

Essential Tennis Podcast #144

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Announcer: 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--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 Essential Tennis podcast is brought to you by TennisExpress.com.

Well thank you very much for joining me on today's show. I'm excited to do today's show! I am every week, but I was just sitting here getting ready to start recording and realizing that I was getting ready to talk to thousands of people all over the world who love tennis. That's really exciting for me! I want to thank all of you listening for continuing to support the show by downloading the file, and by being listeners sending in questions. I love that the show continues to grow and improve. It's great to have all of you on board.

So thank you very much for your continued support. I look forward to today's show. Hopefully it's going to help you out there get some ideas about how you can improve your own game and become a better player. That's always been the point of this show, and I hope that's shown.

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

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Alright. Let's get started on today's episode. Our first question is coming to us from Mark in the Netherlands. Mark wrote and said:

"Hi, Ian. I listened with great interest to your last 2 podcasts about handling short, weak shots. Maybe a nice follow up would be how to handle short, slow balls that are also very low, and have varying kinds of spin. I thought I was improving on handling the short balls, hitting them with top spin and all, but now I encountered an opponent that plays them very smartly. His short shots are often too low for me to hit with top spin back.

" I also make many mistakes if I try back spin. This is because the balls are either too low, or they are very slow and have difficult curve to them, or they have spin and are unpredictable. What I tried in the end was to approach them as almost a volley. I hit them with a continental grip so I can lift them better. and try to push them back as far as I can. I say "push," because there is no space and time for a regular swing. I try to hit them to the back of the court most of the time, because a drop shot seems risky. What do you think of my approach? Does it make sense? Or do you have better ideas?" -- Mark.

Alright, Mark. I've got 4 main things that I've outlined here that I want to get across to you that I think are going to be helpful. I'll give you my thoughts on what your approach is and how to handle this shot, which is very often a shot that recreational players struggle with.

First of all. And I understand that the shot you're talking about is tricky. It's difficult. You're having a hard time getting to it and it's low by the time you get there. However, I do want to point out that top spin should always be your top choice.

[laughter] I totally hear where you're coming from. I know you're talking about a shot where top spin doesn't seem like it's possible. However, it should continue to be your #1 choice if it is at all an option when you're getting these shots from your opponent.

The reason why I like top spin the most for this type of shot, anything low and slow and short in general, is because it gives you margin for error while trying to attack. And that's the best of both worlds. That's what all of you should be striving to do! I know that all of you listening want to have the ability to take something low, short, slow where you're moving well into the court to get to it, and make a confident, full swing and put it in play consistently. Wouldn't that be great? [laughter]

I know that a lot of you out there have fear of hitting that type of shot, because you often miss it. It's a low percentage shot. So you end up having to just push it in play. Just like what Mark is describing, the way that he's taken a continental grip and just basically pushed it in play.

So the first thing I want to say to you is that top spin should be your top choice. If it's at all possible. Because that top spin gives it curve back down into the court again, and it allows you to be aggressive, and not have to lift up and just push it in play.

Many of you listening are not good at this, and it's something that should be developed and practiced. You should be practicing this on purpose on the courts during your practice time. I spend a lot of time with my clients as I teach full-time, practicing this shot. I will give it to them over and over. Typically the way I practice it with them is I will be on the baseline and feed them a short shot. They'll move forwards, attack to one side of the court or the other. Let's say I give them a target of hitting the deuce side and they make a full swing, aim to the deuce side. I'm standing there waiting for it, and I just block it up into the air again. Slowly, softly, short. I have them repeat again and again making a full swing at that short shot.

So get a ball machine or a partner that can feed to you, or is consistent enough or has enough control to hit it back to you over and over again shortly. They might not be exactly the same as this opponent you're talking about who seems to be really good at this shot as far as making it challenging by varying spins and keeping it very low. But you should just be practicing in general hitting a top spin shot from that area of the court so that you have a little more confidence when you play against this opponent.

So that's Point #1 that I want to make. Top spin should be your top choice.

Moving onto #2. When not possible, slice is extremely useful. I talk a lot on the podcast about how I prefer top spin whenever possible. That being said, I'm not anti-slice. It's not that I don't think back spin can be used effectively. However, when you do use slice. Let's say that the shot that your opponent has hit you is especially low, or it has that spin that's unpredictable for you, Mark. When that happens, and you just aren't getting

there in a very balanced position, slice is a great shot selection in this situation. But understand, that this shouldn't be an aggressively hit type slice. You shouldn't be trying to hit lots of back spin with a chopping motion. It should be a smooth, guided shot with a little bit of back spin on it.

I think a lot of time recreational players wrongly assume that slice means you're really chopping down on the ball aggressively. Really slicing it making a lot of back spin, and that it's a shot that should be tricky or sneaky because you're putting a ton of spin on it and trying to fool your opponents with all the back spin you put on the ball. No, this should be a guided shot. Something that's consistent, very accurate, well-placed. And yes, it will have some back spin on it. But the whole point of hitting slice is not just to spin the ball. It's a style of shot that should be very easily controlled and very accurate.

Again, this is a shot that you should be practicing in your practice play, Mark, so that it's in your arsenal, and it's an option that you have when you get a more difficult short shot from your opponent.

So that's #2. Using the slice. And when I say slice, it's not an extreme, heavy back spin type shot. It's controlled and steady and consistent.

Now moving onto #3. When slice isn't even possible. When it's just such a tough shot--you're barely reaching it--I like the approach that you are taking. You should just be pushing the ball back deep. I like your approach to keep it deep. Push it as close to the base line as possible. Hopefully you can direct it towards the weakness of your opponent would probably be a great option. When it's not an option, just keeping it down the line in general is going to be a good way to go. The reason for that is it keeps the ball in front of you, making it easier to cover passing shot attempts from your opponent.

Again, to their weakness would be a great option. Keeping it deep is a great option. When you can't do either of those things, just keep it in front of you. Just push it straight ahead down the line, and you'll be in a better position to cover passing shot attempts as opposed to hitting cross court, which leaves a wide open court down the line for your opponent to try to hit their passing shot.

So that's the push shot. I don't have a problem with this either. Listen, when it's an emergency, #1 priority is to just get the ball in play. And this is a shot that I have absolutely used in match play, even at a 5.0 level. It's a shot that is used on TV by the pros. When you're in a tough situation, you've just got to do what you got to do. So worst case scenario, go ahead and use the continental grip and push it deep down the line, or towards their weakness. Whichever one you think will be more effective.

And lastly, Point #4 that I want to talk about relating to your question, Mark, is I want you to work on your anticipation skills. You've got to start reading these types of shots, start seeing them earlier from your opponent. You should see these low spinny shots coming from your opponent. The technique used to hit this type of shot that you're describing is completely different from trying to hit a top spin drive or a deep shot in the court. You should notice technique differences. You should notice differences in how your opponent is setting up with his body and with his racket in order to hit this low spinning shot.

So I want you to start paying closer attention to how he's doing it and when he's doing it so that when it happens next you get a jump on it and you're able to get to this shot more

quickly and get yourself in a better position.

To be honest with you, there's not really any excuse to get beat by this shot over and over again. I don't even care how good it is, honestly. If he uses it frequently, you should see it coming after awhile. The first couple of times, fine. You're going to maybe get caught off guard by it. But after the first couple of times that he uses this shot, or any opponent uses this shot, you should start to anticipate it. You should start to see it coming, and get up to the ball quickly enough that you're able to play an offensive shot and pressure him right back.

Now of course the pros use drop shots effectively here and there, but [laughter] it's only really effective when they use this type of shot sparingly. It's kind of an off-paced shot to throw their opponent off balance. Anybody who uses a short shot exclusively really should get beat! [laughter] Now if their opponent isn't good at handling short shots, then they won't get beat, and that was a good tactic for them to play and there's no shame in that. But somebody who does this on a regular basis. Mark, you should start to see it coming. I want you to practice it enough and pay close enough attention that you see it coming and you're able to handle it comfortably. That goes for the rest of you listening as well.

Alright. So Mark, there you go. There's the answer to your question. Good question. Thank you very much for being a listener in the Netherlands. I appreciate it. Hopefully this answer was helpful to you!

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Before we get to our second question in today's show, I want to remind you about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast. That is TennisExpress. Com, where you can go to get all of your tennis gear and equipment, and accessory needs met. Whether it be rackets, bags, strings, grips, stringing machines--whatever you need--shoes, shirts, shorts, apparel. You name it, they're got it there.

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Let's go ahead and move on now with our second question. It comes to us from Jim in California. Jim wrote and said:

"Can you discuss the trade offs between hitting predominantly to an opponent's weakness versus waiting for an opportunity to hit your attacking shot there, i.e. if an opponent has a weaker back hand, most people will attempt to hit a majority of shots to that side. However, that means when you get a weak or at least attackable return, your shot is likely to go to your opponent's strength. Conversely, the alternative is to hit to the opponent's strength, then when you, for example, push them wide to their forehand side and get a short hand ball, you can approach weakness. Then, instead of them trying to pass you with their best shot, they have to beat you with their worst shot. What are the trade offs? How do you maximize either approach? When do you use both? On the pro level, Fed and Jokavich do this frequently."

Alright. Jim, good question. It's great that you're thinking critically about shot selection and tactics. Just like what you're describing here. It's excellent that you're even aware of these types of things, and especially aware of combinations, and setting up to one side versus the other, attacking to one side versus the other, etc. Hopefully you're just as aware of these types of things during your match play as you are when you're off the court and you're typing this question to me.

It's awesome that you're thinking about things like this. All of you listening should be trying to pick out patterns of play like this to use against your opponent on a regular basis, both in singles and in doubles. Even though what Jim is describing is clearly a singles tactic's question.

Now a couple of things I want to talk about Jim. First of all, in my opinion, continuing to pound a weakness is the way to go. For a couple of reasons, that's definitely my choice. As we keep going here, I'll point out several reasons or other ways that... Maybe it won't be the way to go. However in general, I think continuing to play the weakness, in other words, the first example that you laid out, which was hitting to opponent's back hand over and over again, and then finally getting that short attackable shot. I think that's the way to go for a few reasons.

First of all, when you do pound their weakness over and over again and you make it really obvious and you just to that side again and again, first of all, it's quite possible that you'll just out right win the point. And you won't even have to make a put away shot, or move in and attack and have to try to put the ball away, or force them to have to put the ball away. It's very possible that they'll just make errors. The more shots that you hit there, the more they will give you free points. You won't even have to worry about putting the ball away. That's Reason #1 why I think that hitting to the weaker side more is a better play. Usually.

Secondly, when you continue to attack to that weak side, who says that when you do get an attackable ball that you have to go the other way anyway? [laughter] You made the assumption in your question that, "Alright. So we hit to their back hand again and again. We get the weak ball. We're just on their back. They just hit a back hand. So now we have to go to the forehand side to try to put the ball away." No! That's not the case. Why not just attack to their back hand again and make them hit yet another one? And force them to try to pass you with their weaker shot.

There's nothing that says that after hitting to their back hand side and getting their short ball that you then have to hit to their forehand side. Go ahead and attack right back at it. If you know, and if it's noticeable that their forehand is much stronger than their back hand, there's no reason to make them hit it the entire match. Literally! [laughter] Go ahead and don't even let them hit it once the entire match. Wouldn't that be great? If you know that their back hand is worse, and you literally just make them hit only back hands? There's absolutely nothing wrong with that, even if it means they're not having to run back and forth at all. Go ahead and make them hit back hands all day long.

Now again, [laughter] there's going to be different situations and different opponents. We'll get to that later. But in general, I think that continuing to attack the back hand is an excellent shot. I'd much rather, I'd very often rather have my opponent not running and try to hit their weakness past me as opposed to hitting their strength on the run. So I do agree with you Jim, that very often having your opponent run and hit their strength is not going to be successful for you in the long run. So I'm totally on the same page with you there! But my point is who says you have to hit over there? Just continue to attack

that back hand.

Now on the other side of the coin, when you hit to their strength over and over again. And we're trying to play that second series of shots that you were talking about. Hit to their strength over and over. Wait for the shot ball, and then attack over to the other side of the court to their weakness. Well the problem with that in my view is that when you do hit to their strength over and over again, there's no guarantee that you'll even get an attackable shot. If their strength, if their forehand is in fact their best shot and they love hitting it. If you continue to go there in hopes of getting a short shot to attack to their other side, to their other side, to their back hand. You might not even get one in the first place if their forehand is in fact their best shot.

Now if both your forehand and your back hand are on par with their strength. If both your forehand and your backhand are just as strong, is their strongest shot their forehand, then go ahead and use this tactic. I actually think it would be fine if you can sustain a long rally with them using both your forehand and backhand side, hitting to their strength, and if you're able to work the point and not worry about them taking over the point and attacking on you, then I think this tactic is perfectly fine.

However, if you have [laughter] a definite weaker side and you're planned tactic is to hit to their strength over and over again, I have a problem with that fundamentally from a tactics standpoint. Because now we're giving them opportunity after opportunity to be able to do to us what we're trying to do to them. If we take every ball and purposefully hit to their strength while it's that many chances that they have to attack to our weakness. So I don't think that's going to pay off in the long run for most of you listening.

Because most of you listening are playing players that have a definite stronger side, and most of you listening also have a definite stronger side. So in my opinion, whenever you get an opportunity to blatantly hit to your opponent's weakness--especially if it's with your strength--you should be doing that, and you should be taking advantage of it.

I think that purposefully going to your opponent's strength in the hopes of getting a short ball so you can then attack to your opponent's weakness is playing with fire. And I think that it's unnecessary risk when you have equal opportunity to go in either direction.

Now you might not always have equal opportunity to go in either direction. Maybe you're having to hit your weakness down the line to go to their weakness. Or something like that, and it just doesn't match up well. Once in awhile you have to go to their strength, and that's perfectly fine. [laughter]

Please don't think that I'm saying that literally every shot should always go to your opponent's weaker side. You should always keep in mind things like the directionals of where the highest percentage play is on the court. It's not always prudent to just hit every single shot to your opponent's weaker side, because tactically, it doesn't always make sense. I'm just trying to make my point that, in general, continuing to hit to their weakness is probably the percentage amount of times going to work out in your favor more so than trying to play their strength on purpose in hopes of being able to set up for their weaker side.

Now the last thing I want to say, Jim. And this goes for all tactical discussions, and all tactical situations, period. Everything is situational. And I've briefly said several times

in my discussion here, "Well it depends on this, and that's assuming that is the case," etc. Your opponent may have an incredible running forehand. I pointed that out I believe briefly. If you hit to their back hand over and over again. I'm sorry, you pointed this out originally [laughter] in your question. If you hit to their weakness over and over and then hit to their strength to try to hit it away from them, maybe that's their favorite shot is hitting on the run to their stronger side. So it may not work out. Or maybe their weakness, their weaker side, is actually pretty good when they know you're going to go there over and over again, and they're just waiting for it and in balance.

I've definitely come across that situation personally, where I definitely figured out early [laughter] "Wow, I don't want to hit to my opponent's forehand. That's definitely their biggest shot." So I started hitting everything to their back hand side, and they get into a rhythm, and get into a groove, because I'm hitting everything over there. They know that it's coming there. They're getting good balance. And they have no problem just hitting a neutral rally ball back. And all of a sudden I'm having to work much harder than I was planning on. Or maybe even they like to hit a passing shot when they know it's coming to their weaker side.

I'm just coming up with random examples here of why what I've talked about might not even work! [laughter] And you have to be prepared for that! You know why? Because there's never anything that always works. Ever. Against everybody. That you won't find a combination of shots for one player that will work against all other players. It's always going to be different.

And that's part of the fun of tennis. It can also be frustrating, because you you go out and play really great one day playing a certain tactic, or a certain combination of shots. Then you go out the next day and think, "Man, this is awesome! I'm going to continue crushing people." You play that same pattern and you get dominated, because it plays right into the strength of your new opponent. So you have to be very aware.

I was talking about this earlier in the show. Talking to Mark about those short shots. You have to be very aware in general of what your opponent is doing. What they like, what they don't like. All of these generalities all of this general information that I've give today where I've said, "In general, I like this," it's always going to be situational, and you have to be willing to change things up when certain plays are not working--because your opponent likes it! [laughter] So you want to do the opposite of whatever your opponent likes. Whatever that happens to be, you have to be willing to go along with that if you want to be as successful as possible.

That's the underlying thing that supersedes everything else that I've talked about today. But Jim, to answer your question directly, in general. [laughter] Again, in general, I definitely prefer the play of going weakness, weakness, weakness and just really make them uncomfortable. Make them hit their weaker shot again and again. I will always like that play better than trying to be sneaky and say, "Alright, I'll go to your strength. Here you go!" And hope that you'll get a short ball, and then hope that you can attack over to their weaker side.

Now don't get me wrong. That can be effective. But just realize that you're playing with fire a bit. You're giving your opponent some opportunities. That's the main point I wanted to make. But remember, all this is situational. So pay attention out there guys. Be very aware and put together winning tactics and winning strategy based on all of your unique opponents.

Jim, thank you very much for your question. Really well thought out question. I really appreciate it. Thank you for being a listener in Las Altos Hills, CA. Good luck continuing to try to improve your game. [music] [music]

Alright. That does it for Episode #144 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Before I wrap things up for today's show, I want to send a "Thank you" out to several really important people. Or at least some of my favorite people now that they've written a review on the iTunes music store. Some of you wrote really nice reviews. I really appreciate the kind words that many of you wrote. Even if you just wrote a sentence or two, I really appreciate the feedback. That helps with the podcast's rating on iTunes, so I appreciate the time that you took to write. No matter how short or long, but to those of you who wrote big paragraphs, I really appreciate it! You guys are awesome.

So I want to give a shout out here. I just copied and pasted over the last 15 people on iTunes who have left reviews. JimVA, HockeyGirly, AndrewLE, Huckleberry7, BruceRodriguez, JorgeSpain, MTouche, Essex 4Duke. Here's my personal favorite: LucyWestermannIsSoCute. That's a little creepy, but that's my daughter. [laughter] I agree. She is cute. Thank you. MatthewChen, DesertTennis, BenW, 808Rich, RogerPatio it looks like, and TennisAndy.

Thank you so much! Those are the last 15 people to leave reviews on iTunes. And those of you who left a review and wrote to me with your address looking for free string, I'm probably going to make all those mailings this week. What is today? The 15th. Nov. 15. So look for your free set string probably in the next week. Unless you are not in the U.S., in which case it's going to be a bit longer than that, but it will still be coming. So again, thank you so much. I appreciate it. This show has continued to get better, and continued to improve because of you the listeners. Honestly, without you listening, and giving me feedback and supporting the show, making donations, doing reviews, telling your friends about it, etc. This show would not continue to get better. So I thank all of you very much. Seriously! Thank you.

That does it for this week. That's enough groveling. [laughter] Let's wrap things up. I'll talk to you guys next week. Next Mon. will be the next show. Until then, take care, and good luck with your tennis!

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