

Essential Tennis Podcast #161

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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 podcast is brought to you by Tennis Tours and Tennis express.

Thank you very much for joining me I appreciate having you as a listener on today's episode of the podcast. Before we get going with today's questions and answers I just want to remind you all about the BNP Paribas Open happening in Palm Springs at Indian Wells right now in California, and ATP 1000 Tour event and some - all the top level players in the world out there playing.

I watched Federer just last night. I know that [inaudible] was looking good, I think he won O&O in his last round. So, lots of good action, make sure to check it out. If you don't have the tennis channel you can actually watch it for free online at espn3.com. That's actually how I've been watching it and I've just been streaming that from my laptop to my TV at home which works great.

And secondly before we get to today's questions, I want to remind you all about the forums at essentialtennis.com. Haven't talked about those in a while. It's a great place to connect with other passionate tennis players, players just like yourself that are looking to improve and working really hard at their game. In the near future I'm going to start spending a lot of time on the forums again. Right now I'm not there a whole lot. I'm going to have more news about that in the near future.

But anyway, you should really go sign up. It's totally free and it's a great place to receive encouragement and support and help when you need a helping hand in your tennis game. So, go check it out. All right, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music]

All right, let's go ahead and start off with our first question today and it comes to us from Collin in Australia, he's a 4.0 player. He wrote to me and said, "I'm 50 years old, right handed, and have been playing off and on for about 30 years. I have always had issues with my forehand ground stroke, it is much weaker than my one handed backhand. I cannot get the unconsciously competent level to lift my game."

"I'm trying transition from an old 70s style flat forehand to a more modern stroke. I get very confused regarding the position of the wrist, forearm, elbow, shoulder etcetera during the swing. Should I be turning my body or shoulder back on the back swing then forward before the arm on the forward swing or does the body stay still in an open position and just shoulder and arm move back and forward?"

What triggers the forward swing? Should my wrist be straight or laid back? Do I pronate or supinate during my swing? How do I return hard top spin rising shots

coming to my forehand side? I can slice these on my backhand side. I feel like I'm never in the right position. I'm good with low shots around waist high. Most of my errors are hitting straight up over the baseline without top spin going well out. I've been trying to develop curve on my forehand works during drills in practice, but not during matches. I drill with the local pro each week, but he is not so technical. What is your advice for older players trying to update their game? I hope you can help. Regards, Collin.

Okay, there is a lot of stuff in there Collin and you threw a lot of different questions at me which is totally fine, and I'm going to do my best to get at everything and make sure that you understand exactly what is essential to being able to hit a solid forehand, a more 'modern forehand'. A forehand that has some top spin, that has some curve like you are talking about in your question.

And that's important, and regardless of how old you are or how long you've been playing, it is certainly still possible to develop more of a top spin shot on either your forehand or backhand side. And I want to start off by saying that it doesn't have to be complicated and reading your question here sounds like just a classic case of paralysis by analysis.

You have way too many things going on in your head, you've got all these questions. I counted at one point; I think you have six different questions regarding your forehand technique. You've got a lot of different, small technical questions. Don't get me wrong, it's important to cognitively understand what should be happening during a forehand swing. You know, it's good to know, to have the information what part of your body should be doing this and that and in what order, etcetera, etcetera. But when you're actually trying to keep track of all of those things you asked me about at the same time, you're focus keeps shifting from thing to thing to thing and you never really become unconsciously competent because you're always - your attention is just all over the place.

So, you never really nail down and make a habit any of those little details because you are always shifting your conscious attention on one thing to the next to the next. And to ever really be conscious - unconsciously competent Collin, all those things have to be a habit. And the way that you're going about it is just too complicated, it's too detailed.

So, I've got a list here of kind of order of operations on a good, solid forehand as far as technique is concerned. It's a list of five things and it's going to give you instructions on how to hit the entire forehand stroke. And they're big chunks, it's not little details. which again can be important, but I want you to get your head away from all of these little details and just do the big, important parts well. And I think you'll be surprised at how much of a difference it makes when you're not so bogged down with all of these little technical parts of your swing.

So, here's a simple, no frills instructions on how to hit a top spin forehand. Number one; your body starts sideways and you were talking about staying open during the swing, no you - well, your stance can be open that's fine. Your upper body needs to rotate back and forth and your core, your upper body needs to begin at a 90 degree angle to the baseline. That's number one.

Number two; your racket needs to drop below the height of the ball, and you can do that however is comfortable. Some people use a reverse C back swing, other people just drop the racket down there the lower the ball is. I don't care which way is most comfortable for you right now. In general I prefer a reverse C back swing. That's how

most high level players hit the ball and I think for a good reason, but you don't have to do it that way. Just understand that at some point if you want to hit top spin and you want to have that curve in your forehand, the racket's got to drop to lower the ball is. Might seem obvious, but I'm going to throw that in there. So, body starts sideways, racket drops below the ball.

Number three; your body rotates forwards and then your arm and your racket follow and this was something that you mentioned in your question. Your core should unwind first before you swing with your arm and with your racket, and this is called the kinetic chain. And I recommend that you do a search for that over the podcast archives for a kinetic chain. That will give you more of the details you're looking for as far as how to use your body correctly and in what order, etcetera. But, your core, your upper body should rotate forward towards your target before your arm and your forearm, your hand, your shoulder, before all those things start to really accelerate the racket through the point of contact. So, that's number three.

Number four; contact should be made with a flat racket face and with the racket at waist height. We don't want the racket facing upwards, we don't want it facing downwards it should be square to the ball. Then number five; your finishing position should be with the racket finishing over your left shoulder and really up off your shoulder is best. Kind of the higher - well, not necessarily the higher the better, but there should be a good four, six inches between your shoulder, your left shoulder and the racket when you finish. Your butt cap, the bottom of the racket should be pointing towards your target and your racket should be on edge, meaning perpendicular court. Your racket face should be perpendicular to the court surface, ninety degrees to the court.

When you're in that finishing position with your racket, your chest should also be facing forward towards your target meaning that you made a ninety degree turn with your upper body. So, there you go, and by the way, I recommend that you start off there Collin. Just get to that finishing position; racket over your left shoulder, butt cap pointing towards your target, racket on edge, chest facing forwards. If you line all four of those things up the way that I'm describing, and then make sure that you finish in that position over and over and over again, I can almost guarantee you that that's going to help improve your forehand right there. Make a Smooth swing consistently up to that finishing position and it's probably going to fix a lot of the problems that you've been having.

So, again just quick review the five things; body starts sideways meaning upper body. You can use whatever stance you want but upper body sideways. Racket drops below the ball, body rotates forwards. Your arm, shoulder and racket then follow. Contact is made with a flat racket face and then the racket finishes over your left shoulder but kept pointing towards your target, your racket on edge and your chest facing forwards. So there you go.

As far as other details; your hands, your wrists, just keep them relaxed during the swing, that's it. You don't want to really try to manipulate those and whip them or hinge them back and forth as you try to make your swing. Just keep them relaxed and if you follow the directionals that I just laid out, you will have pronated.

You were asking about pronating as well. I know you don't want to supinate during a a forehand swing, you want to pronate, and if you finish in the position that I described you will have pronated your forearm. So, you don't have to worry about that. So, that's it. Those are kind of the big chunks, the big fundamental, essential parts of hitting a top

spin forehand.

There's certainly more details we could talk about than that, but if you just follow those simple instructions then you should definitely see some curve on the ball and, you know, using those simple instructions you should be able to hit a comfortable shot without being bogged down with a whole bunch of details.

I recommend by the way Collin, that you practice this without hitting a ball at first. Look at the - those five things, you know, type them out or wait until the transcript is out. And then just take a look at the list and just practicing at home without hitting a ball first so that you're making sure that you get all of those major parts in there.

Two more quick things. If you can curve the ball in practice but not in match play, as you described, then your close, you're on the right track, but you keep reverting back to your old habits when you're under pressure. That old swing that you've been using for, I think you said 30 years on and off that you've been playing tennis, don't be surprised if that keeps sneaking in. And especially when it really counts, and it's in a match and there's a little bit of pressure there. That's when you're going to revert back to your old muscle memory habits.

So, that's extremely common. Please don't be frustrated by that. It takes a lot of practice and a lot of repetition doing it the right way, the new way, before you reverse that muscle memory and you have a new stroke that's happening without even thinking about it.

And then lastly, if your errors are mostly long, especially if they're away long like what you were describing in your question, it means that at contact your racket face is open. Your racket is tilted back your strings are facing up towards the sky or up towards the ceiling and when you make a long high follow through with your racket like what I'm describing, and your face is open, it's not square to the ball at contact, instead of curving the ball you're just going to launch it up into the air and it's going to go way to far.

Usually that is caused by tensing up and not allowing your hand and your racket to turn over fluidly and correctly. So, the face pops open and the ball goes way too far. Just be aware that's usually what causes that. Don't shorten your follow through up and get more tentative, Simply relax and keep your racket face square to the ball as you make contact, and that will keep the ball from going too far.

All right, so Collin there you go. Hopefully that clears up a bunch of your questions and gets you on the right track. Thank you very much for being a listener in Australia and I hope this has been helpful to you. If you have any further questions feel free to write and to let me know. Best of luck. [music] [music]

All right, before we get through the second question in today's show, real quickly I want to remind you all about the two sponsors that I have on the podcast currently. Number one is tennistours.com. You can go there to purchase travel and ticket packages to WTA and ATP professional tennis events. When you check out use the promotional code 'Essential'. You'll get a discount off of your purchase and I thank them very much for their support of the show.

Second sponsor is Tennis Express where you can go to buy all of our racket string, clothing, shoes and bag. All tennis gear and equipments needs you can get fulfilled there. Really great shipping and service. Please go check them out by going to

essentialtennis.com/ express. When you go to that link you'll get r Purchase anything, the Essential Tennis podcast will get a small percentage of your purchase back to the show to help support the show. So, thank you to Tennis Tours and Tennis Express for your support. I really appreciate it.

All right, moving on we've got now a question from David in Atlanta who's a 3.5 player. He wrote to me and said, "My question is simple, how hard should you swing the racket for most shots? I am an intermediate player, I notice I play better when I swing hard and worse when I am tentative with my swing. In lessons I have been told to accelerate. I even noticed how well this works for serves. I now try to hit as hard as I can up and out on my serve. The pros, take Rafa [ph] for example, all swing hard." Yes they do. "Should we be doing the same to improve?"

Okay, David good question. The really short answer is, it depends but in general no. You shouldn't be doing the same as the pros when it comes to this and I'm going to get more detailed than that but no. The pros play a level of tennis that is so far beyond what most people think and can even comprehend. I know that on TV and on YouTube when you're looking at video, you know, we all know what they're doing and we understand it and it looks like we can comprehend what's going on on the screen. You really don't have any idea.

Unless you've been personally close to it, first of all, if you've sat courtside and really watched and heard and felt the ball getting hit by a player like Rafa [ph], or if you've hit with somebody who's been on the tour before, unless you've done one of those two things, it's really difficult to understand how much they accelerate at the ball. It's really incredible.

So, no you don't want to be doing the same as the pros in trying to accelerate that much every time, that's not a good idea. On the other hand, you also don't want to hit tentatively at any level. I don't care if you're just starting out, and you're a 2.5 level, you should not be decelerating using short technique and hitting the ball tentatively scared and worried about it going too far or worried about hitting the ball out. That's not how you're going to improve. Now, there are many, many different speeds of swing between the pros and being tentative. Millions of different levels of swing speed between those two extremes and so where you should be is somewhere try to be a little bit more specific about that to give you a good idea David, and everybody else listening. I'm going to group players up into three kind of big chunks and I want to be really clear that what I'm going to describe and talk about here is going to be a generality. Everybody is a little bit different when it comes to this, but I'm going to give you my two cents on how much I think you should be accelerating based on your level. I'm going to be going based on NCRP which is what we use here in the U.S. to rate players.

David wrote in and said he was a 3.5. If you don't know how that scale works, it starts from 1.0 and goes up to 7.0, between 6.0 and 7.0 meaning that you're a professional player. If you wanted to get a full run down of what all the different levels are, I have linked to a chart in the show notes for today's show which is episode number 161. So, if you're not sure and you want to go see what these levels are that I'm talking about during my explanation, go to essentialtennis.com, click on podcast and then find episode 161, and I have a link there going right to a chart that will show you kind of a general description of each level of tennis.

Okay, now I'm going to group these into three different levels; 2.5 to 3.0, 3.5 to .40 and 4.5 to 5.0. How much you should be accelerating, David, depends on where you are.

Again these are generalities and this is my opinion, but, you know, all of these shows are my opinion, and I think that based on my experience, I have a very strong feeling that what I'm about to tell you guys here is definitely correct.

We'll talk about a 2.5 to 3.0 player first. This level of player should be slow, steady and controlled. I mean really the most you want to be accelerating around this level is probably around 60% or so, and when I say 60% I mean that 100% would be as fast as you can [empty]

possibly swing the racket. So, we're kind of just over the other side of half speed. So, if you're not sure what your 60% is, go out to a tennis court with a bunch of balls, stand on the baseline, drop yourself a forehand and just hit it as hard as you can. It doesn't matter where it goes. I mean you can try to make it, but just hit it as hard and as fast as you can. That's 100%. Then, cut that in half, then add a little bit to that and that's the way that you should - the acceleration you should be using most of the time.

The reason for that is if you're a 2.5 to 3.0 player, you still have big changes that you have to make to your technique to get to the next level. Your technique is not refined and most of it needs work. So, you need to swing at a speed that will allow you to be aware of what you're doing with the racket and that will allow you to be in control of what's happening with your technique otherwise you'll never learn good habits.

If you just go for every shot, if you're a 3.0 player and you're just hitting aggressively over and over and over again, it's going to be very difficult to be aware enough of what you're doing with the racket to actually create new habits, better habits and improve your technique. If you're at a 2.5 or 3.0 level, there's a reason for that and I don't recommend you swing past 60% acceleration most of the time because you need to learn control and you need to learn better technique.

Next up we've got 3.5 to 4.0 and this is where David falls into play, kind of an intermediate to upper intermediate level and this level of player can start to accelerate a little bit more. I wrote down, and again these general guidelines here, very general guidelines, I wrote down in my notes 80% max. So, you can start to accelerate a little more aggressively when it's appropriate in the point situation, but not more than about 80%, and again 100% meaning that that's as hard as you can hit the ball.

You definitely still don't want to be accelerating that much because you'll probably lose control of the technique that you're learning and at a 3.5 or 4.0 level you certainly still have some technique things to work through and improvements to make it to the next level. So, you don't want to be out of control and crazy and trying to hit everything hard. You're probably going to make a lot of errors anyway. Plus as I was describing before, it's going to be very difficult to be aware of what's actually happening and improve those different parts of your game that you need to.

I also wrote down that this depends on the competence of each stroke. Once you get up to a 4.0 level it's very possible that let's say your forehand ground stroke is pretty solid and your technique for the most part is pretty good. Maybe you can start to accelerate on that stroke a little bit more than on say your backhand where you don't feel as - you don't feel like your technique is quite as good and you make a lot more mistakes when you try to accelerate on that side. So, you want to be a little more conservative, but still, and by the way this goes for all of these levels regardless of your competence level as far as technique is concerned, you don't want to decelerate no matter what. That's just not the way you're going to improve. I mentioned that before, but I just want to say that.

You really don't want to drop below 60% acceleration regardless of your level because that leads to poor technique, it leads to scared tentative hitting and you're going to get stuck at a low level of tennis if you continue to hit like that over and over again. So, again 3.5 to 4.0, your average speed should definitely be easily controlled. Hitting every ball aggressively at this level definitely isn't realistic because again your technique still isn't there 100%. It's definitely gotten a lot better but you still have a little ways to go before you can start to really take a full cut at every ball.

At this level the majority of points are still lost due to errors and so that's really the main reason why we're not consistently making a full speed swing yet. You've got to realize that even at a 4.0 level, most points are just being lost due to unforced errors. So, you don't want to be that sucker who is trying to hit a winner on every other shot and just making a lot of mistakes cause that means you're probably going to lose the majority of your matches. Be smart.

Then lastly 4.5 to 5.0 level and at this level, consistent acceleration is needed. It's not only something that you want to do, you really have to do it to be competitive and at this point you're taking 90% plus cuts at the ball when it's appropriate. That doesn't mean every single swing yeah you're starting to really take a full cut at the ball. At this level, especially once you get up to 5.0 and above, large chunks of points are now won instead of lost. It's not that a 3.5 or a 4.0 player [empty] can't ever hit a good shot and will never hit a winner, you will, but it's a matter of percentages. At a 4.5 and 5.0 level a lot more points are won through forcing errors and hitting winners than at lower levels. So, that means that it's more important to start to really accelerate to keep your opponent from really teeing off and pressuring you over and over and over again.

Last week I played three sets against a former ATP player. He didn't make top ten or anything like that. I think that the highest he was ever ranked was in the top 400, like around 350 or something like that. Definitely a better player than me and I played higher level division two college tennis, didn't play any challenger or future events or anything like that after college. I just went right into teaching. So, this player is definitely stronger than me.

I just bring this up because I know that without - even though I'm out of shape right now, even though my timings not the best, I had no choice but to consistently make a high speed accelerated swing over and over again because otherwise the points would have all just been one by him. He's good enough that if I hit a 60% swing forehand from the baseline, well I'm going to lose that point most of the time because that next shot coming back is going to be hugely pressuring to me. I'm going to be behind in the point just playing defense immediately as soon as I fall below, I mean for me probably 80%. So, basically David, the higher and level you get the more acceleration you want to use so that you avoid errors and so that you put the ball in play more often and so that you're able to control your swing, be aware of your technique and continue improving your strokes.

So, to answer your question, that was the long answer no, you don't want to swing hard every time. On the other hand, you don't want to swing tentatively every time. Hopefully my breakdown here, the different levels and the different percentages of effort and percentages of acceleration have helped you kind of get a picture of kind of the varying degree of acceleration you should be using based on your level. Yeah, hopefully that makes sense.

So David, thank you very much for your question. Hopefully that explanation was helpful to you and as always if you have any further questions feel free to let me know. That's the [inaudible] continuing to improve your game. [music] [music]

All right, that brings episode number 161 of the Essential Tennis podcast to a close and in wrapping up I'd like to read two quick comments that were taken from the many comments that were left for episode number 160. And by the way if you have any thoughts or followup questions etcetera, just general comments, about this episode, you can leave them for me by going to essentialtennis.com/podcast, click on episode number 161 and right there you can leave whatever comments or questions you may have.

And here's two from last week's show, first of all from Fred. By the way, we were talking about passing shots, how to hit passing shots. Fred said, "For me the trick to learning how to hit on the run or the big reach, is related to learning how to relax your death grip on the racket when hitting the ball. At a full run and reach there is no way to power the racket through the ball with a rigidly gripped racket that many intermediate players use. You've got to learn how to relax, and let the racket do more work. This is what the pros are doing on the running passing shots. It's not all that hard or impossible to learn. If this sixty year old geezer can figure it out so can others"

Well Fred, and by the way Fred posted a pretty long response so this is just one of the paragraphs but I thought it was a really good point that being relaxed is so important and it's difficult to do when you're on the run or being stretched out or you're having a reach for the ball.

And the other point that Fred made that I like is that regardless of how old you are, yes an old dog can learn new tricks. I'm so tired of hearing that phrase and I get told that phrase by students and members where I teach, and so it's not true. You can absolutely learn it. Sure, it might take you a little bit more time to learn it than a 15 year old kid, but that doesn't mean you can't do it. It just takes a little bit more work sometimes. Sometimes it doesn't even take more work it just takes a little bit of concentration and repetition and you can do it.

So, for both those reasons I thought that was a really good comment Fred. Thanks for taking the time to respond to last week's show. And then secondly from Joe, your explanation on choosing where to hit passing shots was interesting, but I'd add that if you choose, for example, to aim cross court for all passing shots, at some point your opponent will learn to simply move to cover the cross court reply.

So, just like with so much in tennis, the best choice if you have time is to do different things. If you're forced then go for the percentage shots. Yeah, I totally agree Joe, and I'm pretty sure I didn't say in that episode that you should always aim here or always aim there, rather I gave I think it was five different choices that you could make and the pros and cons of each. And if it sounded like I was really pro one choice and con all the rest of them, that wasn't by design.

Certainly they all have their place based on different opponents and different situations and as Joe is pointing out, if you always go to one spot, well unless you're playing just a total dummy who's not paying attention, they're going to make an adjustment and cover that spot. So, definitely do mix up your shot selection when you hit passing shots, but if you find something that works consistently you definitely want to go to that most. I also agree with what Joe said that under just a really, really high pressure situation you

should probably be going to the highest percentage target most often.

So, Joe and Fred, thank you very much both of you for leaving your comments on last week's show. Again if you have comments for this week's show go to essentialtennis.com/podcast. Leave a comments and I might read it on next week's show. Until then take care everybody and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music] [silence]