

# Essential Tennis Podcast #151

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: 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. And happy new year to all of you listening. It's great to have you as a listener.

Two quick things before we get to today's questions that I'm going to be answering for listeners. And they both have to do with feedback. I'd love to hear from you, if you are listening to this show. It would be great to get some feedback from you.

And you can do that two ways this week-- number one, I'd love for you to leave a comment about today's show. And in the new section of [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) for the podcast, you can leave comments for each individual show.

I'd love for you guys to start leaving more comments to give me feedback so I can improve the show. Maybe you can ask me a follow up question about something that I talked about today. Or disagree with me about something that I said in response to a question today.

Whatever your feedback is, I'd love to hear from you. And you can leave feedback by going to [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) podcast.

And this week, I'd love to give away some free strings. The first 10 people that leave a comment about today's show, episode #151, I'll send a pack of free string. No matter where you are in the world, it doesn't matter. I'd love to hear from you no matter what your feedback is. And I'll send you a free pack of string if you comment on episode 151 which is today's episode.

Again, [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) podcast. The second way you can give me some feedback this week, and I'd really appreciate this, if you guys wouldn't mind sending me an email and tell me what you'd like to see changed or improved in 2011 on [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) in general.

This could be for the podcast, the forums, the video section or whatever. Maybe you'd like to see a completely new section or different type of content or more content on a certain subject. Whatever it is, I would love to hear from you if you are listening to my voice right now.

So tell me what you'd like to see more of. I'm always trying to make [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) a better place for all of you who are trying to improve your tennis game. And the best way I can do that for you is if you tell me what you like.

So shoot me an email. You can always do that at [ian@essentialtennis.com](mailto:ian@essentialtennis.com).

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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Let's go ahead and get to our first question. Episode 151 of the essential tennis podcast, and this question comes to us from James in the UK. James thank you very much for writing. He wrote to me and said, "I have one main problem-- my mentality. I've listened to everyone of your podcasts but they don't seem to help. Basically, my problem is that I can be behind 5-2 and then come back and win the set easily. But if I'm up 5-0 40 love in the final set, I can't hit a winning shot because I'm so tight. I don't ease off but I can't pull the trigger on my winning shot."

Well James, that's a really frustrating problem to have. And everybody listening who has competed at all in tennis, I think definitely empathizes with you. We know where you are coming from and it's not a simple issue to deal with. Mental tennis in general is complicated. It doesn't seem like it should be such a big problem.

Tennis seems from the outside like it should be a relatively simple game. A relatively simple sport. You hit the ball in the court, you try to hit in into play one more time than your opponent, and if you do, you win. But people that realize that when first getting into it, how mentally difficult it can be to keep focused. To keep your concentration. To stay confident. To be aware of what's going on on the court and make good decisions tactically. It's not easy.

First of all, I'm sorry that none of the... Since you say that you've listened to all of the shows, I assume that you've listened to the many many mental toughness episodes that I've done already. They are all categorized in the archives at [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com). If you are listening and you haven't heard them yet, go to [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) podcast and on the right, there is a section that says mental toughness. And there has got to be at least 15 or 20 episodes where I talk about different parts of mental toughness.

A lot of times with expert guests and you can download all of those for free. I definitely recommend that you guys do that. But I'm sorry that those haven't helped you and today I'm going to give you my take, kind of from my own thoughts here James. I've had a lot of guests on the show talking about this sort of thing and a lot of what I'm going to talk about is going to be repetition, but hopefully my take on it or the way that I'm going to explain it is going to make sense to you and I'll give you some ideas on how to improve this.

In my opinion, there is two main reasons why this occurs in tennis players. And I've experienced this and as I talked about a second ago, if you've competed in any capacity in tennis, you have experienced this in some way or another. Maybe not as debilitating as what James is describing, but we all know what it's like to get a lead and then all of a sudden get tentative or nervous. I think there is two main reasons why this occurs.

Number one, whether it's conscious or unconscious, just letting off the gas peddle in

general when you assume that the win is in the bag. So if you are literally at the point that James was talking about, up 5-0 in a set and 40 love in the 3rd set, it can be very easy and natural and human nature to assume that I'm going to win now. So you let your guard down and you stop trying so hard. And this is a huge mental mistake.

Not only is it just false in general that you should ever be able to relax and not give it 100% effort both mentally and physically. But you have to realize that when you are up by a huge margin, that's the point in the match where your opponent will most likely be trying the hardest.

If they have a huge lead, I guarantee you, they aren't going to be trying their hardest then. Unless maybe they've listened to this episode of maybe they've read mental tennis books and they understand how big of a mistake it is.

A lot of the times if it's a really close match, both players would really be fighting it out. But really, for most people, especially those people who are really competitive, when they are down by a wide margin, is when they are fighting the most. It's when they are trying whatever they can to hopefully try to turn this match around and win, whatever the cost.

Of course if their attitude isn't great, maybe they are giving up and they are pouting and they aren't having a good day and they are having a pity party over on the other side of the court. I'm not saying it's impossible for them to play poorly when they are down by a lot, but just realize that the best competitors try the hardest when they are down by a wide margin.

So letting off the gas peddle and trying to coast to a victory after you've achieved a lead, is a huge mistake. And one of the guests that I've had on the show several times, David Grumping, who is a mental toughness expert... He has given me my favorite quote about this specifically, and that is letting off the gas... And I'm paraphrasing here, and I don't know if this is the exact quote, but he said once in a previous episode that you are either building a lead or you are losing it. You should never be trying to just maintain a lead. What he is talking about here is not even relaxing and not trying hard. He is talking about just maintaining a lead.

So you get up to break in that set, never try to "Oh, I just have to hold my serve." So you don't worry anymore about breaking serve. You don't even really try that hard to win each and every game because you've realized, "Great, if I just hold serve, I'll win the match." And so you relax mentally, just that little bit, and that gives your opponent the opportunity to put their foot in the door and come back in the match.

So this is the first main cause mentally of what James is talking about. I don't think this is his problem though. The second main cause, and I think this is where you are stumbling, is just general nervousness and anxiety. I'm pretty sure this is what you are going through.

Basically, the way this works, is you get up by a wide margin like what you are describing and then you have thoughts like, "Wow, this is great. I have this big lead but people who have issues with nervousness don't think in the positive. They think what if I lose now? How terrible would that be? I'm up by this wide margin. What if I lose?"

And a lot of times there is social pressures that players who have this problem attach to this as well. Maybe they are playing against somebody that they should lose too.

Somebody who is better than them and they are up by a bunch. They started thinking, "Wow, I'm not supposed to beat this player. What if I win? That would be incredible!" Or, "What if I'm up by this much against this great player, and then I lose and I blow it. What are my friends going to think about me? What are my teammates going to think of me? What is my mom who is watching me, what is she going to think of me?"

Maybe you are playing somebody who is much worse than you-- they are a level below you and you have that big lead. And then you start to think to yourself, "Obviously I'm supposed to win but what if they come back and beat me? That would be terrible. I'm supposed to win this and I'm up by a bunch. What if I blow this?"

A lot of times recreational players or even higher level players who aren't trained to be mentally tough have these thoughts of failure. It's this fear of failure and this fear of socially letting other people, their peers, down. Or their friends, family or their teammates.

And this just chokes them off. And it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. Maybe they get nervous for that first game when they had these initial thoughts of what if. And they get tight and they lose. Maybe they get broken that game and then there becomes even more nervousness because you start thinking wow, this might actually happen. And it snowballs and it gets worse and worse and worse.

James, I have a feeling that you are identifying with what I'm talking about and describing here. I'd be surprised if this isn't exactly what's going on in your own head.

So of course, the question is, how do we fix this? And I have the anecdote, I believe. This is what I feel is going to help you the most James. If you are listening right now and you understand exactly what I'm talking about and you are thinking to yourself, that this is exactly your issue, what you need to develop is a tenacious competitive spirit.

You need to have an attitude that no matter what, you are going to do your best. You are going to fight the hardest you possibly can, and you are going to hit the best possible shot from shot to shot. There is just no question in your mind that you are going to perform on each and every individual point. And you are going to do that, you are going to hold that intensity and that focus and that concentration throughout the entire match.

One thing I want to say about this, is there a fine line between what I'm describing and perfectionism. James, I'm guessing you are at one end of the spectrum right now. You don't have a lot of confidence. You are gaining a lead and getting really nervous and anxious and worried that you are going to lose and then it ends up happening. On the opposite end of the scale is perfectionism. I used to be on that end of the scale, where I always expected perfect out of myself. And saying that out loud, of course it sounds ridiculous, but a lot of players who pursue a sport passionately and they have high expectations of themselves, really develops some perfectionistic tendencies mentally. And things become just miserable.

So don't swing back the other way and expect yourself to always be perfect. Just by having this confidence doesn't mean that you'll always win or that you'll always make the shot. And that's what I struggled with personally in college was, the desire to win was so strong and I wanted to do my best. And I knew what I was capable of and when I didn't achieve to that level, then I felt like I was a failure. And you have to realize that no matter how well you play, you could always lose. No matter how well you hit the shot, sometimes you can miss it.

So mentally, you have to develop the confidence that it's always possible for you to perform at your best, but not expect that it will always happen. And that's a difficult balance to strike personally.

I've been trying to ratchet down my own expectations over the last couple of years and I can say with confidence that I'm enjoying competing much more now than I was in college because I'm learning how to deal with those expectations and manage them more realistically.

But James, you need to come out of the opposite end of the spectrum and find a healthy balance in between confidence, knowing you are going to do well, developing a tenacious competitive spirit. And you need to balance that with maybe expecting too much from yourself, but I'm guessing that's not your problem right now.

So, how do you develop this? You are saying that's great and I understand. I need that competitive spirit but how do I get that?

And the way that you do it is through repeated exposure to high pressure, competitive environments and situations. And this is not just tennis, but you can find ways to compete and do it with intensity all the time. And in writing my outline here for today's show last night, I thought it might be fun to list just off the top of my head, all of the different competitive things that I've been a part of.

And this list, just off the top of my head. These are the things that just came to mind right away-- the different sports, or athletic activities that I've been a part of just since I became an adult. Up until now, in all of these different activities, I have competed intensely. Meaning that my opponent in these activities wanted to beat me really bad. I wanted to beat him really bad and we competed strongly back and forth. And neither of us gave an inch the entire time during this competition or this activity or this sport.

By doing things like this, you can develop this intensity and focus and this desire to win and this competitive spirit.

Alright, so here is just a quick list-- ping pong, billiards, video games, ultimate Frisbee, Frisbee golf, basketball, football, golf, paintball, paddle tennis, pickleball and of course tennis. None of those were made up games.

By the way, I can make up another list of just totally made up games that my teammates would just totally make up on a road trip or maybe sitting in our dorm room looking for something to do to kill an hour or whatever.

I could give you guys a list of a dozen totally made up activities or games that me and my friends have done just because we love to compete. And you guys might've heard the phrase that iron sharpens iron... If you can get yourself around somebody who is really competitive and just seems to always be able to pull matches out. They always just seem to win, even when the odds are against them.

Find somebody like that and go play something against them. It doesn't even have to be tennis.

Even a board game, it doesn't even have to be a game of skill. Just watch them and see how they compete. See what their attitude is like.

Now you don't want to find somebody who has this to an extreme, whether obnoxious or they treat other people poorly. And maybe they'll even take their competitiveness to an extreme and maybe even cheat and do whatever it takes to win outside of the rules. That's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about competitive spirit, but somebody who is still a good sport. And there is a fine line there as well. I've competed against many people who are excellent competitors but they are just not nice people.

And I'm not saying that you guys should develop that kind of attitude. I want you all to be good sports-people but develop this competitive nature as well.

Let's see what else do I have here.. So doing these types of activities over and over again, hardens you mentally. It gives you focus. It gives you determination and confidence. And a lot of my clients, people that I teach, have never really competed in anything seriously before picking up tennis. And it takes a while for them to develop this often. And that's the last thing that I want to say to you James, is that, when I'm describing this competitive nature... This competitive spirit is a skill. This is not something that you are just born with and you either have it or you don't. It's something that can be developed and also something that can be lost. And I can say that with confidence.

By nature, I'm a quiet person believe it or not. I'm introverted. I kind of like to keep to myself naturally and my competitive spirit is something that I've developed since childhood up until when I quit playing competitively after college. I've played a few tournaments since then, but not much.

And I can tell you guys, that my focus and my concentration and my competitiveness has dropped since college. I've had moments of mental weakness during the periods of time that I have competed at random things since college. I noticed a difference. I'm not as confident and as mentally tough as I used to be because I don't practice what I'm describing as frequently anymore because I have to work. And I compete with clients here and there, but it's not the same thing because most of these people have not developed this competitiveness over their entire lives, so just like for me, I play down to their level technically. I play down to their level mentally as well.

It wouldn't be fun for either of us. It wouldn't be a very good learning experience for them if I just played all out and just crushed them every single time. I keep it close on purpose, not that I'm being mean about it or that I do it to taunt them, but because it's the best possible practice for them.

I play just one step in front of them so they see what they have to do to get better. And I've lost some of my mental toughness over the years and I just say this to point out that it's a learned skill. I gained a lot of focus and concentration and intensity over the years. I've lost a little bit of it now and James you can do the same thing. The gain part-- you can gain this focus and this concentration.

It's just like mastering a good forehand ground stroke swing. Or a good serve technique. Just like the technical part of your game, you can learn and develop the mental part of your game as well. It's a skill through repetition, you can get better at it and achieve excellence.

So James, that's the end of my outline. Hopefully what I'm talking about makes sense. Again, I'll go over it briefly. Two common reasons I believe for what you are describing-- letting off the gas peddle. And nervousness or anxiety from fear of failure or fear of letting your friends down-- social pressures.

The anecdote for this is developing a tenacious competitive spirit and you can develop this through repetition and competitive environments.

Lastly, this is a skill. It's something that can be developed and learned. It's something that can be lost as well if you don't keep up with it.

Hopefully all of this makes sense. And I love this topic, and all mental toughness topics because, it's a way that you guys can really improve your tennis games without even working on technique. It's something that a lot of players don't work on but it is a way that you can improve your game and have a leg up on the competition.

And it's something that I've struggled with personally in the past. So I like trying to help people work their way through it.

So James, if you have anything further on this or if anything doesn't make sense or if you have any questions, you can always feel free to let me know. Send me your follow up questions-- [ian@essentialtennis.com](mailto:ian@essentialtennis.com)

Thanks very much for writing. Thank you for being a listener and good luck with this. I hope that it improves for you and before long, you are playing the best tennis that you ever had.

Alright, before we get to our last question on today's show, I want to remind you all about the official sponsor of the essential tennis podcast. And that is Tennis Express-- the online retailer where you guys can find anything that you want related to tennis. Rackets, bags, strings, ball machines, clothing or whatever you need. They definitely have got it there and at good prices. They have free shipping on orders of \$75 and over as well which is a great deal.

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So thank you very much for your support. Those of you who have made orders through that link and I thank Tennis Express for their support as well.

OK, let's go ahead and get to our last topic. And this comes to us from Kyle W. in North Carolina. He is a 4.0 player and he wrote to me and said, "Do you have any tips on recovering to a ready position after you land into the court from serving? My serve is pushing me into the court and I struggle to get back on balance and move back behind the baseline for a well struck return.

Well Kyle, it's great that you are getting into the court on your serve in general so that

tells me that you are using your legs well and you are pushing yourself up into the ball and forward into the court really well.

So it's excellent that you are having this problem. Well I guess it's not excellent that you are having this problem, but it's excellent that you are having to deal with it because you are probably doing a great job with your serve, transferring your weight into the court so that is great.

I'm going to try to relay as best as I can to you via audio the technique that you should be using and the technique that I teach to my students to gather their balance after their serve. And this is what you'll see basically every professional player doing is exactly the sequence of steps that I'm going to talk about.

First of all, you should be pushing up towards the ball on your serve with both legs aggressively. Again, which I assume that you are doing already since you are finishing into the court. What a lot of people mess up is which foot to land on first. And you should be initially landing on your front foot.

So if you are right handed, you should be finishing on your... touching down first into the court on your left foot. And I'm going to go ahead and continue describing this process for you righties out there. I'm sorry I'm left handed myself, but those of you that are left handed are used to switching everything over. So I'm sure this won't be a problem.

So if you are right handed, you will be landing on your front foot. The front foot as well if you are left handed. If you are right handed, that's your left foot. So push up, initially land on your left foot in a balanced way. You should be leaning into the court and touching down on the ball of your left foot. Then you'll make another step forwards, gathering your balance completely onto your right foot.

So you'll push up, leave the court, touch down on your left foot. Your body should be continuing to lean forwards and rotate as you finish your follow through. And so you'll naturally want to catch yourself after landing down initially on your left foot.

So you'll take a step out in front of your left foot with your right foot to gather yourself, to catch yourself. And then simply use your right foot to push back towards the baseline again. And if necessary, take another step as well.

So I recommend to land initially on your left foot. Take a step forward and catch yourself with your right foot because your balance should still be leaning forwards as you touch down with your left foot. So catch yourself with your right foot, push off with your right foot, and stride back past your left again, back towards the baseline. If you want to, you can take one more step with your left foot. So this would be a total of taking two steps back if you want to take that second step as well to get yourself back to the baseline once again where you should be to prepare for the return of serve.

Now Kyle, you mentioned trying to get back behind the baseline to prepare for a well struck return-- that's good. But keep in mind, you shouldn't be moving well past behind the baseline. In fact, if you watch professional players, usually they make their split step somewhere still in front of the baseline. Or on top of the baseline really is the furthest back that you'll see them make their split step most of the time.

That's mostly because they are hitting a really aggressive serve usually and they are



doing their best to throw their opponent off balance. So they want to be prepared to attack as well. Now of course a well struck return is hit, you don't want to be in no mans land, so I do recommend that you take at least one step back after gathering your balance after your serve. But you should not have to take three or four steps back after finishing your serve.

In fact, I don't recommend that unless your serve is really weak and your opponent is just pounding the heck of it deep into the court over and over again, then of course make an adjustment. But I'm guessing since you are really pushing into the court well, that's probably not an issue that you have very often. But just keep that in mind.

So really, the most I recommend you take is two steps after you gather your balance. Left foot first, then right foot. Push back, take an additional step if necessary and you should have enough time to do that, and then make your split step as your opponent makes contact with their return of serve.

So Kyle, I hope that makes sense. And again, you lefties out there, just reverse the right and left that I was talking about during that description.

But Kyle, hopefully that is helpful and the rest of you listening, hopefully that was helpful as well. If you have anything further, please feel free to let me know.

Good luck.

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That does it for episode 151 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for joining me on today's show. Happy new year to you and your family. And I look forward over to producing another great year of podcasts here at [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com). Remember to please send me feedback on those two different ways this week if you have the time. First 10 people to leave a comment at [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) podcast for this show-- #151, will receive a free set of string and if you are listening to this and it's up on the website already, and if 10 people haven't commented already, definitely do that quickly. Even if 10 people have, I'd still love to hear from you and I always appreciate feedback.

And also, send me your ideas, thoughts, feedback, concerns for 2011 about the essential tennis podcast and website in general.

Tell me what you'd like to see changed, improved, added. I'd love to hear from you. You can send me that at [ian@essentialtennis.com](mailto:ian@essentialtennis.com).

Alright, with that, I'm going to wrap things up. Thank you very much for joining me. Take care and good luck with your tennis. [music]