

# Essential Tennis Podcast #153

[music] 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. Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by [tennisexpress.com](http://tennisexpress.com). Please check them out by going to [essentialtennis.com/express](http://essentialtennis.com/express).

Thank you very much for joining me on today's show. I hope that it's going to be helpful to you, and it's gonna give you some good information that you can take and implement into your game. Make sure to stick around for the end of today's show, where I'm gonna read a couple of comments that were left about last week's show. And remember that if you'd like to leave me some feedback about each individual episode of the podcast, simply go to [essentialtennis.com/podcast](http://essentialtennis.com/podcast) and you can leave your comments or follow-up questions there.

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

Alright. Let's go ahead and get started with our first question on today's show. And it comes to us from [inaudible] in Australia who's a 3.5 player. And [inaudible], I hope I'm pronouncing your name correctly. I apologize in advance if I'm not. He wrote to me and said: Hi, Ian. Thanks a lot for providing this podcast. I think it's great and good fun. Me and my friends have solid ground strokes, both forehand and backhand, and once in a while we take a tripod to film ourselves. What all of us seem to struggle with is stepping into the ball. Especially on the forehand side, where we can make up for it with more arm/shoulder movement/ racket acceleration.

I catch myself especially on the forehand side moving more sideways, and almost backwards when hitting, rather than moving towards the ball and through it. On my backhand side, one hander, I can not get away with this, so I have to step into the ball and get my body weight behind it, otherwise the ball will not have enough juice behind it. All of us seem to have... All of us seem to move along the baseline, but not enough towards the ball.

Okay. [inaudible], I'm gonna stop right there and just address that quickly. He actually has 3 different questions having to do with ground strokes and hitting them effectively, but I'm gonna stop right there and... I wish I would've read ahead in my questions a little bit more before I recorded last week's show, because that's what most of the show was about last week, and episode number 152 of the Essential Tennis Podcast was about stepping in.

So [inaudible], make sure that you listen to that show--number 152. And basically, what I had discussed in that show, was that stepping in, or transferring into your forehand, isn't really necessary. In fact, a large percentage of the time, it's just not even possible because of the type of shot and position that your opponent is putting you in, based on the type of shot that they're hitting to you.

Now, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to step in, and whenever it's possible, it's definitely a positive thing--it's a beneficial thing to transfer and step into a forehand ground stroke, or any ground stroke. Just realize that it doesn't mean... Just realize that when you don't do it, it doesn't mean that you did anything wrong at all. In fact, very often when you don't step in, it's a good thing, believe it or not. And we're going to talk more about that-- moving forwards with [inaudible] 's other questions. So, I just wanted to get that out of the way. Listen to 152. But just understand that just cause you're not stepping in, doesn't mean you did anything wrong. In fact, it's very possible it means you were doing good things with your feet. Okay? So, a big misconception there. And I just wanted to address that quickly.

So, now getting on to his questions here. Number one: How can we break this pattern and get ourselves ready to move forward while hitting a forehand. What is a good drill? Drop feeding a short ball, then running in to hit it, comes to mind, but do you have a better one.

Okay, so, what I'm gonna do is give you a drill that is excellent for working on moving your feet in general--in all different directions. And you must realize, [inaudible] and everybody else listening, that you should only be moving forward and transferring into a shot when it's appropriate to do so. It's not always appropriate. And in order to kind of flesh that out, I want to mention that you need to understand that there's 3 different phases of play in tennis: defensive, neutral, and offensive. And you can not always be on the offense, stepping in and transferring into a shot is, just by nature, by definition, an offensive play--to step in and hit the ball. And you can't always be on the offense. In fact, you're usually not on offense. Now, of course, it depends on who you're playing. If you're playing somebody who's evenly matched to you, then you will most of the time not be on offense. You'll either be in a neutral rally back and forth, or maybe even in a defensive position, if they're hitting a good, solid, aggressive shot to you.

So, what you should do, rather than watching yourself on the video and saying, "Wow, I almost never step in, I'm moving sideways to the baseline", and then only focus on that, I wanna make sure, [inaudible] , that you practice all 3 phases of play. And an excellent drill to do that, is what's called the Spanish drill. And I've used this throughout my entire teaching career. I don't remember for sure where I first learned it, I'm sure it was while I was taking lessons myself, back when I was a junior player. I know that my coach used to use it. But it's an excellent drill.

Basically... and I'm going to include a link to a video. I went and searched it on google and found actually a really nice video describing or showing it, demonstrating it. Basically what it is, is you have a feeder, and you have a hitter. So you have someone who's facilitating the drill, and somebody who's actually completing it. And the feeder stands in front of the person. Normally when I do it, I'm only about probably 6 or 8 feet in front of the baseline, inside no man's land, I've got my basket of balls there. And I have my student start off right in the middle of the baseline. And usually the way that I do it, is I begin tossing to one side or the other. And usually I'll tell them.

So, I'll start with their forehand side, and I'll say, "Okay, you're gonna make 10 short forehands." So, I take one ball at a time out of the basket, I toss it out to my side to their forehand side, so that it lands short--probably 6 or 8 feet inside the baseline. And so my student will have to move off the baseline, move forwards, position themselves correctly with the ball, make a nice aggressive swing, and then immediately recover back to the middle of the baseline. They'll do that 10 times.

Then, I move them parallel, lateral, across the baseline. So I toss out to their forehand side, in a place where they have to move straight across the baseline to take the ball at waist height, make their swing, and then recover back to the baseline. They'll do that 10 times.

Then, I toss it deep. I'll toss it back behind them into their forehand side, so they have to move back 6, 8, 10 feet behind the baseline in order to allow the ball to bounce, come up, come back down again to where it's comfortable to hit, make their swing, and then recover back to the baseline.

Then, I'll mix it up and I'll say, "Okay, I'm not going to tell you which of these 3 is coming this time", which is obviously more realistic. And then they'll have to move short, wide, deep, combination of all those 3, without me telling them which is coming. And after each, recovering back to the middle of the baseline.

Then we'll do it on their backhand side. And then, usually, to wrap things up, I'll give them all 6 shots all mixed up--high and deep to their backhand, wide to their backhand, short to their backhand, same on the forehand side--and I'll do it randomly to all 6 positions. And in all 6 tosses, they have to move to the right spot, make a good swing, and recover back to the middle.

This is how tennis is played. You cannot play tennis all from one phase of play. You must be able to back up and play defense, move across the baseline and play a neutral shot, or move into the court, transfer through the ball, and play an offensive shot. And the Spanish drill is excellent for doing all 3.

Now, I'm gonna post a link. Go to [essentialtennis.com/podcast](http://essentialtennis.com/podcast), and no matter when you're listening to this, click on episode number 153, and you'll see a link there. I'm gonna post a link to a video. The USPTA actually put this video together. It's actually really well done. And when you watch the video, it's actually a Spanish coach doing the video. It's where it got its name. Apparently it has been a famous drill that Spaniard coaches have been using for a long time now.

When you watch that video, they... he does it in a specific sequence. And it's much more dynamic. The coach is having his players do inside-out forehands, inside-out backhands, and they go through a specific pattern. When I do it, I will do a simple pattern first, then mix it up and make it random. But this is an excellent way to practice all 3 phases of play [inaudible], and definitely go check it out.

Now, one more thing I want to mention before we get to his second question. If you only want to work on your offensive phase of play on your forehand side, and that is when you have the ability to be balanced, step in, hit an offensive shot, fine. Just make sure that you don't ignore neutral and defensive shots too. If you want to work on the short ones, start off with just having somebody feed short balls over and over. Practice moving into the court, transferring your weight, making an aggressive shot. And you can make this a new and competitive game as well, where one side feeds the ball shot on purpose, the other side moves in and attacks, and then play out the point. Lots of different ways you can work on it, on that specifically. But I would really caution you from only working on one phase of play like that, [inaudible].

Okay. Moving on now to his second question. He says: The footage shows clearly that all of us have a tendency to wait for the ball to come to us, rather than closing in on the

ball, and hitting earlier. How can we break this pattern?

Okay. [laughter] And [inaudible] , in all 3 of your topics and questions here today, I'm going to be talking about and uncovering a misconception in something that recreational players very often think is true, but it's really not. Especially for a player like yourself, who is kind of right in the middle of the road. You're not a beginner. Assuming that your NTRP level--he puts himself down as a 3.5--assuming that's accurate, you're definitely not a beginner, you've been playing a while, you've got some skills. However, on the other hand, you're definitely not an advanced player either.

Now, keeping that in mind, this is what you should be doing most of the time, is letting the ball come to you. What you're describing--closing in and taking the ball early--I assume you mean by that taking the ball on the rise. So taking the ball early, meaning early after it's bounced. And you'll see professional players do this often. They will move in close to the baseline, kind of crowd the baseline, and take the ball right off the bounce as it comes from their opponent's racket, and hits on their side of the court. And they'll immediately rebound it back, very often taking a full swing, and taking a shot that kind of should put them in a defensive position, because it's very, very deep in the court, but they turn it right back into offense, back at their opponent.

Now, taking the ball on the rise is great, but I have 2 problems with it for the recreational player. Number one: A large percentage of the time, it's just simply not possible at all. When you rally against another 3.5 player, there's not a whole lot of balls that are landing right next to the baseline. And those are the ones where it makes the most amount of sense to take it early and right on the rise, instead of backing way up and allowing it to come to you. So that's number one.

When the ball lands, for example, if you're in a rally back and forth, and the ball lands on the service line, you can't take it early, right off the bounce. Now you could take it earlier if it lands on the service line. You can move forwards a step or two inside the baseline, and take it a little bit earlier. But your number one priority is to hit the ball where it's comfortable, and that's right around waist height. And usually the best way to do that, especially if the ball is landing on the service line, is to allow it to come up to the top of its bounce, allow it to come back down again to where it's comfortable to hit, and then hit the ball.

And so the ball really dictates, or the ball flight really dictates where you're gonna be when that happens. And taking the ball early, meaning at waist height before it gets to the peak of its bounce, is only possible if you can get to the ball before that happens. And in most rallies against a 3.5 player, most shots it's just not possible to do. You just can't get to it quickly enough to take it early. Now, that doesn't mean you can't take it, again, earlier. Maybe take a step or two forwards. But in general, just keep that in mind. Very often it's just not possible.

Number two: On many shots it's also just not a good idea. Maybe it's possible that you could get there to take it early, but in doing so, you're gonna rush yourself, you're going to make it just kind of a frantic sprint to get to the ball in time before it gets up past your strike zone. Because if you don't take it early enough, it's gonna get way up high, outside of where it's comfortable to hit. And very often it's possible to take it on the rise, but in order to do that, you have to make a quick rush towards the ball. And it's not going to be easy to do. And by the time you get there, you're out of balance, you don't feel comfortable, and you would've been better off actually being a little bit further back in the court and being relaxed in allowing the ball to come to you, and being a little

more [inaudible] and feel a little bit more comfortable.

So, in closing those thoughts, I just want to say that hitting on the rise can be great, but you only want to do it when it's practical and it's comfortable. And it should make sense, it shouldn't throw you off balance and put you in a tougher spot than where you started. The rest of the time you should allow the ball to come up, come back down again, and then make contact. And that's how most of your shots should be hit.

In fact, go watch the Australian Open. It just started yesterday. Well, you know that. [laughter] You're in Australia. Watch the Australian Open. Watch a Men's match, and see how often they hit the ball on its way up from the bounce. The majority of the time, they're allowing the ball to come to them. They're allowing it to come up, come back down again, and then hit it where it's most comfortable so that they can hit the most effective shot possible. Of course, you'll see them take it on the rise, and take it early as well, but it's only when they're able to do so controlled and in balance. And all of you listening that are recreational players, you should be doing the same thing. Very rarely, to be honest, hitting the ball early and on the rise. And most of the time allowing the ball to come to you in a comfortable spot.

Okay. So one more question from [inaudible] . And this one is: "All of us seem to hit the ball too upright, not bending our knees enough. Again, more so on the forehand side than on the backhand side. What is a good drill to stay low?"

Well, I've got a problem with that last phrase. And, again, kind of a misconception here. And bending your knees is awesome, and you should be definitely trying to do so on both your forehand and backhand side, as using your legs can help you clear the number one thing that you have in the way to your success--and that is the net. We want to make sure we clear the net easily and consistently on both sides. However, you don't want to stay low. You should almost never stay low on your ground strokes.

The whole point to bending down with your legs, is so that you can then stand up. You want to use your legs to lift the ball. And if you get down with your legs, and you "stay low" as you hit the shot, well, you did something good by getting below where the ball is, but if you just stand there and drop your racket and drop your arm, you can get plenty far below where the ball is. On most shots, you don't need your legs to bend in order to get the racket below the ball. On the majority, vast majority of shots just dropping your arm and letting the racket drop, is more than enough to get the racket below where the ball is.

The point of bending your knees is usually not to do that--not to drop the racket--but to use your legs actively during the shot, to use them to lift the ball and drive the ball, and kind of give the ball more of a drive by actively using your legs to bend down, and then stand up. So if you bend down and you don't ever stand up again until after the ball is gone, you're kind of missing the point again. Now, also what I don't want, is for you to just be standing upright throughout the entire stroke. I want to be clear on that. Using your legs is good, and I started off this answer by saying that. Actively using your legs is great. I just don't want you to use them, and them "stay low". That's not what you should be doing.

A good drill to work on this, [inaudible] , is to stand next to your partner... Start off on the service line, and stand... Get a practice partner, and one of you will be... Just like the Spanish drill, one of you will be facilitating the other person practicing. And stand right next to your partner, let's say on the forehand side, on their forehand side, right to their

side, and hold the ball just 2 or 3 feet off the court. So probably a little less than a meter, or a little bit less than a yard. And just hold the ball there. And just let it go, let it bounce, and when it comes back up again, it's probably not gonna come up off the court any more than about 2 feet or so. And that's the point. We're trying to give them a low ball.

And the point here is to have them practice... Once you've dropped the ball, have them practice getting down with their legs, below where the ball is, and then actively standing up again with the swing. As the ball... as the racket comes up to meet the ball, and they're making contact, their legs should be actively standing up again, so that those big muscles contracting and expanding again and coming up, help lift the ball over the net.

And that's why we're doing this from the service line, is we want to put the person who's practicing close to the net, so that you really have to get underneath it, and we're putting the ball low. So that they really have to get below the ball, and really stand up nice and strong, to get under the ball, lift it, and you should still be able to keep the ball in play by creating topspin and having it curve back down into the court again.

Now, one progression to this drill would be to have them then start in no-man's land, or even back at the baseline. And drop the ball, again, just from a stationary position, drop it from a little bit higher this time so that they're able to have enough time to get to it. But have them practice doing the same thing while on the move. So maybe this time drop it from like shoulder height--maybe 4 or 5 feet up off the court. Have them start in no-man's land, or maybe even on the baseline, depending on how fast they are. And just drop it from shoulder height, have them start moving forwards quickly as soon as you drop it, get to the ball, bend, get below it, stand back up again, move through the point of contact, and lift the ball over to the other side. So the focus is still on getting down below the ball, and then not staying there, but lifting up again and getting the ball over the net to clear it safely.

Alright, so [inaudible] , good questions. And I'm happy I was able to address all 3, because, again, some misconceptions about ground strokes, kind of similar to last week's show, but some different topics. So the first one was... Let me go back to my outline here. The first one was moving, not necessarily always through the ball, but moving in general, and in a defensive, neutral, and offensive phase of play. Being able to move with the ball correctly. You can't and you shouldn't always be stepping in or transferring into the ball. And use the Spanish drill to practice that. Again, go to [essentialtennis.com/podcast](http://essentialtennis.com/podcast), and you'll see a video there that links to an example of the Spanish drill.

Second: Waiting for the ball. Most of the time you should wait for the ball to come to you. Let it come up, let it come back down again, let it drop to where it's comfortable for you to hit, and that's where you should be making contact. Okay? Another misconception there. You shouldn't always be rushing at the ball to try to always take it early, and always take it on the rise. Practice that. Taking the ball on the rise is great. Practice it. But it's not... you shouldn't be striving to always take it on the rise. It's just not practical.

And then thirdly: Being upright, and trying to stay low. Don't stay low. Please. Get low, but then come up again, so that your legs are helping you lift the ball and make it a safe shot, and easily clear the net.

So all three of those, and Ben... not Ben, [inaudible] , I know that the way that you

wrote your questions might not have exactly been the way that I took it, but you at least alluded to some misconceptions. And I wanted to get all of those out there, really air them out for the benefit of everybody listening. So, hopefully you don't think I was kind of talking down at you or angry at you, that you were thinking about things always the wrong way. A lot of times you're on the right track here, probably we just worded things a little bit differently than maybe you meant. Or, maybe you totally meant all 3 of those in their ... in the kind of the misconception way of thinking about all 3 of those topics. Either way, I wanted to get that good information out there, and make sure everybody is on the same page. And I hope that my answers were helpful to you, and get you on the right track.

So thanks very much for being a listener in Australia. Enjoy the Australian Open. And if you have any follow up questions to anything that I talked about in this show, go to [essentialtennis.com/podcast](http://essentialtennis.com/podcast), go to Episode number 153, leave your comments there, and I'll be happy to reply. But thanks very much, and good luck working on all these different parts of your ground strokes. [music] [music]

Alright. That does it for Episode number 153 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Gonna cut the Q&A section a little bit short, because I want to make sure that we get to some comments from last week's show. And if I try to answer a whole other question here, we'd easily be going past 40 minutes on this week's show. So we're just going to leave it there, with the Q&A, with [inaudible] 's questions.

And I want to read some comments that some people left about last week's show--the forehand misconception show. First of all from Dave, he wrote and said: "I think that there is some or medium weight transfer at the pro level, because they load on the inside of the back foot, which facilitates some forward weight transfer even though it may not appear as obvious as the step forward onto the front foot. I also think that the pros can get away with less or no forward weight transfer, because of the speed and weight of the oncoming shot. At a 3.5 to 4.0 level, you get a lot of slow balls and a lot of fast balls with no weight behind them. And in my opinion, the weight transfer is essential to generate pace."

Well, Dave, some things I agree with in there, and at least one thing that I don't always agree with. I do agree that even when the pros don't physically take a step forward into the court, they are still transferring momentum and weight into the shot. It might not be super obvious, and they might not physically move 3 feet forward as they make contact, but the transfer from inside foot to outside foot definitely transfers at least some weight into the shot. And I'm pretty sure I actually said that in last week's show. So I agree with that.

I also think it's a really good point that you brought up the fact that the ball is already moving really fast at the professional level--most of the time. And that's actually a really good point. When the ball already has a lot of momentum to it, it takes less of your own to hit it back at an aggressive pace. And during a, you know, 3.0 level rally back and forth, there's not a lot of speed on the ball already. So to hit aggressively, it takes a little bit more of your own energy to make the ball come off your racket aggressively. When the ball is already moving quickly, and you meet it with your racket, it comes off more quickly. So that's a good point.

That being said, the last part, the one part that I don't always agree with is, you said: "In my opinion, the weight transfer is essential to generate pace at a 3.5 or 4.0 level, when you get a lot of slow balls." I don't agree with that. If the players technique is good

enough to accelerate the racket, it's not essential. Now, that doesn't mean that it can't be beneficial. It can help. And I said that in last week's show. It's not that I'm saying that transferring your weight is bad, and it doesn't help, and it's no good. But I just wanted to point out that technique is much more important, it's much more essential than transferring weight.

I was watching [inaudible] last night. Um... I need to find out if he won, by the way. Uh, I know that he won the third set after being behind. Anyway. And I was actually watching this. I had this in mind while I was watching him and his opponent, and Dutchman, [inaudible] I think, or something like that. I probably mispronounce that badly. But I was watching on one specific shot, [inaudible] 's opponent hit him a weak shot, right in the middle of the court, no pace to it. And [inaudible] moved up to it quickly, hit from an open stance, didn't step in, didn't transfer forwards, and hit a winner.

Now, obviously he's a world class athlete, and he's a beast of an athlete, so he can do that. However, I don't think that recreational players are unable to do that either. Stepping in could've helped [inaudible] get more pace and hit a more aggressive shot, but it wasn't necessary. He obviously has great swing technique, and I think rec players should learn that, should learn how to use their upper body to really accelerate the racket, be relaxed, create racket head speed, and be able to put the ball away. Not to say that transferring your weight and stepping in is a bad thing. But just want to point that out. It's not essential to generate pace. I'll leave it at that.

Okay. And next up from Steve. "After listening to your podcast, I checked out YouTube for some old timer games-- [inaudible] vs. Connors, Newcombe vs. Rosewall, etc. It was mostly a sever and volley game, so they were very few baseline rallies that you could examine closely. Per set I estimate that I saw maybe one or two strokes that was a classic closed stance, weight transfer forehand. Jimmy Connors was hitting these classic strokes as an approach shot, when he rushed the net--the kind of step in and transfer forwards. I guess the forehand..." I'm sorry... "I guess the forward momentum is useful if you're going to the net." Absolutely. "However, most of the time, they just went with the flow--striking the ball on the fly, rushing the net, hitting half volleys, and even a few times, hit an open stance forehand.

As with today's pros, Federer and Nadal included, there are no 'classic' or 'perfect' forehands. Every stroke is slightly off, adapting to the situation. Everyone should keep in mind to be flexible and adapt, and not try to hit an open stance forehand every single time, just because they were taught this, and it's the way it 'should be done'."

Yeah, Steve, I think that sums it up really, really well. There's different situations every time you get the ball. And if you try to take a cookie-cutter stroke--you know, in this stance, and in this follow through, in this [inaudible] --and do it every single time, and try to make it fit into every single situation, you're just gonna feel awkward and off balance a lot, because the shot your opponent hits to you has a lot to do with what you're able to do with the ball and what you're able to do with your body. And so I think that's really interesting that you went back, watched some of the kind of old-school players and old-school matches, and saw kind of the same thing that today's professional players are doing. Just kind of going with the flow, taking it as it comes, not always doing the same stance and the same stroke, but just doing what they had to do to hit a good shot back. And that's a lot of what goes into being a high level player, is being able to adapt and just do the best you can with what you're given. So, Steve, thanks for your comments there.



And lastly, from Penelope: "I've always struggled with my forehand, and often feel like I'm thinking about 10 things while hitting the stroke, whereas my backhand has always been more solid and natural. I found this podcast very helpful in getting me to focus on what the main ingredients are."

That's awesome, Penelope. And don't feel badly about that. For most people it's the opposite. Their backhand, they're having to think... At least for me it is, and for most students that I work with it is. Their backhand they have to think about it. It's not as natural. It doesn't just happen as fluidly. It kind of feels like there has to be more thought about the technique. And so don't feel bad about that. It just means you have to spend more time with your forehand to learn and kind of put into your muscle memory what's solid and what's going to help you hit a good shot.

So I'm glad that last week's show kind of made things a little bit more clear as far as what's really important. Work on those things. You know, drill them, practice them, repeat them over and over and over again until it becomes a habit. And then you'll be able to start hitting that forehand, hopefully as confidently as your backhand is.

So, Dave, Steve, Penelope, thank you 3 for your thoughts, and everybody else who commented on last week's show, thank you for your thoughts. Had some good discussions in there with listeners. And I'd love to hear your thoughts on today's show. Go to [essentialtennis.com/podcast](http://essentialtennis.com/podcast), go to Episode number 153, leave your thoughts, and it's very possible I will read them during next week's show. [music]

Alright. Well, that's going to do it for this week. Thanks everybody for listening. I appreciate it. Take care. And good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]