

Essential Tennis Podcast #155

[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. [music]

Ian: Hi, and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast--your place for free, expert tennis instruction that truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by tennisexpress.com. Please check them out this week by going to essentialtennis.com/express. Thanks very much for joining me on today's show. I hope that it's going to be helpful to you and some of the information that I give is going to give you some ideas on how you can improve your own game.

Before we get to today's questions, real quickly I'd like to remind you all about the different ways that you can connect with Essential Tennis online. First of all, Twitter. You can follow essentialtennis.com at twitter.com/essentialtennis. And Facebook is at facebook.com/essentialtennis. Both on Twitter and Facebook you can sign up to follow or like Essential Tennis, and get regular updates on what's new on the website. You'll know right away when the new podcast is out, also blog articles, etc. And on YouTube you can check out all of the free videos at youtube.com/essentialtennis. And you can subscribe to the videos there and find out right away when I put up new instructional videos. Sorry it's been a little while, but in the near future I'm going to start working hard on those again to get you all some good, free video instruction.

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

Alright. Our first question on today's podcast comes to us from Ben in New York City. He wrote in and said: "I'm a 3.5 player, and sometimes during the weekends I play tennis with a group of 2.5 recreational tennis players. I play below my standards, such as double faulting day and night, and feeling so out of place. They aren't the most experienced tennis players, so they do not know how to properly warm up. What they call warming up, is hitting the ball hard and all over the place. At the end, I feel dissatisfied that I performed lower than I actually can. On the other hand, when I play with my 3.5 to 4.5 hitting partners, I have some bad days, but I eventually click, especially on my serves, and I'm not..." I'm sorry... "and am not to be dissatisfied with my overall performance, regardless of if it is a win or a loss. I do not know if I am just not focused enough when I play with a group of recreational players, pressured that I have to play better than them, or if I am just not interested when I play with them. I know everyone has their good days and bad days, but I don't enjoy in playing inconsistent tennis. In your opinion, what does the situation seem to be like, and how should I deal with it? Ben."

Well, Ben, good question, and something that every recreational player is gonna deal with at some point or another most likely, is having to deal with playing, just in general, with or against somebody who's a level lower than they are--or maybe several levels lower than they are. And I want to tell you that I think it's great that you are spending time with these players, especially those players who are significantly weaker than you are. First of all, just shows that you're a nice guy in general, and so it's very nice of you to spend some time with them, and I'm sure it really helps them a great deal. So, just

kind of shows some good tennis player character on your part, because I know that a lot of recreational players go out of their way to not play or practice with players who are weaker than them. So, kudos to you on that, first of all. And secondly, just in general, it's good to practice playing against players who aren't as strong as you. So, it's good that you're taking the time to do this.

Now, to answer your question specifically, to be honest, this seems like 100% a focus issue to you. And the biggest reason why I feel that way, is the statement that you make about your serves. You say that when playing against these weaker players, your serve just goes away, and you double fault all over the place--you double fault day and night, to quote you specifically. Well, what in the world does the strength of your opponent have to do with you putting your serve in the court? Putting your serve in the court is completely on you--100%. It's not like your opponent is tossing the ball for you and not giving you a good toss, or like they have any direct control at all over the quality of your serve. So, that tells me that it's definitely a concentration and a focus issue. And I don't blame you. Let me just say that. I'm not saying that you're a bad person, and that you're a bad tennis player because of this. I totally understand that you can lose interest, and you can lose concentration, and you can be kind of frustrated, and what's happening during these practice sessions. Because, as you said, these players aren't strong enough yet that they can be consistent. And maybe they're not smart enough to hit at a speed that they can control and give you practice to warm up. And they're not giving you the ability to really get into rhythm and get comfortable, and be able to just hit the ball back and forth the way that you're typically used to.

So, I understand that it's difficult to concentrate in a situation like this, but at the end of the day, it's just an excuse. And at the end of the day, this is something you need to work on, is specifically being able to concentrate even when the player on the other side of the net is not inspiring you to be focused and try hard, and concentrate, and do the absolute best you can to play at your very highest level. The players that you're describing aren't really just giving you that drive or that inspiration to do your best, and so you're not doing it--you're not doing it on your own. Then you have to learn how to up your focus and your concentration, so that you can get past the distraction and the lack of rhythm that's occurring here, and still play at an acceptable level of tennis. So, on one hand, I don't blame you for losing focus, because it's not easy against players who are significantly weaker than you. But on the other hand, this is a great chance to purposefully work on your concentration. It's a great chance to work on putting away lower level players.

I mean, when you think about it, what would happen then if you go and you enter a 3.5 tournament, there in New York City, a USTA tournament, and in the very first round you draw somebody who's just like one of these players, or maybe literally one of these players, one of these same people that you're talking about, and you have to beat this person. What then? And maybe you would say to me, "Well, then the match would count, and so I'd have a lot more concentration." What if you didn't? What if you ran into the exact same problems-- you got frustrated because during the warm-up they didn't give you any consistency or any rhythm, and so you never really felt like you got a good warm-up, and you weren't comfortable. And then, as the match started, you weren't hitting well, you were double faulting, you started getting angry at yourself, and before you know it, it's a close match, or maybe you're even losing, and this is a player that you consider to be much weaker than you. Then what? I mean, you can't come off the court after that loss and say, "I played terrible. I'm actually much better than that person, but they're so bad that I couldn't play well." That's not an excuse. That, in fact, that's a terrible excuse. That's like one of the worst excuses that you could possibly

have. And I don't want you to fall back on that, and as a result never play against these players, because you won't get the practice to figure out how to still have yourself perform to an acceptable level.

So, what you should do, is spend more time with these types of players, and purposefully work on your concentration and your focus. Again, the serve is a good indicator. If, when playing against a player who is better than you or your level, you double fault maybe twice per set, and then against a player who's much weaker than you, you double fault 6 times a set, you know that your concentration is lacking, and it's going down the tubes again. So that's kind of a nice measure or indicator to tell us how good of a job you're doing.

But, go out there against these players on purpose, and don't focus on what they're doing, and how weak they are, and how little of practice or rhythm they're giving you. Focus on the things you can control--things like your footwork, your effort level going after the ball, your strategy and your tactics, figuring out what game plan is going to be the best for this particular match against this particular player. You can control things like your concentration--focusing just on what's happening right in front of you, you know, between points. Leave your eyes down on the court. Don't be looking around and saying, "Wow, this is boring. I'm not having a good [inaudible] " You should be practicing trying to beat these players 6-0, 6-0, and crush them. And if these players really are weaker than you, you should be able to do that, and come off the court and feel good about how you performed, regardless of what the score was. And if that particular day you perform well, and you consider this player to be much weaker than you, but it was still close, well, maybe you need to give a little bit more respect to these players that you think are quite a bit weaker than you are.

So, when it comes down to it, play with intensity, play with focus, practice this on purpose, Ben. Go set up times with these players, and practice beating them badly. It's... honestly, it's a skill. It's a mental skill, and a tactical skill to know how to put away players who are weaker than you are. It's definitely something you should be working on. So, spend time, put in some repetition working on playing these types of players, and work on increasing your focus and your concentration.

So, Ben, hopefully that makes sense. A tricky situation, and it's, again, great that you're playing with these guys. Now you need to work on controlling what you can control and playing at a higher level--a level that you know you can play at--even though maybe they're not giving you the best possible practice. So, let me know if you have any further questions about that. Best of luck as you continue working on your game. And let me know how it goes. [music] [music] [music]

Alright. Before we get to our second question today, I'd like to remind you all about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast, and that is tennisexpress.com, the tennis online merchandise website extraordinaire, where you can get pretty much anything you could possibly need for your tennis game--rackets, strings, shoes, clothing, bags, stringing machines--whatever you could possibly need. And they've got great prices. They're always running specials on different frames and different strings, so go check them out, see what their prices are for what you're looking for--what you need, or what you'd like to upgrade to. And they have free shipping on orders of 75 dollars or over as well. So, definitely check them out. And if you check them out by going to essentialtennis.com/express, that will automatically shoot you over to Tennis Express and it will track any purchases that you might make through them, so that when you do make a purchase, a small percentage of that will come back to support the Essential

Tennis Podcast, which I would appreciate very much. And Tennis Express appreciates you being a listener of the show and making your purchases through them. So, it's a win-win-win. [laughter] You're happy with the service and with the prices, Tennis Express is happy to have you support them, and I'm happy to have the support of all of you and of Tennis Express as well. So, please check them out this week. Again, that's at essentialtennis.com/express.

Okay, now let's go ahead and get to our second question. And this one comes to us from Blake, in Kansas. He's a 4.0 player. He wrote and said: "I've been playing a little over 2 years now..." Well, Blake, it's great that you're already up to a 4.0 level. Great job with that. "I feel like my strokes have really developed well. I can get good pace off both wings on my groundstrokes. However, I really need to develop consistency and the ability to hit my shots even under pressure. My question is about how firm a player's grip should be when hitting groundstrokes. I know that a very loose arm and a relaxed grip are crucial to having an effective serve, but I've not heard it talked about how much regarding the groundstrokes. I feel like many times I have a rather tense arm on my groundstrokes. Could this be robbing me of pace and spin? I have tried having a very loose arm on my strokes, and have had some success, however, I feel like I didn't have much control over my arm. How firm and/or loose should my arm be, and grip be, on my groundstrokes? Should the strokes feel almost like a throw or whip, as the serve does? Thank you for taking the time to read this, and for offering such a great free service such as the podcast."

Alright, you're welcome, Blake. And that's an excellent question. And you know what? I agree. I think it's kind of common knowledge, or common instruction that websites or teaching pros will give, that you should be very loose and whippy with your arm and with the racket on a serve. But I agree with you, I can also say that I haven't seen a whole lot of instruction on how tightly to grip the racket on a groundstroke.

Well, I will tell you that in general, recreational tennis players are much too tight. [inaudible] in general--serves, groundstrokes, on every shot--they tend to be tense and tight, especially right around the point of contact.

And too much muscle tension during a tennis stroke, causes two very big problems. First of all, shorter, jerky swing technique. And all of you listening to my voice know what I'm talking about. Maybe... well, you think probably not for yourself, but you've seen other players who are just... are super, super tight with their upper body as they try to hit the ball, and their technique is just really, really short and tight. At least as compared to a higher level player, and certainly as compared to a professional player, who have long and relaxed strokes. It might not look relaxed because they're accelerating super fast, but trust me, they are--compared to recreational players. So as a result, there is less room for acceleration. The tighter you get and the shorter your stroke get, the less amount of distance your racket travels along. And that shorter distance means that you have less time, or less space, to actually accelerate the racket towards the ball and through the point of contact. So the racket head ends up decelerating.

The racket wants to move through the point of contact, but those tense and tight muscles end up actually holding it back and decelerating the racket. And so that leads to the second big problem of being tight is ultimately the racket slows down--there's deceleration. So that gives you less potential for power and less potential for spin. And that was one of your questions: "Could this be robbing me of pace and spin?" Absolutely. 100%. Yes.

So, as a result of this, I'm constantly working with my students to help them relax their upper body. And there just seems to be kind of an automatic response for humans to want to kind of brace for impact between the ball and the racket. And that bracing, that tensing up, that tightness, absolutely robs the racket head of momentum and of speed, and those are bad things--especially on strokes that are longer in nature, such as groundstrokes and serves. So, when I finally do get a student to relax more and use a longer stroke, the result is more pace, more spin--or at least more potential for pace and spin--while trying less. And that's significant.

All of your ears should've just perked up when I said that. Wouldn't you love to have more power and more spin while trying less than you are right now? Or at the very least, while trying the same? Wouldn't you love to have more power and more spin without actually trying any harder? Well, when you lengthen your stroke and you relax your body, and you allow your racket to freely swing through the point of contact, you'll have the opportunity or the potential to be able to do that. And that's a really, really significant thing, for sure.

So, the question that you had was, well, exactly how loose should we be? Well, I would definitely err on the side of feeling too loose, especially at first. As I said before, in my experience, recreational players in general are just always too tight, they're just chronically tight--across the board when I watch recreational players. And it's not a coincidence that as I look from a 2.5 to a 3.0, or a 3.0 to a 3.5, or a 3.5 to a 4.5 player, I see those players progressively use longer swing technique and more acceleration, and they look more relaxed as the racket accelerates--there's less and less tension as I look from a lower rated player up through a higher rated player. It's not a coincidence that I see longer, more relaxed strokes. So this is absolutely a key thing.

And in saying that every player needs to relax as much as possible, I will say that I've maybe seen one or two players that really were too relaxed, and they were just sloppy, and you know, not because they were lazy or cause they weren't trying hard, but they were just too loosey-goosey, and had no control over what the racket was doing. Honestly, everybody, I've only seen that happen like once or twice in my whole teaching career. And I haven't been teaching 30 years or anything, but I've been teaching a decent amount of time, and a lot of hours every week, and I almost never see that. It's almost always the opposite--that recreational players are too tight.

So, in answering the question of exactly how loose should your grip be, and how relaxed should your arm be, I would really honestly say to most of you, as relaxed as possible. Seriously.

Now, when you do that, and this'll be the last main topic here, is feeling out of control. When you do that, for the first time, very likely, you're gonna feel like you've lost control over the racket, and you've lost control over where the ball was going. That's super common. And over and over again... And by the way, the tighter of technique that a student has, when I ask them to completely relax, the more out of control they feel. So, it's definitely a direct relationship, where if a student of mine is super tight, and I ask them to relax, they'll feel much more often out of control than somebody who was doing a pretty good job, but they just needed to relax a little bit more.

So, if you have really tense technique now, and you literally do completely loosen up and relax, the very first time you do it, you're probably going to feel like you have no control over where the ball is going. And really, what it comes down to, Blake, is that you need to learn how to still have control over it. And through repetition and practice,

you'll start learning to feel where the racket is, and where it's facing. And the more you work on it, in the long run, you're actually gonna end up having better control than when you were kind of hyper-controlling everything, and everything was tight and guided. In the long run, as you get better at making a relaxed swing, you'll actually have more accuracy than when you were tight. It might seem like that's impossible, especially to those of you who are very rigid and tight right now, but trust me, it will be the case as you practice it.

And the best way to practice it is just with a ball machine or a partner feeding to you, and not being worried about where the ball is going at first. Just relax, be totally loose, and if you miss every shot for the first 5 minutes fine. As you keep doing it you'll start to get a better feel for where the racket is, cause it's going to feel very different than what you're used to. And as you make more and more strokes with a relaxed arm and hand, you'll start to dial in and build some awareness of where the racket face is at, even though you're not hitting with your regular tense body. You'll learn how to control it.

And the last thing I want to say, Blake, is that you're already a 4.0 player--which is great. You're already above average as a tennis player. If you want to make that next jump up to 4.5, and certainly if you want to jump up to being a 5.0 player, this is something you will have to train yourself to do eventually. You need to be able to freely accelerate the racket if you ever want to create the power and spin necessary to be a 5.0 player. 4.5 you know, still a jump up from where you are now. It might not be completely necessary to learn how to be really relaxed and loose and free with your strokes. It might not be completely necessary, but it's gonna help you a lot in being able to create more power and more spin than what you are right now, so that you can bump up that next level and make it up to 4.5. So keep working on it. Put in a bunch of repetition. Be as relaxed as possible. And maybe you'll actually end up being somewhere in between where you are now and completely relaxed. That would still be better than whatever you're probably doing right now. But keep working hard at it. And please let me know if I can help you any further with this topic or anything else.

And I'd love to hear thoughts from those of you listening about this topic, because it's something that's a lot of times controversial when I talk to recreational players about it. They kind of don't believe me, especially when they try it and they don't feel like they're controlling it great at first. So if you have any comments about this topic, go to essentialtennis.com/podcast. Go to episode number 155, which is the number of today's show, and leave me your thoughts and your comments. I'd love to hear from you.

Alright, well that wraps up that answer. Blake, again, thanks very much. Thank you for being a listener, and good luck as you continue working on your technique. [music] [music] [music]

Alright. That does it for episode number 155 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for joining me on today's show. And in wrapping up, I'd like to read a couple of comments from last week's show, where I had Dr. Kone on the podcast, and we talked about a variety of mental toughness--questions having to do with choking, also feeling sorry or feeling bad for your opponent. And I'd like to read a couple of those comments. There were some really good ones. And thank you to all of you who left those comments. And I'm gonna continue reading comments each show from the previous one, so if you have any thoughts about Episode number 155, definitely go leave them. You can do that by going to essentialtennis.com/podcast, go to show 155, leave your comment, and I read and respond each and every one of those when all of you come by and leave your comments. So thank you for the time that you take to do

that. I always love hearing feedback, whether it's positive or negative. If you disagree with anything I said today, let me know, and I'd love to have a conversation with you about it.

Alright, so, some thoughts on the mental toughness podcast from last week. First of all, Alice. "Is it okay to have different levels of competitiveness. When I play my friends, I'm less likely to care about who walks away the winner. Does this hurt your mental toughness when it counts? Should you consider matches with friends practice for mental toughness?"

Well, Alice, that's an excellent question. And I talked with Dr. Kone about being competitive, and feeling sorry and letting up on your opponent. Alice, it's perfectly fine to have those group of friends that you like to go out, play with, and kind of socialize a little bit, catch up on what's going on with your families, and your social life or whatever. Totally fine to have that time when you just go out, get some exercise, enjoy your time with your friends, and just have fun. There's nothing wrong with that. Absolutely nothing wrong with that. And so I don't think you would be--if that's how you enjoy part of your tennis, and then another side of you likes to be really competitive, and really work hard, and win, and improve your mental toughness and your strategy, and etc--then I don't think there's anything wrong with separating that. And I don't think it's going to hurt your game, or hurt your mental toughness in the long run.

I think, what I just described is very reasonable approach. I don't think it would be reasonable to only have "Okay, tennis is my sport. I'm gonna take it totally seriously. If you come out and play with me, even if we're just friends and I'm way better than you, I'm gonna just crush you and just beat you into submission, whether we're just friends and it's just for fun or not." I don't think that's a reasonable approach, and you're going to end up not, you know, none of your friends are going to want to play with you--at least the ones that don't take it seriously. And if you have a group of friends who just do it for fun, then just have fun with them. When you go out and you play with somebody who does take it seriously, and they do want your best game, then turn it on and be as competitive as possible. But I don't think it's going to hurt you to separate that a little bit.

Alright, now some really good thoughts--personal thoughts from listeners. First from Frank: "I have had that problem with feeling guilty about beating opponents, suggesting that a player with this problem change her personality for the duration of the match, is not likely to be helpful. What works for me, is reminding myself that nobody gets excited by the prospect of playing poor players. Everyone prefers to play better players, even if they lose." That's true. So, well, not everybody, Frank. Not everybody. Some people kind of have fragile egos, and they'd much rather crush somebody than lose. But in general, I agree. I think most people probably--who are really trying to improve--would agree with you, that they really want a good match.

And Frank continues: "So you are doing your opponent a favor by being the toughest opponent you can be. She may be happy today to have beat you, but you won't be the kind of player she would want to play again. It's like what mothers used to tell their daughters before dates, if you give in, he won't respect you in the morning." Yeah, I totally see what you're saying, Frank, that if... Uh, who was that? I think it was Jeany, was the player who had felt sorry for her opponent and let up, and basically gave her the match. And you're right. She probably was really happy to win at first, but in the long run, your opponent, Jeany, would have respected you a lot more if you'd really tried

your hardest and beat her, and really played to the best of your ability. And Frank's absolutely right. If she really wants to get better at tennis, she will be coming back to you to play you again anyway, because she wants to get better and therefore play people than are better than her. So you're kind of doing her a disservice by letting up.

And then Frank continues: "If you want to be liked by others, recognize that if you beat your opponent badly, after she gets over her disappointment, she will forever be grateful that a superior player such as yourself agreed to give her a chance to play with you. Also, I remember that Jack Kramer and Bobby Riggs taught if you let up on your effort when you're way ahead, it's not niceness, you're showing contempt for your opponent. It's like saying, I'm so much better than you that I can beat you even without trying hard. It's more respectful to try and win 6-0, 6-0 if you can, because it shows that you recognize that your opponent could raise her game and get back into the match at any moment. And that until the last point has been played, you have no guarantee of winning."

Yeah. I really liked your thoughts, Frank. And I definitely think you're on track there. Again, it depends on the maturity, the competitive maturity, of the opponent. Some players do feel slighted by beating them 6-0, 6-0, and feel like "Oh, come on, give me a game. You're embarrassing me." So, you might feel this way, Frank, and kind of players who are secure in themselves, and are mature as people and mature as competitors might feel the way that you do, and that they want to be beat 6-0, 6-0 if that's how good their opponent is, other players take it personally when they get crushed and you don't let up at all, and you show no mercy. So, it depends on the person, but at the end of the day, you need to do your best out there. Play to your full potential. And you know, you shouldn't be kowtowing to everybody who has a confidence --not disorder, but lack of confidence in themselves as a person and as a player. That's not something that you should be concerned about, and that shouldn't alter your tactics and your level of play--is the bottom line.

And then lastly, from Dan: "I was intrigued by this mental game episode, and found Jeany's situation particularly interesting. I've been on both sides of the issue--the one winning handily and concerned about my opponent's feelings, as well as the one losing handily with my opponent seeming concerned about my feelings. I believe that the best approach for both sides is to play your best, and play to win. It gives you good practice of your technical strengths, furthermore, it's good mental practice in closing out games, sets, and matches, and it gives your opponent much needed exposure to strong competition. Perhaps your opponent will see a shot from you that he or she has never seen before. If so, then he might get a better idea of his own strengths and weaknesses, and then work on them. We need the adversity of competition to develop our skills. Simply holding back and trying to spare our opponent's feelings, won't likely help him grow as a player. It's always important to be a good sport, such as by showing respect and courtesy on the court, but being a good sport also means giving your best effort. Your opponent deserves it, and you deserve his best as well." And Dan, I think that's really, really well said. And I completely agree. Good thoughts.

So, Frank, Alice, and Dan, thank you for writing your thoughts, and really some, you know, thought and consideration really put into those comments. So thank you--you three, and everybody else who left comments. There were several other really well thought out comments as well. Those weren't the only ones. And you can check them out by going to the comments section of Podcast number 154 --that was the mental toughness episode.

And leave comments for today's show. Definitely do so by going to essentialtennis.com/podcast, Episode number 155, and I'll be happy to read some of those comments next week when I record the next show. So until then, take care, and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]