

Essential Tennis Podcast #156

[music] Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you love tennis, and want to improve to 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 can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode is brought to you by Tennis Express. Please check them out this week by going to essentialtennis.com/express.

Well, thanks very much for joining me on today's show. Two quick things to talk to you about before we get right into the content. First of all, I'm so happy and proud of my Green Bay Packers. For those of you who don't know, I'm from Wisconsin. I was born and raised in Milwaukee, and just a life long Packets fan. I love the organization, I love the town of Green Bay, and I'm just so happy that they won the Super Bowl yesterday. So, just wanted to get that out of the way. And yeah, it's just incredible. Never expected them to make it that far, and nobody did, once we were about half way through the season. Alright, I'll leave it at that.

Secondly, this is going to be a rebroadcast. And I don't like to do that, but I am just completely overwhelmed with getting ready The Doubles Domination release, which is going to start next week. And again, for those of you who don't know, I teach full-time. I have a full-time teaching job. I spend around 50 hours a week at work. And so I just have limited time to work on side projects. And my second release of Doubles Domination is going to be huge--lots and lots of new content, most of it video. And it's going to be much more in-depth than my last release of it. And anyway, my web admin and myself have been working long hours getting this ready. And we're going to have an announcement about it next week, next week's show--on Monday. So listen for that.

But today's episode was originally aired--I don't have the date in front of me, but it was originally Podcast number 69. It's all about singles--singles practice, singles strategy, and mental toughness for singles. So it's a comprehensive episode on improving your singles play. So I know it's gonna be a great episode, and I apologize for the rebroadcast, but I just have to get everything ready for next week for Doubles Domination. So let's go ahead and get to it. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music]

Alright. Let's get down to business on today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast. And today we're going to be talking about winning more in singles. And we're going to be splitting this up into 3 main areas or topics. The first one is going to be practicing for singles to increase your winning. We're going to talk about what to practice when you go out onto the practice court. And practicing in general is something that we've talked about on the Podcast before, and I would encourage you guys to go to the Podcast archives and look that Podcast up, cause it was very good--just telling you guys how to set up a good quality practice and not waste your time.

Today we're going to talk about singles specifically, and we're going to repeat some of that information again, but some of these things will be new as well. Our second topic is going to be winning singles strategies. We're going to talk about how to put together a

strategy for your singles play. And our last topic is going to be winning more. And I'm going to give you guys 3 different ways that I see people lose a lot of matches--basically by lack of focus and giving away points, giving away matches, by not really paying attention. I'm gonna give you guys 3 ways to keep your focus and keep your attention more, and win more matches. So kind of a mental tennis topic to wrap things up. So, practice play, we're going to talk about strategy, and we're going to talk about mental tennis--all having to do with singles specific play.

And the first topic we're going to cover is going to be practice play. And I was asked to cover this by Tom. Tom and I sent a couple emails back and forth. And I'm not sure what his location is, but he asked me to cover a couple different topics, and one was practice drills to increase winning. And I want to talk to you guys--you singles players--about how to practice and put together a high quality practice that's really gonna be the best use of your time, so that you can give yourself the best chance of winning. And we're going to cover 4 main strokes or areas, and you guys are going to see a pattern in how to practice all of these. And hopefully I can get through to you guys what's most important to do when you guys go out and actually practice your tennis.

So we're going to talk about groundstrokes, volleys, overheads, and serves. Have our 4 kind of meat and potatoes types of strokes in tennis. Certainly we could talk about more different types of strokes--stuff like half-volleys, or maybe backhand overheads, or lobs, or drop shots--but these are gonna be the 4 main strokes that you guys are going to be using in your singles play, and for the most part in your doubles play as well. Doubles has a little bit different skill set, but for our singles play today, we're gonna talk about those 4 strokes.

So let's get started with groundstrokes. First of all, I want you guys to make sure that you're practicing both cross court and down the line, on both sides--your forehand and backhand. Oftentimes when I see recreational level players practice, when they practice their groundstrokes, both players will go back to the baseline, and just hit. They'll just rally it back and forth. They'll both start in the middle of the baseline, and they'll just hit back and forth. And you guys should probably warm up that way, just by hitting back and forth and kind of relatively low focus, and just rally. And that's fine. But you need to evolve from that. You need to advance and get more complicated and challenge yourself more, moving on from that.

And the way that I like to do that with students is to take each side--their forehand and their backhand--and set up a specific target and a specific goal for each direction that they could hit. And basically that breaks down into 4 different rallies, 4 different directions--their forehand crosscourt and down the line, that's two, and also their backhand crosscourt and down the line. And typically, the way that I like to warm my students up--and I very often begin every lesson this way--is by taking a specific direction--let's say their forehands first and going crosscourt. And I'll give them a specific target and a specific goal to achieve while aiming for that target.

So, for example, their forehand crosscourt, I'll put out a cone crosscourt, and I'm left-handed, so that would go typically across to my backhand. And I'll put that cone right in the middle of no-man's-land, half way between the service line and the baseline, and half way between the center of the court and the singles sideline--over on the deuce side of the court. So if you guys can imagine no-man's -land--a rectangular box back there--basically I split that in half, and I take just one half at a time, and then I put a target right in the middle of that half of the court. And I want my student to be aiming past the service line--we're practicing on purpose hitting deep, solid groundstrokes. I

want them to aim for that target, and I'll give them a certain number to achieve.

Sometimes I'll have them hit 10 or 15 total to that section of the court--that half of the court past the service line. So anywhere in that back box on the right half of my side of the court is going to count. Or maybe something I'll think that they need some work with their consistency, and I'll have them hit 5 or 7 shots in a row to that spot -- crosscourt and past the service line. And again, I'll usually give them a specific physical target to actually aim for that's in that target area. And I'll give them, you know, some bonus points if they actually hit that spot, that actual target--the cone, or ball pyramid or whatever.

So anyway, rally with your partner. And both of you guys should have a physical target to aim for, and also a general target area that you're trying to hit X number of times--maybe it's X number of shots in a row to your target area, or maybe you and your partner are working together to try to get a total number, maybe 20 or 30 groundstrokes in that specific spot. And then once you've achieved that, then switch it up and go down the line. Then go to your backhands and go crosscourt and go down the line, and keep repeating aiming for that target.

This is going to be the best bang for your buck, because you guys need to be comfortable and confident hitting to specific targets, and hitting in specific directions during your singles play. Everybody you play is going to have a little bit strengths and weaknesses--and we're going to get to that in your strategy part of today's show--and you need to be able to hit to those specific spots over and over and over, depending on who you happen to be playing that day. So there's your groundstroke practice--deep in the court, specific target, and get some good repetition and consistency, so that you build your confidence and your physical ability to hit to a certain part on the court over and over.

Next up, let's talk about volleys. And I want you guys to do very similar drills to work on your volleys. And we want to work on depth and control of the ball. And the way I do this with my students, is very often similar to how I do groundstrokes. I'll be on the baseline, and I'll have them aim to a certain half of the court, typically. And I'll put them right in the middle of the court, up at the net, a lot of times half way between the net and the service line. And I will put a physical target out on one side or the other--let's say the deuce side. And I will hit groundstrokes at them, and it's their job to volley back to my specific target.

So, if it's on the deuce side, again, I'll typically have them practice hitting past the service line and to a certain half of the court. And so they'll have half of that no-man's-land box to aim for. And I'll have them hit, again, 5 in a row, or maybe 10 total, or 15 total, etc. And then we'll go over to the other half of the court, and they'll have to do the same thing. And again, this kind of repetition builds confidence, or it can build technique as well. If they don't have the ability to control the ball, and keep it within a certain part of the court, and keep it within some boundaries that we're aiming for, then you know, aiming and trying to get 5 in a row might take 15 or 20 minutes. And if that's how long it takes, then so be it--that's how much practice they needed. And they need to get better at that skill.

Hitting 5 in a row to a specific target like that is something you guys hopefully eventually are going to be able to do routinely. And this will just be kind of another part of your practice that you'll maybe get through quickly some days, and other days it might take you a little while, but it's very important to have a specific target like that,

and be able to repeatedly hit it over and over. Cause once again, during your point play, we're going to have to be able to control where the ball goes to be able to execute certain strategies. And this is how you learn to be able to do that again and again--is by having a specific target.

I think it's important to point out that in both instances--on groundstrokes and volleys so far--I've mentioned that I have my students very often aiming for a deep target, and specifically past the service line. I find that it's very important that players learn how to control the depth of their shots, and in general, keeping the ball deeper in the court takes a little bit more skill and a little bit more control. Anybody can kind of shank a volley or groundstroke, or hit it poorly, or not on purpose in general, and hit it short. And sometimes that might even work, and that might even earn you points. However, if you watch high level players, if you watch good players, you'll see them consistently trying to keep the ball deep, or purpose, to keep their opponent in a defensive position, to keep their opponent away from them. And so, I very... I shouldn't even say very often. Really 100% of the time, I start my students off aiming deep in the court. Even beginners just starting off. I have them purposefully aiming past the service line with their volleys and with their groundstrokes, to try to build good technique and good habits, to try to hit a solid, confident shot, be able to hit a good, penetrating shot--whether it's volleys or groundstrokes. And it's important to develop that.

It's not to say that it's never appropriate to hit the ball short on purpose, to be able to hit a drop shot or a short angle volley, or maybe a low slice to draw your opponent into the net. It's not to say that there's no place for those shots, there certainly is. However, your bread and butter should be to be able to keep the ball deep and penetrating and pressure your opponents.

Alright, next up let's talk about overheads. We've already talked about groundstrokes and volleys. I want you guys picking specific targets, and I want you guys getting good repetition. I want you guys being able to hit 5 in a row, or 15 or 20 total to a specific target, and usually a deep target. Next up, let's talk about overheads. And these are important shots. If you guys are going to wander up to the net--maybe that's not the right way to put it. If you guys are going to approach the net and come forwards, it's important to be confident with your overhead as well. Especially at lower levels--let's say before a 4.0 level--oftentimes that's kind of the first response that you'll see from an opponent, where the person they're playing is come to the net, is a lob. You guys will see a lot of lobs coming forwards. And it's very important to be confident with your overheads.

A lot of times, with junior players, I have them hit 10 overheads in a row anywhere in the singles court to start off. And I like doing this with a 2 on 1 drill a lot of times, with one person hitting overheads, and 2 people back at the baseline lobbying every shot. And I want to see my student be able to hit, just make, 10 overheads in a row--anywhere in play. And it doesn't matter how tough of a lob that we've hit--unless it goes out, I'm not going to count that against the overhead player-- but I want to see my person at the net hustle for every ball, and make a play on every ball, and do their best to make every single overhead. Cause that's just the reality of tennis when you guys go out and play. You've got to run everything down. It's your job, you're by yourself, nobody else is going to cover the lob for you, and so it's important to go and practice running every single shot down, rather than standing there up at the net watching the ball go over you, turning around, and saying, "Oh, good shot" when it lands inside the baseline. Go for every single lob, and try to make a play at every single overhead. You'll become a better player for that.

And start off with just making 10 in a row with you and your partner, your partner lobbying every single shot. And then after that, I would really encourage you to practice hitting to both halves of the court. Just split the court into halves, and again make 10 or 15 total, or maybe 5 in a row, using your overhead to each half of the court. A lot of times, recreational level players only are really able to hit across their body. Which means the righty player is going to hit from right to left, and a lefty player a lot of times can only hit their overhead from left to right, going across their body. Make sure that you try to develop hitting both ways--both to your right and to your left with your overhead. And get some good repetition doing that as well.

And lastly, let's talk about serves. We've already gone over groundstrokes, volleys, and overheads. Serves, we're going to have a similar sounding thing. I want you guys to have a consistent--or rather a specific target. And a lot of times I'll split the box into halves to do this. And you guys need to be confident hitting both halves of the service box. Your opponent will have different strengths and weaknesses from player to player, and you need to be able to place your serve to force them to have to hit either a forehand or a backhand, depending on which one they're better at, or which one they're worse at. You have to be able to adjust and control where your serve is going.

And listen, I don't care how good or bad you think you are, you can aim your serve. You might not be as good as it as a player who's stronger than you, but you need to start practicing as soon as possible placing your serves on purpose. This is going to build your confidence, and is going to build the options that you have, strategy-wise, in your point play. So I want you guys to practice hitting specific targets. And just as general as splitting the box in half, and hitting to the left side or the right side of the box, is perfectly fine. But I want you guys to start developing your accuracy to be able to hit to one side or the other of the box.

So practice a specific target, and again, I would practice hitting, 3, 4, or 5 in a row, to each of the 4 sectors. We've got 2 halves of each of the 2 boxes, so 4 different sections. And I would encourage you guys to try to hit 3 in a row to each of those sides--each of those halves of each of the boxes. And practice your consistency and your accuracy. And I would also do a first serve and a second serve. Practice your first serves, practice your second serves, and this is a good way to build your confidence.

So, there's a general overview guys. And I just spent a lot of time on that. But these are some high focus ways that you guys can practice your singles game, and build your confidence, build your ability to hit certain targets. And we're going to get to strategy next, and your ability to do and execute these types of directions and these types of strokes, that's what's going to give you the ability to be able to build a good strategy and be able to stick with it.

So, I'll be back in just a second to talk about strategy. But that wraps up the practice part of it. And Tom, hopefully that's helpful to you. I know that you weren't necessarily looking for singles specific drills, and I could do a whole other show on doubles specific practice drills as well, but that's a good start for your singles play. [music] [music] [music]

Okay. Let's get talking about singles strategy now. And this question came to us from Abby, who's in Missouri. She wrote to me and said: "What is a good way to develop strategy? I am 17 years old, and have only been playing recreational tennis for a year. I have joined the school team, but I have no strategy to win." Well sure, Abby. That's an

excellent question. And we're going to stick with our general topic of singles today. And Abby told me that she plays mostly singles. She plays some doubles as well, but we're just going to stick with singles today.

And in singles, Abby, first of all I want to make sure that you understand that crosscourt is better than down the line. All other things being equal. There are certainly circumstances where it's appropriate to hit down the line, but for the most part, crosscourt is going to be your best play. And Abby, especially since you're relatively new to the game of tennis, you've only been playing about a year, and I believe she's around a 2.5 level player or so, crosscourt is going to be your best bet. And you're going to want to be hitting the ball across from right to left or from left to right, across the center of the court over to your opponent's side. You're going to want to be hitting in that direction a very large percentage of the time--especially since you're just getting started.

It's higher percentage because the court is about 4 feet longer in the singles court from corner to corner going crosscourt as opposed to down the line, so it gives you more space to hit to. And the net is also shorter across the center of it. It's 6 inches lower in the center of the court as opposed to over the net post. So, the net's lower, the court is longer, and also by hitting crosscourt you make your opponent move a little bit more as well. You hit the ball at an angle which forces them to have to travel a little bit greater distance to get to it in general, as opposed to hitting down the line.

So, that's number one. Understand that crosscourt is going to be the better play a large percentage of the time. And I want you to be hitting crosscourt most of the time in your singles play. I mean, I would say, you know, if you... when you have the opportunity to, I would say 80+ percentage, 80+ percent of the time I would like to see you hit crosscourt if I was your coach.

Now, there's some other things that I want you to identify as well. And if you can start to identify these things quickly, within the first couple minutes of your warm-up or your match play, it would really do you a great service. First of all, I want you to identify what your opponent doesn't like or is poor at. Figure out what their weaker side is--their forehand or their backhand. Figure out if they like volleys or dislike coming to the net. Figure out their serve is weak. You need to figure out what the weakest part of their game is.

You also need to identify what you're doing particularly well. What's your best shot? Maybe that particular day something specific is really clicking for you. You need to figure out what your strongest part of your game is.

Once you have identified those 2 things, you want to make them beat you with their worst shot. Make them beat you with their worst shot. You're going to want to find out what their weakness is, and go to it all day long. And this sounds like a very simplistic thing, but in watching tennis around the level that you play at, Abby, I very rarely see players really execute this well. You need to figure out what makes them uncomfortable, and then go to it again and again and again. And what would be even better than that, taking it one step further, would be to use your strength to go at their weakness, and figure out how you compare that up, and use that pattern to your advantage, and do it over and over.

And I'll use myself as an example here. I'm a left-handed player, and my forehand is much stronger than my backhand. And since I play mostly righties, my crosshand

forehand goes to their backhand--which is very typically a player's weakness. So, over the years I have really highly developed my crosscourt forehand, and I've also developed a good down the line backhand as well. And so, my game--my singles game--is kind of tailored towards hitting to my opponent's left side of the court--which is usually their backhand. And so I'm used to just pummeling that side of the court, and forcing them to have to hit backhand after backhand after backhand.

And along the way, I'll also typically shift myself to the right side of my side of the court, so that I can hit as many forehands as possible. Again, I'm left handed, so I very often shift myself to the right side of the court so that I can hit even more forehands and hit them all over to the right--which is my opponent's left--hit it to their backhand side. So I have a very high focused strategy, very typically, of hitting to my opponent's backhand side. And if they start adjusting for that, and shifting over to their left, I'll start hitting inside-out forehands, and hitting back the opposite direction, and start moving them side to side, again, while hitting as many forehands as possible for myself.

So, these are the types of things that you need to start paying attention to--your opponents weaknesses, your strengths. You want to start setting up patterns of play that are going to play into your opponent's weaknesses, and also understand that crosscourt is going to be the higher percentage direction. If you play an opponent who is kind of even, they like both their forehand and their backhand, they don't really have a really well-defined weakness --which is going to be rare, by the way--just hit everything crosscourt. And work on hitting as many shots that you're comfortable with as possible. If it's your forehand, work on running around your forehand, hitting as many forehands as possible, and keeping the ball safe in crosscourt in deep in the court. And you're going to beat a lot of players just doing those basic things. I wouldn't get any fancier than that. And we're going to get to that next when we start talking about winning more and kind of using some mental tennis tactics.

So, Abby, hopefully that gives you a good starting point, and a good place to kind of give your strategy some foundation. Please get back to me and let me know if I can go into depth any further with that--which I could. But that should give you a good place to start for your level, and give you some good foundational ideas. So, Abby, thanks very much for writing, and let me know how things go. [music] [music] [music]

Alright. The last couple of things we're gonna cover are going to be some mental tennis topics. And Tom and I... Coming back to Tom, when he and I were writing back and forth, one of the topics that he asked me to talk about was turning good tennis fundamentals into winning when it counts. And to me, that just screams mental tennis. That means taking the skills and abilities that you have, and applying them to your match, or even to your practice, so that you get as much out of it as possible and give yourself the best possible chance of success. And so much of that is going to come down to focus, concentration.

And I'm going to talk briefly about how that relates to both your practice and your strategy. When you guys go out there, practice. Concentrate. Focus on what you're doing. Don't lose track. Don't get sidetracked. Don't just start hitting aimlessly, and just hitting back and forth and messing around. Pick your target. Pick your objective, your goal. Give yourself a number and objective to shoot for, and take one thing at a time and achieve it, and obtain that goal. Hit 5 in a row, or hit 20 total in your specific target, and then move on to the next thing.

Guys, all of the practice drills I gave you guys, and the strategies that I talked about,

these are all pretty basic things. I'm not giving you guys earth-shattering stuff here, you know. I mean, not to down play it, I mean, it's important that you guys understand how to practice well, and how to put together a strategy. But, I mean, at the core of it, the things that I'm giving you guys to think about and the concepts are very simple. What really separates an average player, kind of over across the whole span of their career, and somebody who really achieves more, and who really becomes great given their own skills and abilities, the difference between those players is going to be their focus, their intensity, their work ethic, their concentration. These are things that during match play and during your practice play are going to make really a big difference for you guys.

Now, as far as winning more is concerned, I've got 3 things here that I want you guys to really remember. Write these down in your tennis notebook if you have one already. If you don't have one, go get one. Right now. [laughter] So 3 things. First of all, never change from a winning game plan; ever.

I see this all the time. In my lessons, I see this all the time. I'll play a groundstroke game with my students up to 7. And they'll--on the very first point of the game--put together a great point, and play a specific pattern against me that utilizes their strengths, hits to my weaknesses, they put the ball away. It's like "Awesome. Great job. Good point." And then we go, and the next 2 or 3 points they do things completely different. And they'll try... No, I'm gonna leave that for a different point. But they'll go and use completely different strokes or different strategies. And the entire time they could've been winning by using what they used in the very first point. But they weren't paying attention. Or maybe their attention span is not good enough. They didn't really... It didn't really compute to them that, "Oh, hey, I won that point. Maybe I should do that again."

And again, this seems like a simple thing, but I see it constantly where people come up and put together an excellent point, and then they just try something different, because they kind of get the idea that it has to be complicated. It doesn't have to be complicated. Find a simple strategy that works, and just keep hammering at it, again and again and again, until your opponent has come up with some kind of counter to it that, you know, renders it useless. But until that happens, keep on hammering away at it.

Next up, abandon a losing game plan quickly. Not only is it important to understand and realize and notice when you've won a point, but it's also very important to realize [inaudible] notice when you are losing points in a certain way, or using a certain strategy or a pattern of shots. And you need to put away those patterns or that strategy as soon as you notice a pattern of it not working. So just as important as sticking with a winning plan, you need to put away plans that are not working out for you as well.

And the last thing I want to talk about is don't get fancy. Alright? And I almost mentioned that while I was talking about not going away from a winning game plan. Guys, don't... If you're below a 4.0 level, put away the drop shots, put away the lobs. You guys should not be trying to win with fancy tennis. You should not be trying to hit winners on every point. You guys should be playing good, solid, fundamental tennis. We want good, solid basics.

Good tennis is very simple. And especially at an amateur level, you don't need to go out and hit big, professional type shots, you don't have to hit fancy shots and play complicated strategies. Good tennis is simple. And you guys should not be trying to overcomplicate things by trying difficult strategies or difficult techniques. So make things simple on yourself.

Alright. Well, that's all the time we have for today, so we're going to wrap things up. But Tom, hopefully those are some good things for you to think about. And everybody else, hopefully that was enjoyable for you as well. That's gonna wrap up our winning more in singles show. And just a recap, we talked about our practice play, we talked about strategy--putting together a winning game plan--and right there we talked about a couple mental tennis things as well. If you guys put all of those things together and really focus on them, I can pretty much guarantee you will win more--within whatever level you happen to be playing in now. It just takes some focus, it takes some practice, takes some intentionality, and you guys can do it. You can improve your tennis. [music] [music] [music]

Alright. That does it for Episode number 156 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. I hope that you enjoyed this rebroadcast. And whether you did or not, I'd like to hear from you. This Episode was originally aired before you could leave comments for the shows, so I'd love to get your take on the content in today's Episode. You can give me any thoughts or feedback or questions you might have, by going to essentialtennis.com/podcast, and then leave a comment for Episode number 156. I will share some of those at the end of next week's episode, unless I just have zero time again. But I should be able to get out a regular episode, answering some new questions next week.

So thank you for your patience in that. And trust me, it's going to be worth it when you see... I'm putting out a bunch of free instruction as well next week having to do with doubles tactics. So I know all of you are going to at least enjoy that, even if you don't end up becoming part of Doubles Domination 2.0. Alright. So, until next week. I hope you all are doing great with your tennis; improving. Hope that this podcast has been helpful. And I will talk to you all again next week. Until then, take care, and good luck with your tennis. [music]