

Essential Tennis Podcast #142

[music]

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

And now, here is 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 Tennis Express.com. Well before we get to today's topic, which is going to be a great one, we are going to talk about tennis strategy and tactics both in general and as they relate to the singles and doubles game.

I have been talking about iTunes and how it is the best way for you to get the podcast and it really is, by the way, a free download for either Mac or PC. I am going to give away--I've got some string laying around the office here that I would like to give away to anybody who leaves a review of the Essential Tennis podcast on iTunes this week. I've got here 15 packs of Wilson Super Spin 16-gauge tennis string that I will send completely free to anybody who leaves a review on the iTunes music store for the Essential Tennis podcast.

To get your string, all you have to do is leave the review, copy it, and then paste it into an e-mail. Send me the review that you left on the iTunes music store. Send me your name and address in that e-mail and I will send you a free set of string. That's it. So send those e-mails to Ian@essentialtennis.com and I look forward to seeing you guys' reviews up there and sending out some string that you guys can use.

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

Alright, let's go ahead and get started with today's topic. And today's episode of the podcast is going to be completely about strategy and tactics as it relates to both singles and doubles and combined general tactical and strategical elements that you need to be good at in order to be as successful as possible out on the tennis court. And I know that a lot of you spend a lot of time with technique and trying to improve your strokes, and that's great. And you guys should be spending time doing that.

But make sure that you balance that out as well With learning about tactics and practicing your tactics. Make sure that you guys are getting in enough competitive play on the courts that you learn how to use the strokes and the techniques that you have taught yourself or that you have learned from the podcast or videos online or your local tennis pro or whatever. You guys should make sure you are balancing out your time on the court between the practicing of your technique, the practicing of your strokes, and also the practicing of implementing those strokes into a strategy that you have developed against an opponent. It is really important.

And I want to give a shout out to the person who was the impetus for today's show topic. And that was John M, who's in Texas. John wrote me today's question and suggested the topic. And also included his own outline for both singles and doubles tactics. John, your outline was great. You're just right on queue there with your thoughts and your suggestions. And I wrote my own outline, because I didn't want to steal all your stuff basically.

So I've got my own outline, basically, talking about all the same basic topics and fundamental things that we should be focused on as far as strategy is concerned. I am going to go ahead and get into that now. But I definitely borrowed quite a bit from your outline. You are on queue with most of your thoughts. So, cheers on that. You are right on track there. And strategy and mental toughness is definitely a big strength of John's in Texas.

So, let's go ahead and get to my outline and I'm going to break this up into 3 different main areas today. I'm gonna first talk about general strategy musts. Things that you guys need to do and I've got 1, 2, 3, 4 different strategical things that, whether you're a singles player or a doubles player, these are things that you guys should be doing. You should be paying attention to on the court as far as strategy is concerned. Otherwise, you are absolutely leaving points in matches on the table. [noise] Excuse me.

Secondly, we are going to talk about singles strategy specifics. I am going to give you guys 3 different things that are probably most important as far as understanding what to do during a singles match. And we are also going to talk about doubles strategy specifics. I've got 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

Doubles--there's more parts to doubles tactics. It is definitely more complicated and if for no other reason, because there is twice as many people on the court. And so there is just a lot more stuff going on and there is more that you have to pay attention to in doubles. Not that singles can't be complicated sometimes, but doubles there's a lot more to it for sure. As far as tactics is concerned.

Alright, so that's today's outline. Let's go ahead and get started with the first section. And that is General Strategy Musts. And #1, under that heading, is you must know your game. You have to know heading in to every match what you are good at and also what your weaknesses are. You should know this before the match starts. And I know that

sounds obvious and it sounds like, "Well, yeah, of course. I know what I am good at and I know what I'm bad at," but please be conscious of it. And this is something that you should be taking mental inventory of heading into a match, because you need to know walking onto the court before you even swing your racket for the first time.

You need to know, today, what do I have. Is my forehand my biggest weapon? Is my backhand my biggest weakness? Am I able to hit a hard flat serve but my second serve has been a little bit shaky recently. These are all things that you have to have a really good understanding of walking onto the court. And we are going to talk about why a little bit later. So that's #1. Whether you are a doubles player or a singles player, you must know your game walking onto the court.

#2. You must observe your opponent or opponents very carefully during your match warm up. And the reason for that is you need to know the other side of the coin. You want to learn their strengths and their weaknesses as quickly as possible. It's information that's absolutely crucial to your success every time that you play a tennis match. And as the match starts moving through the warm up, continue to pay close attention especially during those first several games.

And you guys know what I am talking about. If you have very much experience at all, you'll know that not everybody hits the ball the same way during warm up as they do during the match. And so you have to be careful for that. In fact, some players will [laughter] purposefully --I've absolutely done this. Some players will purposefully kind of hide some of their strengths or some of their weaknesses.

An example of me doing that is I am left handed in case you guys are new to the show. I am a lefty and a big strength of mine is my spin serve. Specifically, I have a kind of a combination topspin and slice serve that I hit very aggressively that I use for my second serve and very often my first serve as well. Especially in doubles. And very often in college I would warm up my serve hitting all flat serves. I would not hit any spin serves.

And so I would hit probably 10-15 flat serves to each player or 10-15 on each side to one player as we did our doubles warm up. And then I would come out of the gate hitting heavy spin on both serves after hitting all flat in the warm up. And that is something that I am not embarrassed to say that I did quite a bit in college. And so don't be surprised if people do that to you. I think it is a good tactical play.

And so pay very close attention during the warm up, but don't take it for granted or don't assume that what you see in the warm up is what you are going to see all day on the court during the match. So you have to be really alert and really aware of what is going on on the other side of the court. That's thing # 2 under General Strategy.

So #1 was know your game. #2, observe your opponents closely, because you need to know their game as well. And now #3, using those 2 pieces of information, you will build your strategy. And you can't build an effective strategy without knowing those 2 things first.

And I know that a lot of you out there walk onto the court already knowing how you're going to play and it's completely regardless of what your opponent's strengths and weaknesses are. And that is definitely a mistake. And this isn't complicated. You should be thinking in simple terms. It doesn't have to be complex or tricky. In fact it shouldn't be. We are going to talk more about that.

A little bit later, and I'm going to give some specific examples of tactics, or a strategy based on your strengths and your opponent's weaknesses. I'm going to talk more about that later. But the reason for knowing yourself, and for observing your opponents is so that you can effectively build a strategy. That's the whole point. Now, moving forward with the match, you know yourself, you've observed your opponents, you've built a strategy around that within the first couple of games of the match. Now continuing with the match, I have 2 general rules, and again everything I'm talking about right now, applies to both singles and doubles. General rule #1: Never change a working strategy. This is something else that you guys have probably heard a lot, and it probably sounds like old hat. Please take this seriously.

Because way too often, I see recreational players, they will put together a point, a successful point and it involved 2 or 3 or 4 specific shots, put in sequence, that worked. They put together a winning pattern, and the very next point they do something completely different. Maybe even totally opposite of the point previous where they just dominated their opponents, putting together a specific pattern of shots, or a specific play. They crushed their opponents the point before, and on the next point, they'll do completely the opposite thing.

And when you find a winning match-up between you and your opponents or opponent, it's important that you guys note that hammering it over and over again, is the way to go. I think that recreational players very often feel that a good tactician is somebody who is sneaky and kind of complicated and kind of cloak-and-dagger, kind of fancy, kind of tactics and always changing it up. Your opponent never knows what's coming next, and that's good strategy or good tactics. That's absolutely too complicated, and it's totally not necessary. Usually, a good tactic between you and your opponent, to try to beat your opponent, will be very simple. Don't get bored by that, please. I get excited when I find a weakness that pairs up well with my strength.

Again, I'm a left-handed player, and so my strength from the baseline, by far, is my forehand. I love hitting my forehand cross-court because it usually goes to my opponent's back-hand, which is usually their weaker shot. I just said usually twice, so it's not always the case. A high percentage of the time, I'm playing a right-handed player, and their weaker side is their backhand. And so I make absolutely no secret of the fact, early on in the match, that most of the time I get a forehand, I'm going to be hammering my opponent's back-hand. I'm going to do it over and over and

over again, until they can show me that they can either handle it, and hit right back at me with something that challenges me, or if they don't, I'm just going to do it all day until I win the match. Period. You guys should be thinking in simplistic terms when it comes to putting together a match strategy. That's under general strategy rules #1: As far as continuing the match goes never change a working strategy or a working combination of shots.

Rule #2: When a strategy doesn't work, change it. Again, really simple, but something that I see players screw up a lot. They'll stick they'll kind of go down with the ship of whatever they're comfortable strategy is, without ever changing it up. The hardest part about this, is figuring out when to change something, and when to say 'Alright. This is obviously not working. We do need to change this up. It's not going to be a good day unless we do something different.' Sometimes, it'll be super obvious.

Maybe you're playing a doubles match and you're serving and volleying, to begin the match with, and you're just getting beat. Your opponent is just hammering the return. Both opponents just hammering the returns of serve, low, at your feet over and over again, and you're just not making the half-volley or the low-volley. Sometimes it's going to be obvious, and you'll know. 'OK. Well I need to be a little bit more cautious here. I can't keep running into these returns, because it's not working.' You'll need to change it up.

Sometimes it won't be obvious. It'll be kind of 50-50 to begin with. You win half the points using a specific tactic, and the other half, you get burned. In cases like that, you have to kind of look at the big picture, and look at the long-term. It's possible that over time, you'll kind of continue to tilt things in your favor, and you can kind of wear your opponent down.

But you must be very aware. In order to make that judgment, you have to be very aware of things like your opponent's technique, and their emotions and their mental toughness. If you're trying, let's say you're playing a singles match, and you're trying to hammer your opponent's back-hand, maybe they hit the ball really hard on that side. Their technique is not fundamentally sound. It's a really low percentage shot. Once in awhile they make it, and other times they miss it, badly.

Sometimes you kind of have to weather the storm a little bit, and be patient and know that in the long run, it's probably going to work out in your favor. In the meantime, don't be discouraged hitting a winner here and there. That would be a good example of a tactic not working every time, but knowing that in the long run, it's probably going to work out in your favor. Sometimes you just have to be patient and stick with it. As they get hot, they make 5 or 6 in a row, for a winner, well now it's probably time to change things up.

My point is, you have to really be aware of what's going on, and you have to be paying attention. Otherwise, before you know it, the match could be over, and you'll be looking back at the match, saying 'Wow. Why did I continue to hit to that spot over and over again, when obviously, they beat me that way?' So on one hand, never change a working strategy. On the other hand, you have to know when to fold and move on to something new to try to gain the upper hand.

So in review, those were the 5 general strategy musts. #1: You must know your game. #2: You must know your opponent's game through observing them. #3: Using those two pieces of information, you will build your strategy. That's the point. #4: Continuing with the match, never change a winning strategy. When a strategy doesn't work, please do change it. Don't go down with the ship. Pay close enough attention that you can tell the difference between something that's just working part of the time, and something that's obviously not going to work out for you in the long run.

Before we get to the next part of my outline, I want to remind you all about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast, and that is Tennisexpress.com. You guys need strings, you need rackets, you need shoes so why not go to Tennis Express. They have really good prices. They have free shipping for orders over \$75.00, and if you use the promotional code 'essential' when you check out, it will give credit to the Essential Tennis Podcast. It will show Tennis Express that you're a listener, and you appreciate their support of the show by being a sponsor. Please do that, and I appreciate their sponsorship of the podcast, very much.

Alright, next up, let's get to some specifics having to do with singles and doubles and as with all other parts of my teaching, both online and in person, we're going to keep things simple here. There's only really a couple basic tactical things that you guys really have to have nailed down in order to be successful. At least at an entry level. Doubles is a little bit different. There's a lot going on in doubles which is why I created an entire product around it. Doubles Domination, which I'm reworking, by the way. I'm getting the 2.0 version of Doubles Domination ready, so let's go ahead and start things off. We'll begin with singles, first. These are specific singles strategy things that you guys need to understand, and you need to use if you want to be successful. I've just got 3 basic ones. #1:

From behind the baseline, you should be hitting the ball cross-court most of the time. Period. If you're not doing this, you need to start. Simply because it's a higher percentage shot. The court is longer when you aim cross court by quite a bit. I think it's like 5 or 6 feet when you go from corner to corner, cross court, as opposed to down the line. The net is lower when you hit across the center of it. It's 6" lower in the center than it is at the net post. You're going to make more shots when hitting in that direction. The reason why we want to take the high percentage play is because most points are going to end with a mistake. Period. I don't care how good you are, if you're listening to this show, you make more errors than you force errors from your opponent, or than the winners that you hit. You definitely hit more errors than you do winners. Everybody can benefit from being a little bit higher percentage than they are right now.

The exception to that would be, and I just said everybody, there is one exception. If you are a strictly defensive player, and you hit everything slow and everything to the middle of the court, of course you could benefit from learning how to attack and learning how to create some offensive opportunities and develop some weapons. That would be a great thing for you to do. For most of us, we need to work on being a little bit more steady and a little bit more consistent.

It's not to say that hitting down the line is never the right thing to do. Usually, it's kind of a sucker play. You see a little bit more space between your opponent and the sideline down the line, that you've got a little bit of an opening there to hit to. Be patient. Wait until you really have an obvious hole to hit to down the line. Otherwise you should be hitting cross-court. When you do hit down the line, make sure that it's only in situations where you're in balance, you've got control, you're not reaching for the ball or you've had a hard time getting to it. Make sure that it's worth the risk.

The two main situations that you'll be in when it is worth the risk is, #1: Which I already mentioned, if your opponent is way out of position -the opposite direction- if they're out of position because the previous shot you hit a really good cross court ground stroke, and you're in balance, then down the line would be reasonable at that point. Go ahead and go for it as long as you're not aiming for the line, either the baseline or the sideline, still give yourself margin for error. At that point, go ahead and go down the line. That's a reasonable time to do it.

Another time would be, if you're in balance and it's your opponent's weaker side down the line, and they have a big weakness there. I break the directionals quite often with my backhand, even though it's my weaker shot. I will very often take a steady shot, like my backhand slice, I hit a lot of slice shots in my singles play. I'm not very good at hitting top-spin relatively speaking. Relative to the people that I'm playing against, when I'm competing. I'll very often use a down the line, backhand slice, to try to get myself into a pattern where I can, on the next shot, hit a forehand and hopefully be hitting that cross-court, again to my opponent's backhand. Remember, I'm left-handed so my backhand side is on the deuce half of the court. If I hit that down the line to my opponent's add side, usually that's to their weaker shot, their backhand.

Now I don't do that unless I've got a reasonably easy shot. Or at least a neutral shot. I'm not taking on-the-run defensive, stretched-out slice shots and trying to thread it down the line, and hit the line. That, I'm not doing. But when I'm in reasonable balance, and I have an opportunity there to direct the ball to my opponent's weaker side, I will absolutely do that. So that's #1 under specific singles tactics hit the ball cross court, most of the time. Please. And when you do go down the line, make sure that it's warranted. Make sure it's at the right time. Make sure you're in balance is the main thing.

Alright. #2 under singles: When approaching, when you do come up to the net, you should be hitting the ball down the line most of the time. The reason for that simply is that you will keep the ball in front of you, and it's much easier to cover passing shot attempts from your opponent. That's not always the case. When hitting down the line goes to your opponent's strength, and they love hitting passing shots off that shot, then maybe you want to start changing things up and breaking that general rule and go cross court.

If this is something that you haven't heard before, I urge you to go to the video section of Essentialtennis.com, and I have a video up there diagramming and showing with a point scenario. Having a point example why down the line is a better choice, and why cross court, for an approach shot in general, is a poor choice. It has to do with your positioning on the courts and being able to cover passing shots.

Alright, so that's #2, when approaching, make sure you go down the line. #3: Play your strength to their weakness as much as possible. Period. If you're a righty, and you're playing another righty, then you want to hit inside-out forehands. That means assuming your strength is your forehand, and your opponent's strength is their forehand, whenever possible, you want to shift slide to your left over to your backhand side to hit a forehand as much as you can, if that's your strength. You should be jockeying for position to try to hit that forehand as often as possible. You don't want to do that to such an extent that you leave yourself vulnerable and open, and you're constantly way over to the left leaving yourself wide open on your forehead side. Unless your opponent just doesn't have any weapons.

If they're not able to hit a winner when you leave the court open because they just don't have strong enough ground strokes, then go ahead and leave it open. Shift way to your left and just hit all forehands all day. And when you get that shot, hit it inside-out. Go back across the court, hit a cross court shot to their back hand. There you go! You've got a great pattern now. You're hitting your strength -your forehand- cross court which is a high percentage shot, to your opponent's weakness, their backhand.

Now we're following all 3 of those rules and you're looking like you're in great shape. You should be trying to come up with patterns like that as often as possible. Once you find a pattern like that, don't deviate. Stick with it, and keep hammering it until either your opponent makes a big adjustment and you've got to switch things up, or until you've won the match. Keep hammering it until 1 of those 2 things happen. Period. Alright, so that's singles strategy specifics. Cross court from behind the baseline most of the time, when you're approaching down the line, most of the time. And #3: Do whatever you can to match up your strengths, versus your opponent's weaknesses.

One more time I want to point out these are all generalities, OK? There's going to be situational things that might happen whether it be your strengths, your opponent's strengths, or whatever. When you match up versus different opponents, there's going to be different specific things going on. Sometimes you have to break these general rules in order to give yourself an advantage. If that's the case, go ahead and do it. Just make sure that it is the case, that you've

got to break that rule in order to get the advantage, the upper hand. Otherwise, you'll find yourself making more unforced errors than necessary.

OK. Lastly, last part of today's show. Doubles strategy specifics. I've got 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 6? No, 5. 5 of those. We'll try to get through these quickly here. As I mentioned earlier, doubles is just more complicated. There's more moving parts, literally. There's a lot going on. I've just got a couple of specific scenarios here. #1: If they serve in volley, if your opponents serve in volley, your focus must really be on a quality return of serve. Cross court and low most of the time.

Please don't try a down the line return of serve unless the net person is just really, really active. It's a sucker play. Just like going down the line a lot in singles is a sucker play, the down the alley return of serve is a sucker play as well, in doubles. Now again, the exception to that is if you're playing against a really, really aggressive and really active net person, you need to show them that you are willing to do it, and that you are capable of going for the shot. There are situations where it's better to go down the line at least once or twice, just to try to keep that net player honest.

For most of you guys, you're not going to play super-aggressive net players. So it might seem boring, but cross court as much as possible. If you can keep it low against a serve in volley-er, that would obviously be best. So that's situation #1. #2: If they serve and stay back that's a huge opportunity for you and your partner. You should be returning cross court, safely, it doesn't even have to be low unless you aren't good at getting it cross court and you're risking hitting it to the server's partner. Assuming that's not the case, go ahead and play it 2, 3 feet over the net. Keep it to the server's half of the court, and get into the net. If you guys aren't comfortable with that now, work on it. Work on your approaching game. Work on your transition game from the baseline to the net.

Because when you play a team that serves and stays back, they're giving you a huge chance to take over the net, and to pressure them to be offensive and to take care of business. If you watch them serve and stay back and you return and stay back and you play full points and full sets and full matches in a 1-up, 1-back position, you are limiting yourself, tactically in the game of doubles. You need to break through that and start getting more comfortable getting up to the net. Yes, I'm talking to you. I know there's a lot of you guys out there, that are sitting there listening to this a little uncomfortable because you know I'm talking to you. Mr. person who serves and stays back and sits there on the baseline and returns and stays back. It's not always the winning strategy, but you guys need to work on it. If you never use it because you don't like half-volleys, you don't like the ball at your feet, you're not good at volleying from behind the service line, start working on those things. Please! I don't want you to be stuck your entire tennis career, playing 1-up, 1-back doubles. It's just not as fun, alright?

Tactically, you're just not taking advantage of the opportunities that you have out there. Alright. I could really go off there, on a tangent in case you guys can't tell. Alright, moving on. #3: If they love to lob -this has got to be one of the top 3 complaints, for sure, that I hear from doubles players. "They lob every point and they all hit the back of the baseline. It was terrible!" Don't be a sucker against lobbing teams. Especially if you're serving and volley and returning and volleying and you and your partner are both getting up to the net. Coming up to the net and playing "at the net" doesn't mean that you need to be standing 3' away from the net.

When you're playing against a team that you know likes to lob, be smart about where you position yourself. You should be positioning yourself to anticipate the lobs that your opponents continue to hit. That might mean on the service line is your at the net position. From there, when your opponents drive, you can move forward and volley. When they lob, you can move back and hit an overhead out of the air. You should position yourself wherever you have to so that you can take the majority of shots out of the air. If that's 2' behind the service line, or 3', so be it. Don't let it bounce.

Once you let that lob bounce, you're giving your opponents lots of time and you are giving them the ability to now attack and move in and take over the point. So position yourself wisely, if they do lob a lot. Know it's coming, and don't keep closing all the way into the net, over and over and watching the ball go over your head. Be smart about it, and put yourself where you can take those out of the air. Two more. If you're opponents love to poach and be active at the net, you know you must hit your ground strokes solidly all day. Or, use the lob yourself.

When you've got a person who's really disruptive up there, you have to either play an offensive, aggressive ground stroke, pass them hopefully down the alley a couple of times to show them that you're not afraid of doing it, or, if you've got a good lob, go ahead and use it. When that happens, get to the net as quickly as possible. Try to beat them to the punch if you can. If you can serve and volley and get up there and not give that net player the opportunity to poach so much, that would be great. Lastly, use specific plays as often as possible in doubles. Find which specific tactics and which specific plays and which specific patterns of shots work, and then hammer them over and over and over again.

A specific example of that might be a serve to one of your opponent's backhands, and then a poach, or a fake poach. Be super active up there at the net and really pressure their weaker side. Whatever you find that works, stick with it. Don't over-complicate it. Just keep hammering it until you've won the match. Don't deviate unless it's absolutely necessary. Alright. Well, great topic today. John, thank you very much for the suggestion and in review real quickly, area #1 was general strategy. Know your game. Know your opponent's game. Put those things together and never change a working strategy and change it up when you figure out it's not working. Then singles strategy specifics:

From behind the baseline, most of your shots should be cross court. When approaching, most of your shots should be down the line. Play your strengths to their weaknesses as much as possible. Doubles strategy specifics: If they serve

in volley, focus on your return. If they serve and stay back, take the opportunity to move in. If they lob a lot, don't be a sucker. Don't close all the way into the net over and over again. If they love to poach, hit solid ground strokes and or use the lob. And just like singles, use specific plays as often as possible once you figure out that they work.

That's a broad, general, solid overview and outline of tennis tactics. These are things that you guys can bank on. You know that these are solid tactics and these are the fundamentals, the essentials, the things that you guys should be working on, be conscious of. If you want to be good at tennis, these are the types of things that are the difference between winning and losing matches. Even though they're kind of simple common things, if you can get really good at everything I've talked about today, you will be more successful.

[music] [music] [music] [music]

Alright, that does it for episode #142 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Hopefully you guys don't mind that I went a little bit over time today. It was a great topic and I enjoyed talking about it. Remember, I will send you a free pair of strings a free set of strings, Wilson's Super Spin 16 gauge, just for leaving a review on the iTunes music store of the Essential Tennis Podcast. While you're there, subscribe to it. It's the easiest way to get the show. To get those free strings, make sure to send me an email to ian@essentialtennis.com with your pasted review and your name and address so that I know where to send the strings.

Alright. That does it for this week. Thanks again everybody, very much, for listening to today's show. Take care and good luck with your tennis.

[music] [music] [music] [silence]