

Essential Tennis Podcast #165

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 Westermann: Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast, your place for free expert's tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the episode is brought to you by Tennis Tours and Tennis Express. Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode. Before we get to our two listener questions today, I'd like to quickly thank all of you for all the support and feedback that you've given me in the last week since last week's episode, number 164.

I just went over and took a look at the comments, and I've got some to catch up on. I'll still reply to everyone who's left me comments and thoughts and feedback about last week's episode, but as of right now there are 177 comments on that episode. Obviously a lot of those are myself replying to those of you who have left comments, but that's by far the most feedback I've ever received from the show, so I just want to thank you all very much for your support and your kind words in those comments. It really means a lot to me. So let's go ahead and get to today's episode. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Let's get to our first question today, and it comes to us from Michael in Upstate New York. He's a 3.5 level player. He wrote to me and said I have the Serena and Venus Williams Wilson K Factor team blade racket. I love the racket and recently purchased a second one I would like to modify and experiment with. Having the original to serve as a baseline will allow me to make a more reliable assessment of the customized change. The racket has a weight of 10.2 ounces, and after listening to one of your podcasts, I believe I have adequate strength to benefit from a heavier racket, 11.2 to 11.5 ounces.

My plan is to add a sufficient amount of lead tape at the 9 and 3 o'clock positions. Still unsure how much tape is necessary. I realize I would lose some maneuverability, but I am looking to be more consistent with a longer and smoother stroke. I tend to get too whippy and often revert to rolling over my forehands. I am also considering going on the lighter side with string tension 53 to 55 pounds to add some power. My thought is that this will compensate for the loss of swing speed given the additional weight. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated. Keep broadcasting. Mike.

Alright, Mike. Good questions, and I want to start off by saying I like the path that you're headed down. I think it's really smart to start experimenting with more weight, and a great way to do that is to take a lighter racket relatively speaking that you already like and add weight to the frame as opposed to going through the process of demoing new

rackets, spending the money to buy one or two new ones that cost a lot more money than a frame that you already like.

Once in a while it's a good idea to upgrade and be current with the frames that you use. You don't want to be using 10 or 15 year old rackets for sure, but if you have something that's just a couple of years old, like what Mike has here, then there's nothing wrong with simply modifying what you already have if you're ready for that next step in terms of weight or balance. I think it's really smart that you're experimenting with more weight in general. As I've talked about in previous episodes, we haven't really had a gear show in a while so I'll just quickly go over my thoughts on that. In general, I guide my students toward the heaviest racket that they're still comfortable making a swing with.

Obviously you don't want to go too heavy where it's just a lot of work to swing the racket and you don't feel like you can maneuver it. That's a word that Mike used which is a great word. If you don't feel like you can maneuver the racket comfortably. A lot of recreational players play with frames that are too light for them and as a result those lighter frames, really light frames, especially if you're sub 10 ounces, they tend to lead to poor technique. They're so maneuverable that it's very easy to use short, tight, kind of choppy unsmooth technique. And the lightness of the frame and the amount of power that those light rackets make on their own really lets recreational players get away with poor technique like that. Longer smoother swings will always lead towards higher levels of play.

It's not automatic, but the more you can lead yourself toward a more relaxed, smoother, longer swing path on shots like your forehand ground stroke, your backhand ground stroke, and your serve, the more potential you'll have to raise your level of play. So going towards a heavier racket definitely tends to promote that because the extra length makes it easier to maneuver the racket through the point of contact. If you have really short, choppy, poor technique, then a heavy racket will feel terrible because it's very difficult to accelerate it across your short swing path.

But if you take that heavy racket and you accelerate it across a longer swing path, now we've got the best of both worlds. We have a heavier racket which gives us more momentum through the point of contact, and we have the longer swing path, which gives us the range of motion to be able to accelerate the racket head effectively. The combination of those two things is really the ultimate. That's what you should be going for. So that's section number one. I'm going to talk about three different topics. That's number one.

Just wanted to explain that quickly for those of you who aren't familiar with my thoughts on that. If you want to hear more, go to EssentialTennis.com/Podcast and on the right in the categories there's a Gear and Equipment category, and I've had master racket

technicians, several of them, on the podcast before talking about topics like this. If you want to hear more not just from myself but from people who really make it their career to know gear, go listen to some of those episodes.

Topic number two I want to address here Mike is the proposed jump in weight that you're talking about. 10.2 ounces to 11.5 ounces is a huge jump in weight. I would definitely encourage you to try less than that at first and make incremental movements in weight, kind of up the scale. I would recommend to begin with adding no more than a half of an ounce, 0.5 ounces to the frame total at first. You'll find that's a very noticeable difference to start with. Going a whole ounce heavier or even more than an ounce heavier is really a gigantic difference, relatively speaking, in weight. It might not seem like a lot, but it will change the racket dramatically.

So I would take half of an ounce of lead time, and the best way to tell how much you're working with is just get a cheap postage scale or postal scale. They're the little digital scales with a flat surface on them, and you can use those. They're very sensitive, so they're great for measuring sensitive things like lead tape. A little bit really makes a big difference, and I'm going to link in the show notes here for this episode, number 165. I personally buy everything on Amazon these days. It's just impossible to beat the prices, and I found a good postal scale I think it was \$23, and you can use that not only to measure out your lead tape very, very accurately, but you can use it then to measure the over-all weight of your racket as well to test out exactly where you are.

So I would recommend that especially if you're planning on spending a lot of time to customize this racket. Not only that but once you customize this one, the one, to the way you like it, you're going to want to make the second one exactly the same. So this postal scale will really help you not only know exactly where you are with the first one but match the second one as well as far as the amount of weight you're adding so you have the same weight for both frames.

I would recommend 0.5 ounces. Use the postal scale to measure that exactly. Take a quarter of an ounce on each side of the frame. A quarter of an ounce at 9 o'clock. A quarter of an ounce at 3 o'clock. Use that first. See what you think. If you still feel like you've got plenty of strength and you could definitely still handle more weight, then add a little bit at a time on top of that, but I wouldn't go a full ounce heavier at first.

Then lastly, and again I'm going to put a link to the postal scale in the show notes. Just go to EssentialTennis.com/podcast, click on episode 165, and you'll see a link there to Amazon to the scale that I found. Pretty cheap price. Okay and then lastly Mike I want to talk to you about the string tension. Honestly, I would keep the tension with what you're used to at first. I bet that you'll be surprised at how good it actually feels. I might be wrong. You might feel like once you add the weight that you have a big drop in

power, but I would be willing to wager that you'll be surprised that it might feel like it's the opposite, especially if you do in fact start using a little bit longer swing path, a little bit more relaxed swing path, to really take advantage of that weight.

When you add that extra weight to the racket, especially to the head, that increases the amount of momentum that is traveling through the point of contact. So that extra momentum will make up for whatever less amount of racket speed that you might have by having that heavier weight. So it's very possible that will just balance out by itself. Plus if you start using a longer path, that will allow you to use more potential to accelerate the racket faster anyway.

It's very possible that once you start using the heavier racket, a couple of months from now you'll have the same racket head speed that you did before with a lighter racket anyway because you'll simply get used to it, you'll start lengthening your swing technique, and you'll adapt to the heavier frame and not only have the longer path, not only have the extra momentum, but you'll have the same racket head speed as well. And bam. Now you've got an increase level of play. That would be huge. That would be awesome.

So those are my thoughts right now Michael. Thank you very much for writing to me with your question in upstate New York. If you have anything further, definitely feel free to let me know. Probably the best way to do would be to just post a comment for episode 165 at EssentialTennis.com/podcast. Hopefully this was helpful to you, and best of luck modifying your frame.

Before we get to our second question, I want to remind you all about the official sponsors of the Essential Tennis podcast. Number one, TennisTours.com where you can go to purchase professional ATP and WTA tour ticket packets and travel packages to go watch the pros play. I want to give a quick shout out John M., Essential Tennis fan, and he's come to several clinics. Great guy. Really hard worker. He's in Monte Carlo right now watching the ATP event taking place there right now, the Red Clay event, and having an amazing time.

He purchased his tickets through TennisTours.com. They actually ended up upgrading his tickets. He was in an upper section. For free they upgraded his tickets down to the lower section. Obviously I can't guarantee that's going to happen every time you buy tickets through them, but they've just taken really good care of him, and he's having an awesome time. So, John, continue enjoying your trip thanks to TennisTours.com. If you'd like to check them out, please do that and use the promotional code Essential when you check out. You'll get a discount off your purchase and that shows them that you're a listener of the show.

Then secondly, TennisExpress.com to get all of your gear needs taken care of, rackets, strings, stringing machines, clothing, shoes. Whatever you need, they've got it. Free shipping for orders over \$75. To support the podcast, please go see them by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express. That'll shoot you over there right away. Or you can simply go to the podcast page and click on the box on the right for Tennis Express.

Either way, after you do that and make a purchase, a small percentage will come back to help support the Essential Podcast. Alright let's go ahead and get to our second question. This is a singles tactics question coming to us from Louis in Portugal. He wrote to me and said I'm 31 years old, right handed, one handed backhand, and I'm writing to you from Porto, Portugal. I have one game situation that I've been dealing with for some time now that I'd like some feedback on, returning an easy second serve during singles.

At the level I play at, I often play opponents that cannot produce a heavy second serve. My question has to do with the situation where I hit the return with my forehand. Taking your thoughts on directional, I most often return these shots cross court. As a rule, I take the ball early and on the rise so that I don't have to deal with a shoulder high ball and also to pressure and take time away from my opponent. That's great Louis.

Usually I'm able to hit a consistent and aggressive cross court forehand the first couple of times in a match. I get unforced errors from my opponent, but as the match goes on he tends to adapt to my shot. When I finish my shot, I'm somewhere in between the baseline and the service land in no man's land. I could see this shot as a cross court approach shot, and I go to the net returning volley, or I can recover to the baseline to a neutral position.

On the ad side that's fine because I hit an inside out forehand to my opponent's typical weaker side, their backhand, and from there I can usually control the point. On the deuce side, I hit to my opponent's typical strength when I hit cross court, their forehand, and sometimes I find myself in trouble. If I go to the net, I leave the ad court open when he's on the deuce side and also risk a shot directly at my feet. If I go back to the baseline and recover I have a lot of court to cover until I find myself in a good position.

On the deuce side, should I try to hit down the line forehands more often, even if I hit them with less pace than I hit the cross courts one to avoid unforced errors? This way I would go to the net with less distance to cover and with better court position. You're correct Louis. Should I hit cross court and try to recover to the baseline to a more neutral position? Or should I try to hit the center of the court to the feet of the server?

Lots of options here, and Louis you're off to a really good start understanding the situation that you're in, the different options that you have, and the pros and cons of each option. It's really smart that you're aware of the directionals. I'm not going to get

into the directionals right now and explain it, but basically it's a set of guidelines, general rules for where you should aim your shots in singles given different criteria. If you want to hear about the directionals, go to podcast 156 where I talk about them in detail there.

So in general you've got some great thoughts going on here Louis. You're aware of a lot of different things. You know that down the line in general is riskier. You know that approaching off a cross court shot is not a good idea, so it's great that you have these things in mind. Now the directionals are really good, and they're solid foundation to build your single strategy on top of, but it's important to understand that sometimes it's okay to break the directionals. I'm going to go over four different situations where it's okay to do that. There are other tactical considerations that can override the directionals and make it smart to break them.

Namely what I'm talking about here is the fact that an outside ground stroke is usually best to play course court, and on the deuce side that's what he's talking about. He's struggling with the decision of whether to go cross court which he knows is the smart shot in general. It's higher percentage as opposed to going down the line.

Now the four tactical situations that I have listed here where it's okay to break that rule of going cross court most of the time is number one, your opponent has a considerably weaker side down the line. And on the deuce side against another right handed player, this very well could be the case because when you go down the line it goes to a right handed player's backhand. If in fact their weaker side is their back hand side, and if it's substantially weaker than their forehand, then that could be a good reason to break the directionals and come out ahead in the rally right from the get go right off of the return of serve.

So that's number one. Number two, your opponent is considerably out of position. Now this probably isn't going to apply to this specific situation that Louis is talking about because we're going to go ahead and assume that the server isn't a dummy and serving all the way out by the double's alley, nor is he or she falling over or out of balance or out of position in that way. So that's probably not going to apply, but just in general keep that in mind if you've moved your opponent way out of position during a single's point, during a rally, that can be a good reason to break the directional and go down the line.

Number three, you have a clear offensive opportunity, and that is definitely the case in Louis' situation here. He's describing a weak second serve that has very little spin, and it's an opportunity for sure. He has a chance here to attack. He's in a comfortable position. He's balanced. He's taken the ball on the rise, so we know that he's really confident about making this swing, and he has a good opportunity here to be offensive

and be able to get the point in his favor, or get the rally swung in his favor right from the get go.

Then number four, you plan on approaching the net. When you're approaching the net even if it's on an outside ball, usually you want to go down the line because of the geometry of being able to cover passing shots. Louis mentioned that in his question. He already knows what's going on here, and I'm not going to go through the trouble of explaining that here either since he already knows. I've certainly talked about that, the why of that, in previous shows. Definitely check out episodes about approaching the net.

So there's 4 reasons Louis about why breaking the directionals can only be okay but actually the right thing to do tactically. Again, quick review. Your opponent has a much weaker side down the line. Your opponent is out of position. You have a clear offensive opportunity, and you're planning on approaching the net. If any one of those things is clearly available, then breaking the directionals can be good. If you have a combination of two or more of those things, all four of those criteria might be present all at the same time in which case going down the line would be best. Following the directionals and taking an outside ball cross court might actually be a really bad idea if your opponent has a much weaker side down the line and they're way out of position, already cross court from you, and it's an easy ball. You have an offensive opportunity, and you plan on coming to the net after this shot anyway. It's very likely or possible that all four of those criteria could be met, and you could have an outside ball. Going down the line is obviously the right choice.

So Louis I just want to make sure that you're aware that while the directionals are a great guidelines, it's not written in stone and there's many reasons why breaking the directionals might be a great thing to do. It sounds like you've met several of those criteria when you're on the deuce side and you have this weak second serve that you're able to attack on.

Now, three other things that I want to touch on quickly. First of all you mentioned in your question that when you go down the line, you're being much more conservative. You're taking pace off. Now it's important to understand that down the line is a higher risk shot. It just is. You have less room to work with. The net is higher. There's just more ways to screw up when you go down the line. It's important to know that, but it definitely should still be an offensive shot. If I were you, I wouldn't make it higher percentage.

I wouldn't make up for the fact that it's a lower percentage shot by slowing down. Instead I would simply hit with more spin, hit with more topspin, curve the ball more, and as a result you'll be able to gain back the margin for error that you're losing by going down the line. Make sure also that you're not aiming for the line. Make sure that you give yourself at least 3 or 4 feet of space inside the line as you try to hit that shot, and

make it a confident accelerated swing. If you can't currently put enough topspin on the ball to really make it curve and dip back into the court, definitely work on that because that's a shot that you really want to have down confidently so that you could take advantage of these situations where you have opportunity to be able to attack.

I almost hesitate to put this in here. If it's really, really easy just aim lower over the net and just go for a winning shot more or less. If it's a real sitter, then you might not even need to add that extra spin to make it safer. It's very possible that you have the ability to confidently still just be able to drive through the ball solidly and probably make it into a winning shot.

I almost don't want to say that because recreational players in general tend to hit too low, too straight, not with enough margin for error. So be careful with that. The first choice would be to add some extra spin, make it safer so that you balance out the extra risk that you've incurred by going down the line.

Secondly, if after making your offensive attempt down the line or cross court, either way, and you realize that it wasn't that great of a shot. You had every intention of hitting a great pressuring shot but it just didn't work out that way. You didn't hit it as cleanly as you wanted to or maybe your opponent anticipate where you were going and got there nice and early, and you see that they're going to be in balance and it's not going to be much trouble for them. In that case, definitely recover quickly back to the baseline and weight for a better opportunity.

I know that you have a little bit of distance to go from where you made contact back to the baseline, but standing there is not an option, and moving forward while it will pressure them, if they have reasonably good ground strokes, it's just going to set up for an easy passing shot for them.

So learn to be aware of how good of a shot you actually struck when you went for that offensive change of direction and learn to sense the fact whether or not you really have just pressured your opponent. If not, then start working on recovering quickly back to the baseline and just kind of stay alive to fight another day. Live to fight another day. Don't over pressure and don't over play your hand. Be smart about it and go back to a neutral position and wait for a better opportunity.

Now of course if your opponent has terrible passing shots, then by all means just go ahead and go right up to the net and pressure them and continue to do that even if you don't hit your best shot. But against somebody who's at your level or maybe even a bit higher level than you and has solid confident passing shots, that's probably not something you want to do over and over again.

Lastly, Louis, if they start getting used to your attack, this is something that you mentioned in your question, let's say on the deuce side you start taking that forehand down the line confidently. You're curving it so it's still safe. You're going to their weaker side. Maybe you're even following up to the net on a regular basis and really pressuring them. All good offensive selections. If they start getting used to that and start anticipating it and start making adjustments so that it's really not challenging them as much anymore, feel free to mix it up. Don't let them get comfortable.

Now if it continues to work when you take that forehand down the line, then by all means keep doing it again and again and again. Don't even mix it up. Just be obvious about it and just keep attacking and pounding that backhand over and over and over again. But if they get comfortable and start burning you with passing shots or start guessing and moving early and really getting set up well and they start beating you, then mix it up. Start going cross court as well, and it's especially since this is a really shot that you're talking about. You're comfortable. You're in balance. You don't have to go one way or the other. Feel free to mix it up and keep them guessing if they start getting use to your attacks and it's not effective anymore.

And lastly I'll say you're correct about being wary about approaching cross court. You can still do it. You can still move in off a cross court ball. Just make sure that you really pressure them and you've made it a really good offensive shot. Otherwise you're right. You do leave yourself open for an easy passing shot down the line.

Okay, Louis, great question. You've come at this from a really good level of understanding already. Hopefully this gives you a little bit more freedom to be able to mix up your tactics more, especially when you're in balance and it's an easy shot and you can comfortable attack. Definitely start using that down the line option, especially if your opponent is getting used to your cross court attacks, and especially if their backhand is a weaker side, etcetera. So hopefully you have better understanding of this situation now and it's helpful to you. If you have anything further, definitely feel free to let me know. Great to have you as a listener in Portugal. Hopefully you continue to enjoy the show. Thanks for writing.

That does it for episode 165 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode. I appreciate it, and I'm going to go ahead and start up with the comments next week, so any comments that people leave for today's show I'm going to pick one or two of them and read at the end of next week's show. So if you have any comments or questions or feedback about today's episode, go to EssentialTennis.com/podcast, click on episode 165, leave your comments down at the bottom. I always reply to those right there, and I'll pick a couple to read at next week's show as well. So I look forward to seeing that feedback.

Real quickly, and I really should've said this at the beginning of the show. I just released a new video series about building your serve from the ground up, and it's a three part video series showing six progressions to developing a solid fundamental service motion. Check that out by going to [EssentialTennis.com/video](https://www.essentialtennis.com/video) and you'll see all three videos as well. They're free to watch, and it's really good information. So definitely go check it out whenever you get the chance. Alright that does it for today's episode. Thanks again for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.