around. I'm not going to bring the best stuff to the table. So I'm just trying to find the way to win the best I can, so usually I'm trying to look for any reason to get fired up. Not necessarily yelling at or angry at my opponent, but a way to fake it. A lot of people fake positive energy. I'm trying to fake any way to get mad that I can!

Ian: [laughter]

Jason: A lot of things that I notice that happen to me, I slice a ton of backhands. Especially if I notice that you don't like that. It happens all the time where I'll slice, slice, slice. People miss of course. Then they're sitting there going, "All you do is slice. You're a terrible player! You're the worst guy I've ever played against." They just get so mad at the fact that I'm slicing, that they're too stupid to realize that they should try to get away from that slice. Then they just tank it on downhill, and I win easily with nothing that good, because they didn't put their energy into avoiding my slice. They put their energy into telling me how bad I am for doing it.

Ian: [laughter] Well it sounds like there's 2 main ways that our emotional state can go downhill. Either by really focusing in on the opponent and forgetting about what you need to do, or changes you need to make technically, etc. To be more successful. And the other side of the spectrum, what I'm describing. Don't get me wrong! I can remember matches where I was really unhappy with my opponent. But I think that was probably rare for me. I can only think of 1 or 2 examples where I just... I was just really upset with my opponent the time the match was over.

However I can remember dozens, and probably--well I won't say hundreds. That would be bad. I can definitely remember dozens of examples of walking of the court and being incredibly upset with myself. It sounds like that's probably the biggest difference between you and I as far as this topic goes.

Jason: Absolutely. That's something that is not a proud thing in my life, even with the other sports teams that I watch. I think the Lions get screwed in every football game. [laughter] But I try not to get down on myself for what's going on. And it's not necessarily looking for excuses and saying, "Oh well, we got bad calls [inaudible]." It's just trying to I guess subconsciously positively reinforce what's happening. Positively keep myself focused and in the game. Because it's really tough if you're sitting there going, "I'm the worst player ever! I can't win." You can't think like that. You can't be successful if you're sitting there going, "Well my backhand's atrocious; there's no way I

can win a match."

Ian: Right. That's definitely been my biggest downfall mentally, I think in the past. Recently for myself, personally. Since college, I've played competitive paddle tennis or platform tennis. I've played--well you know me, Jason. I'm always competing in something. So I've been trying my best to find that optimal mental state for myself. It seems like for me, the best combination for myself is first of all, I can't let everything just fly off the handle. I can't just be completely open and let everything just come out. Because I definitely will slide towards the negative side of things.

On the other side of the coin, I definitely not successful just being completely even. That's not me either! [laughter] Because sooner or later, I can't hold it in anymore, and I blow up and I go right back to being negative again.

So for myself, I think I've found that it's a combination. I allow myself to have an outburst after making a bad error, but then more often than out, recently I've just been laughing it off to myself. I'll make that mistake and then say, "Alright, well that was dumb." I'm doing my best now to let it out, and get right back to being positive again. I think that's probably the best combination for me.

Jason: I would say that for almost everybody listening, either doing your best to just be positive about whatever situation is going on, or doing your best just to fake being positive. A lot of times if you tell yourself, "It's OK. I can still win this." Even if you're way back, that's a better result than sitting there going, "God, I'm down 3-0? I'm screwed." Most people can't make it from there.

Ian: Right. And that's a word that you've used several times, is to fake it. And I've seen that by using the word "fake" you mean literally? In other words, you feel negative but you show something positive instead?

Jason: Well, Nadal's an example. I don't believe that anybody in the world can play in like an ATP 500 event after being the best guy in the world for several years, or one of the best, play somebody who's #160 in the world, be up 61-51, hit a decent show, and pump his fists and yell, "Come on. [inaudible] " There's no way you can be that excited. I just don't believe it. So he's just sitting there thinking: I play my best tennis when I am fired up and positive. It's 61 - 51. But I got to keep doing it. That's how I play my best tennis, and I'm going to do it. I believe Nadal has trained himself to be outwardly positive even though there's no way he can feel that at some junctures. No way!

Ian: And on the other side of the coin, you will actually go fishing for things to be annoyed about, even if maybe you have to make it up so you get your focus up during a match?

Jason: Absolutely. If I love the guy I'm playing against and we're just out there screwing around, having a good time, I'm never going to play my best tennis. No way. I've got to find something. I don't need to be yelling at the guy or anything like that. Although I've done that sometimes. But I just need to not be happy. Being happy out there makes me laugh and not pay attention.

Ian: And then on the other side of the coin, which makes for a 3 sided coin now for those of you keeping track at home. For me, it seems like my optimal emotional state is to let out negative feelings and then immediately go back to being I almost have to make a joke about it. To keep myself from just continuing to slide downhill. I've started

to let it out, and then smile to myself and, "Well, it was a bad mistake, but I've got another point to play here, so I've got to let it go."

So there's 3 completely different ways of "faking it." Overly excited; finding something to be negative about; and then me, finding something to be positive about. Sounds like this is pretty complicated. [laughter] It's got a lot of different elements to this.

Jason: Yeah, I would find out how you focus the best, whatever that is, and that's your route. It may not be the prettiest route. I wish that I could go the Pete Sampras route and not say anything, not show any emotion, but that is not my way. I would guess that not many people are the Pete Sampras route where you just don't show anything. It's got to be somewhere.

Ian: I guess in wrapping things up I would say that everybody listening I think needs to put themselves in competitive situations as often as possible. Because there's not really any other way to learn this about yourself, is there Jason?

Jason: Not that I know of. In any competitive situation: ping-pong, sting-pong, pool, basketball, baseball, darts, billiards. Whatever you can come up with, it all works the same.

I'm not very good at any of those if I'm nice and happy.

Ian: [laughter] And I can attest to that as well. In all those examples actually! [laughter]

Jason: [laughter]

Ian: Alright, we're going to go ahead and wrap things up. Jason, thank you very much for spending time with me and for having this conversation about this topic. I knew you were the man for the job when I read through this question from Sam. So thank you for your thoughts. Do you have anything final or any closing words of wisdom before we sign off?

Jason: I will say and although I've fallen into the trap a few times, but there's definitely a line that you can cross. Being angry at somebody could be having a scowl on your face and pumping yourself up internally. It's not swearing at them or accusing them of cheating. All the time. [laughter] Most of the time when I would try to really pump myself up, I might think the guy's cheating, but I would not say it. It's just to myself so I could go that route. I don't need to be standing at the net going, "Dude, that was in!" Even though I know it was out but it's not. That's not the way. A lot of people go that way for some reason. I'm not saying that by being angry you need to be a jerk. There's a difference.

Ian: I think we should probably repeat for emphasis as well that the method that you're describing is something that very few people actually play better tennis while doing. I think we should probably repeat that as well. [laughter]

Jason: Sure! Yes, I would say it's a small percentage, but there's people out there. You probably know it for the rest of your life. I do better with everything if it's in the last minute and I'm under pressure. If there's trouble, of something like that. I'm always better that way. So it makes sense on the tennis court that if I'm angry or under pressure or something's going on, that's when I pay attention the best. You might be able to get a clue from your daily life on how you like to react.

Ian: Alright. Good stuff! Jason, thank you very much again for your time. I know that listeners of the show are going to enjoy this conversation and it's a topic that's not I don't think it's discussed very much. Definitely not online as far as tennis improvement goes. So I'm looking forward to hearing feedback from listeners, and Sam in Portugal I hope this was helpful to you, and gives you some thoughts and ideas on how you can keep getting better with your mental focus.

So Jason, thank you very much. Hopefully I can have you back on the show in a sooner amount of time than it's been since the last time you were on! [laughter] So thanks very much for being with us.

Jason: Thanks. I hope to see you on the forum some more too.

Ian: That would be outstanding. We'd love to see you there. [music] [noise]

Alright, that's it for Episode #140 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you very much for listening to today's show. I hope that it was helpful to you, and gives you a good idea of what you need to do to find your ideal emotional state out on the tennis court. In wrapping up today's show, I want to remind you guys to go check out Essential Tennis Platinum. Hours of content every single week and it focuses on you the member. It's my goal to help all of you guys get as good as possible. It has always been my goal with the podcast and that's my goal with essential tennis platinum as well.

So go check it out and give it a look and hopefully I will see you on the inside of Platinum.

Alright, that does it for this week. Take care everybody and good luck with your tennis.