

Essential Tennis Podcast #150

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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, 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.

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Thank you very much for joining me on today's show during this busy holiday season. Speaking of which, I just got back in town a couple of hours ago. [laughter] It's funny. The last time I was at my home here in Maryland, I was just recording the intro for Podcast #149 before I headed out the door. And I'm sitting here right now, it's Mon. and my wife and I and Lucy just got back in town.

So I'm going to be doing another recorded show here, and I'm going to be re-releasing another show that I thought was really good. because to be honest, I've just had no time to put together a completely new episode.

So I apologize, but I know today's episode is going to be great, especially for those of you who have not heard it before! And if you have, it's great review anyway. Mental tennis topics, and getting tougher mentally in your tennis game is such an important thing. Today you're going to be listening to an episode, the first episode I ever did, with Dr. Cohn, who's a mental toughness expert. So I hope you enjoy today's episode My conversation with him.

Two quick things before we get to that. First of all, I want to thank all of you who voted for the Essential Tennis podcast at PodcastAwards.com. Unfortunately, the Essential Tennis podcast didn't win the top award, but in watching the awards ceremony, I learned that over 3,000 shows were nominated for awards at PodcastAwards.com. That's across all of the different categories. Not 3,000 shows for sports, but 3,000 total shows, and they were all put into their correct category and then voted on from there. Only the Top 10 shows in each category were even able to be voted on. For Essential Tennis to make the Top 10, I'm really proud of that, and I thank all of you who voted to get it to that spot.

The category was won by a show that ESPN produces. [laughter] So I'm not disappointed to lose to ESPN, but in the future, I would love to win that award. I know it's possible.

Just in general, I want to thank you for your support. Especially to all of you who voted to try to make that happen. We'll try again next year.

Lastly, before we get to my interview with Dr. Cohen, I asked you guys last week to submit a holiday greeting calling to the Essential Tennis hotline. Record your name, your location, and a holiday greeting. I've got a bunch of those, and I'm going to save those for the end of the show. So thank you who called in to record your greeting. Really cool. I enjoyed hearing from all of you. The various greetings that you extended to me and the Essential Tennis listeners was really cool to hear! So thank you all who participated and did that, and those are all going to be lined up at the end of the show.

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

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My guest with me today on the Essential Tennis podcast is Dr. Patrick Cohen. Dr. Patrick Cohen works with many nationally ranked junior players on their mental game. He is the host of the Tennis Psychology podcast, which you can find on iTunes and also on his website, which is SportsPsychology Tennis.com.

Dr. Cohen, welcome to the program.

Dr. Cohen: Thanks for having me, Ian!

Ian: You bet! I'm always excited to have new guests on the podcast. I like talking back and forth with tennis experts. One of the most common topics that gets talked about here on the Essential Tennis podcast is the mental game. I really like talking about tennis and where the mental game fits in.

I think it's an area that your average level tennis player can really see big strides and improvements to their game by getting good information about how to strengthen themselves mentally. So it's great to have you on the show. I'm looking forward to answering the questions that you have from the listeners of the show.

So thanks for being here. Tell us a little bit about what you do. I know that you worked with nationally ranked juniors. Do you work with any club level or avg. level players as well? Or do you normally just interact with upper level players?

Dr. Cohen: It's usually high level amateur or junior players, nationally ranked junior players for the most part that are going to hire me to work on the mental game. I want to do a little off shoot of what you talked about earlier, Ian. I think the mental game can be often neglected by players until they realize that there's a problem or a challenge.

And that's unfortunate. It's unfortunate in my work that players feel like they need to be in a slump, or they have a real mental game issue. Like they've lost all their confidence, or they can't take their practice game to matches, for example, before they decide on, "Well maybe it's a mental game issue."

I don't think it should be that way. I think players need to educate themselves and learn more and more as their game improves. They need to learn more and more, and educate themselves about the mental game.

To me, the mental game is like physical training. The most physical training you do to improve your fitness, it's similar with the mental game. The more you do mental training, the better you're going to get with your mental game. That's how I want players

to perceive the mental game. It's not about solving problems all the time. It's about just getting better.

Ian: I totally agree with several points that you made. First of all, your avg. level club player probably considers the mental side of the game something that's not terribly important. I think you're right. Most players probably wait until there's a big problem before they start to address it. Which is a shame! Because if you're mentally tough, that can really be a huge advantage out there on the court, since you and your opponent are both out there on your own. You don't have a coach; you don't have a teammate unless it's doubles; and you've got to coach yourself through the mental challenges and struggles.

That's why I love having guys like you on the podcast. As far as building up your strength or your toughness mentally, I've had another mental tennis expert on the show a couple of times who refers to that as "mental muscle." I like that phrase a lot. But you're right. It's like practice in any other part of the game. It's something that listeners of this issue, and any player, can get stronger at.

So thanks very much for being here. Let's go ahead and start getting into the questions here. I posted on the forums at EssentialTennis.com and asked for topic suggestions. The Dr. and I are going to be answering several of these questions. Maybe 3-4. We'll see how many we have time for. Typically, time runs over [laughter] and I don't get to as much as I want to.

But our first one is a question from Brian Mark, who comes to us from Nebraska. He wrote and asked:

"How about letting go of double faults and preparing to hit the next serve? It seems that once I hit one, I start to worry about the next one and create self-fulfilling prophecies. Then nights like tonight I only hit one in a set and wonder why I don't always do that. Seems like tournaments bring out the worst in my serve."

Brian said he had 23 double faults last weekend in a match, which definitely makes it tough to win! [laughter] Thank you for posting that question.

Dr. Cohen, what do you think? What is the best way for players to let go of a let down? Obviously we don't want to double fault, and it's 3 points. How do we let go of the disappointment of giving away something like that?

Dr. Cohen: Well Brian described it as a self-fulfilling prophecy, and not everybody might understand that Ian, so maybe I should start from there.

When a player makes a double fault and they engage in this "Here I go again" thinking, "Here I go again double faulting the match away" [laughter] then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You start to think that, "I'm going to double fault again," or "It's just one of those nights where I'm into that double fault mode."

That's what a self-fulfilling prophecy is. You talk yourself into it, and now you think you're double faulting a lot during the match. And it just... Double faults turn into more double faults. That's what a self-fulfilling prophecy is, OK? They have to be obviously careful with that. I can speak to that.

But I think what's happening in Brian's case is he's making what's called the

"generalization." It's related to the self-fulfilling prophecy.

A generalization is: if I start the match early with double faults, I'm going to continue making double faults. In other words, he generalizes based upon past matches that if he starts with making double faults that it's going to continue for him. That's a really dangerous mindset, that generalization.

So maybe the first step is he's got to be very careful about the "Here we go again" and making those generalizations about the double faults.

With that said, I also think what happens, based upon my experience working with players, is when they double fault, they get it into their head that they don't want to do it again. Right? Meaning now they're protecting the double fault. They'll want to make more double faults. "What am I focused on right now? I'm focused on not double faulting again!" That's one of the worst focuses you can have when you're serving is to get up to the line and think, "I don't want to have another double fault!" [laughter] Now you're only focused on the double fault. That's really a bad mindset to be in.

The goal needs to be obviously to not focus on the negative, and not focus on what you don't want to do in that situation. The goal needs to be to focus on the ingredient that's going to help you hit a good serve.

What do I mean by that? The ingredients of hitting a good serve has to do with having a plan. What type of serve you're going to hit if you've got different options. If you can hit that kicker serve, or hit that flat serve. If you have those different options. What's the target based upon what's working? You're going to go out wide down the line. What's working for you and what is your target? I call that the planning stage.

Then you want to go ahead and visualize or feel a good serve, or experience yourself hitting a good serve. Whatever that means for you. It could be visualizing the trajectory. It could be just feeling solid contact. Whatever works for you! It's very individual for each player.

Then you're going to go through the rest of your routine at the line where you're bouncing the ball, you're trying to create a rhythm, and then you're focusing on the target, for example.

So that's what I mean in a general sense, that's what I mean by the "ingredients of a good serve." You cannot focus on the ingredients of a good serve if you're afraid of double faulting the match away. If you're afraid of missing the service box on your second serve, for example. You have to be very disciplined with your mind and be able to focus on the ingredients that are going to help you hit a serve.

As soon as you get defensive and you're protecting the double fault, you're basically done.

Ian: I really like the process that you laid out. The ingredients that you gave us there, a recipe for success. What I like so much about it Patrick, is that you're giving us so many positive things that should be focused on: the target, the process, feeling or thinking about making good contact, going into that whole planning phase. Every part of it was a positive thought or a positive emotion was attached to it.

As opposed to what Brian is saying, as you said the "Here we go again" type thing,

which is clearly negative. And once that prophecy is fulfilled once, obviously the tendency is to go in that downward spiral and continue to repeat that again and again. Emotionally the person gets more and more negative.

But what I love about what you're talking about is these are all positive thoughts; all positive emotions. Top level athletes are continuously optimistic. There's never a thought in their mind--well there is sometimes, but the vast majority of their thoughts are: "I'm going to make this shot. I'm going to hit my target. I'm going to hit a good shot." The inner dialog is so positive and intense!

So what I'm hearing you say is Brian has got to reverse his inner dialog. It's got to be more positive, more optimistic, and hopefully the results will follow. Is that correct?

Dr. Cohen: Absolutely. There's always two sides to the coin, as you talked about. There's the players that go out there and try to avoid failure. Avoid missing shots. Avoid missing the easy volley or the routine shot. Avoid the double fault. Which is very easy to get sucked into. As opposed to there's the players that strive for success, and are always focused on what they want to do to execute that shot.

And that's where you need to be throughout the match. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about the service. It's any shot that you're hitting. I shouldn't say, "You can never." You could certainly play that way, but it's not going to be a way to play your best tennis if you're focused on what not to do and avoiding errors.

Ian: Yes. That's the classic. Playing not to lose instead of playing to win. The best athletes and competitors in the world are constantly playing to win. They're playing towards their best shots, and that's usually what happens for them. [laughter] As opposed to the opposite.

Good stuff. Anything else on that topic, Patrick, before we move onto our next question?

Dr. Cohen: Certainly you have to have confidence in your ability to hit the serve. If you can in practice minimize those double faults, and if you increase your first serve percentage, that's going to go a long way too, because then you don't have some of the challenges with worrying about having to get that second serve in because you have a better serve percentage.

So for Brian a good goal might be to go out there and focus on a strong first serve percentage rather than minimizing doubles.

Ian: Sure. Alright, good stuff. Now let's go on to our next question, and that is going to be from Beebee, who lives in North Carolina. She wrote and said:

"I've been fascinated with crowd mentality. By this I mean how a person plays when a crowd is watching. The pros usually use this to their advantage playing to the crowd for show while rec players have a tendency to break down of crowds. It may be good to discuss the difference in their mentality towards crowds, and how a player can change their mentality if a crowd emerges at a match."

What do you think, Dr. Cohen?

Dr. Cohen: Yes, it's a very intuitive question here, because there is definitely from a

professional standpoint the home, what I call the "home court advantage," where they'll use that crowd to their advantage to give them intensity, to give them adrenaline to help m focus even better. I think the best players in the world are able to go deeper into their bubble, deeper into their cocoon, when they have people there cheering them on. It seems counter-intuitive to think that way, that you have more people watching you that are for you and the player can go deeper into the zone, but I think that's what the great players are doing.

Now on the other hand, for amateurs, I think their focus is more a concept that I call "social approval." Alright? That's a real broad concept in my work, but basically it says that the player has concerns about what others think. [laughter] So in Bee Bee's case, it's not the crowd mentality. It's about the player's mentality about the crowd.

We can go back about worrying about fear of failure and striving to avoid failure. It can be similar from this perspective. Well, you can look at it two sides of the coin here as well. The player that has this fear of embarrassing him or herself is not going to play well when there's bigger crowds. Because that means there's more at stake for that player. There's more at stake, because there's more chance for embarrassment if the player doesn't play well.

On the other end of the coin, some players want badly to look good. They want respect. It all falls under the category of social approval. They want to be liked. They want others to see them as good players. So now that player, although focusing on something that's more positive, feels the pressure or feels the need to-- I don't want to say "show off." That's pretty strong. But to show off that person's talents.. And however they do that. It could be winning, or it could just be hitting great shots.

But in either case, if you're focus is on what the crowd may be thinking or what persons in the crowd may be thinking about your game, then you're not completely focused on your tennis. You're either worried about embarrassing yourself, or you're concerned that you're showing off your talents in a positive light. In either case it's not going to help you focus on the match, because it becomes pressure and it becomes expectation.

So I think the root here Ian, for me is players that focus too much on what others think about their game, we call "social approval" in my work.

Ian: OK. That's really interesting. [laughter] We're talking about things now; the social approval that you're talking about, we're getting into some pretty deep psychological responses and desires and wants. It's interesting to me how those things actually get connected so deeply to a sport, like tennis.

I've got a follow-up question for you. I'm curious what your response would be to this.

So we're talking about the amateur player, and how they become concerned with what the other spectators think of them. "Are they going to think I'm a good player or a bad player wanting to show off?" like you said. Or maybe being nervous. How is it then that professional players oftentimes can feed off that? Feed off of the crowd and actually raise their level. What's the mental or emotional difference between a player who can actually take a crowd setting and elevate their game and somebody who typically chokes in a situation like that?

Dr. Cohen: They don't have that need or that concern, I think, of that social approval. I think they've learned that, "Hey, you know what? The only thing that matters is me and

my opponent in the court." So part of their mentality isn't focused on what the crowd is thinking.

Like for example, I worked with a junior player that said 40% of her focus is on what her parents and other parents are thinking about her game! [laughter] That's not going to cut it.

At the professional level, they don't have this huge concern or this need and worry about what people are thinking. They're only concerned with what's going on on the court.

Now when they have that home court advantage, or when there's a lot of people watching, like I said earlier Ian, I think it drives them further into the zone. It drives them further into what they need to focus on to perform their best. Because they know in order for them to perform their best, they need to focus on a specific set of performance cues. The performance cues that are going to help them execute good shots.

So to me when they have a home court advantage or when there's a lot of people watching them center court at Wimbledon, for example, they're able to narrow their focus even more on what's important to execute good shots. That's really I think what separates your good amateurs from your top level professionals.

Ian: OK. Great stuff! Thanks for answering that question. Let's move on to our third one. I'd like to try to get to two more, but we may run out of time. Our next question comes from Sally in Washington state. She wrote and said:

"A subject I'd love to hear discussed is the inner drive to win. The importance of someone knowing someone believes in you; the power of your inner will, and confidence in having that attitude in check before you step out onto the court."

Can you talk a little bit about that? The importance of believing in yourself and having confidence in yourself that you can perform well going onto the competitive court.

Dr. Cohen: It's critical. It's probably the #1 thing that your listeners have to harness is that inner confidence; that inner belief.

The biggest mistake that I see players make is they wait until they get into the match to decide how confident they're going to be. We call that "leaving confidence up to chance." In other words, if they have a poor warm up prior to the match, then they'll struggle with confidence early in the match. Or if they drop a couple of games early in the match, then they'll struggle with confidence, because they're waiting for their game to arrive before they can feel confident. That's the best mistake I think.

From my perspective, athletes in general need to be more pro-active with their confidence. Need to take responsibility instead of be reactive. Being reactive means, "Aw, my shots didn't feel great in warm up, so I guess I'm not going to play great today." That's reactive. I prefer my students to be pro-active in that they try to harness and take confidence into the first point of the first set. The first game. That's critical, I think, to give yourself a better chance of playing better early on.

Then momentum-- you can get momentum from that, which is another concept in and of itself--it's related to confidence. If I can get momentum, then I've got a lot of confidence going on. Because as you know, we could talk about that in another show. That's a huge

topic I think. From a mental perspective is how to harness the momentum, or how to keep the momentum, or how to get the momentum if you don't have it.

But being proactive with your confidence means that you're going to remember that confidence isn't about the last shot you hit, or the 10 min. warm up you had before the match. Confidence is a long term project. If you've been playing and practicing for 6 years, that's how long you've been working on your confidence. You always have to remember that confidence needs to be something that's long term and enduring, and not be on the confidence roller coaster depending upon your perception of the last shot or the last game of the match. That's not true confidence.

If you're losing confidence early in the match very quickly, then there's a good indication that you don't have the true confidence that you need.

Ian: Good stuff. Tell me if I'm wrong here, but I would have to assume then that this is very closely tied to the first question we talked about where Brian was having problems double faulting, and having pessimistic thoughts or negative attitude in a self-fulfilling type of thing. I would have to assume then Dr. Cohen, that building that long term confidence is probably closely tied in with having positive thoughts, and picking your target and having the process or the ingredients you were talking about. How closely tied in are those two concepts?

Dr. Cohen: I would say they're very closely tied in, because when Brian gets in the match, in the back of his mind he's going, "Who's going to show up today?" [laughter] "Server #1 or Server #2?" And that's the start of the doubting process. You're opening up the door for the doubt at that point.

Now he's not sure. Confidence-wise, he's not sure who's going to show up for the match. Server #1 or Server #2. That makes it difficult for him to have full confidence in the match. So I do believe being more proactive with his confidence--not assuming that he's going to serve great, but having confidence in a serve prior to the match is going to go a long way.

Ian: Nice. Thanks for tying those two things together. I want to get to one more question real quickly before we wrap things up. I want to get to this, because it's a question that's near and dear to my own heart. [laughter] When it comes to competition in general. Not even just in tennis! Sally and Brian both touched on this briefly. Brian said:

"A few missed shots, and my dad is down on himself badly. Especially missed overheads. Any suggestions for correcting that?" missed shots especially bothersome to him."

Sally said: "I'm still fascinated with the pressure that comes along in real match situations. Does anyone ever feel pressure to be perfect?"

You talked just for a couple minutes Dr. Cohen, about maybe those of us who are perfectionists by nature, how can we deal with missing shots or missing easy shots? How can we keep from getting down on ourselves and angry, and falling into a downward emotional spiral?

Dr. Cohen: Well, if we had about 2 hrs. I could cover this topic! [laughter] Because this is a huge one in my work. I actually created a program called the Parent's Top Dilemma, which was about perfectionism in youth sports and kids in sports, because it's so

rampant! It's even worse when you look at sports like when you go to skating or gymnastics or dance. Where people are judged on their performance, it gets even worse in those type of sports. But it is very relevant in tennis as well.

The quick answer to that is... There's so much involved with perfectionism. The quick answer is--well there's two answers. One is the expectations that perfectionists have. Perfectionists go in the match thinking they can't miss shots, or they can't miss hit shots. That they can't double fault so they have very strict expectations about how they should perform. They pretty much look back on their peak performance or their best performance in practice, and they think they should perform that way every single time. So when they don't perform those expectations, then they lost it. They lose confidence, and obviously they lose emotional control and get angry and frustrated.

So the quick answer is: You have to manage your expectations going in.

The other quick answer is: You have to be much more accepting of yourself in general when you do make mistakes. Which ties in to what I said about expectations. Being accepting means, "I'm not perfect. I'm human. I'm going to make mistakes! It's not going to help me to dwell on those mistakes or beat myself up about those mistakes. But it will help me to learn and to get better as a player and know that mistakes will help me grow." So it's very critical for them to let go of the mistake, be more accepting, and take more of a learning approach and a growth approach from their mistakes so they can get better rather than just emotionally frustrated with what they're doing.

Ian: Yes. [laughter] Speaking from experience, it can be very difficult to actually accept that something positive can come from missing. Or losing. Or something that typically has a negative connotation to it in general. And even more so with somebody who has a perfectionist nature.

I've actually written a blog about that, about accepting your losses or your misses and learning from it. That can be really hard to do! It's difficult for people like myself to be positive [laughter] when negative things happen on the court.

But you know what? I guess me saying that it's negative to miss or negative to lose, I bet that's probably just a product of my nature right there to begin with, isn't it? Just the very fact that I'm saying it's a bad thing to miss. That's just part of the game, isn't it?

Dr. Cohen: It is. You have to look at it from a learning perspective. As a matter of fact, I devoted two sessions in my audio program to that one session on letting go of errors, and another session on how to deal with the perfectionism as well. As you know, Ian, I produced a program just for tennis players called Tennis Confidence: Mental Toughness for Tournament Players. Those two things are so important about managing the perfectionism and learning how to stay composed after errors. If you don't have those elements, it's very difficult to play your best.

Ian: I agree! [laughter] I know how that goes.

Let's wrap things up. Dr. Cohen, I really appreciate you coming on the podcast. Thank you very much for your time and for the effort that you put into answering the questions today. Everybody listening, I encourage you to check out Dr. Cohen's podcast. Again, it's the Tennis Psychology podcast. Go subscribe to it on iTunes. Check out his website at SportsPsychologyTennis.com.

Patrick, thank you for joining me. I appreciate your time. And I look forward to hearing more of your shows.

Dr. Cohen: Great. Thanks for having me on, Ian!

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Ian: Alright. That does it for Episode #150 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Let's go ahead and get to those holiday greetings. Just a couple minutes of those. Several you called in and participated by saying "Hi," and giving a general holiday greeting of your choice. It was great to hear from all of you.

Thank you very much for your participation if you called in. It's definitely something that I'd like to do again in the future. I think it's cool to interact with you guys and get feedback just in general, whether it be the questions or general suggestions for the show, or little things like this. It's really cool to hear from the listeners of the show. I definitely look forward to doing more things like this in the future!

Without further ado, I'm going to go ahead and get to that. That will close off the show. I want to say a really warm and Happy New Year to all of you listening. Thank you for being a listener of this show. I look forward to producing another full year of the Essential Tennis podcast. I truly hope that it helps all of you continue to improve your tennis game. That's always been my goal for the show, and will continue to be. So thank you all for your support as I continue to do it.

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Caller #1: Hi Essential Tennis podcast listeners! This is Ben from New York. I would like to wish everyone a Happy, Healthy, Safe Holiday. For those of you I would like to say: [inaudible] OK! See you later! Bye.

Caller #2: Shalom! This is Gary [inaudible] from Havertown, Pennsylvania, USA. Season's Greetings, Happy Holidays, and all the best in the New Year!

Caller #3: Hi, Ian. This is Carlotta from New Jersey. I wanted to extend to you and all of your listeners a Happy Holiday. Congratulations on the new edition to your family!

Caller #4: Hi, Ian. This is David Goldman, originally from Southern California, but calling you from Jerusalem, Israel. I'm a huge fan of your show, and want your show to succeed and continue. I really appreciate you. I want to wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! All the best. Bye.

Caller #5: Hi! This is Jay from western Massachusetts. Holiday Greetings to everyone.

Caller #6: Hi. This is Anthony from Atlanta, Georgia. I just wanted to wish the Essential Tennis family a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Play well and have fun!

Caller #7: Hi, this is Andrew wishing you Holiday Greetings from San Francisco, and hopefully 2011 will be essential on and off the court. Enjoy! Bye.

Caller #8: This is Andrew Webster from Salem, Oregon. Peace on Earth, and goodwill to all.

Caller #9: Hi, this is John in real life from Santa Cruz, California. I just wanted to wish Ian, Royce, and everyone in [inaudible] a Merry everything! Thank you all for making it fun for me not just to learn the game of tennis, but to truly enjoy it. Happy Holidays!

Caller #10: Hi, this is ZZ Carls wishing everybody and their family Happy Holidays! I hope you've had a great tennis year and you're looking forward to a great tennis year in 2011, whether it be your game or the professional game. Have a good one!

Caller #11: Hey! This is John M. calling from Fort Worth, TX. I want to wish everyone Happy Holidays. I'd like to congratulate Ian on his 150th podcast.

Caller #12: Hi, this is [inaudible] from the great state of Utah wishing you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

[music] [music] [music]

Ian: Take care, and good luck with your tennis. Happy New Year's to you and yours!

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