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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 for joining me on today's episode. Before we get to today's topic, which is going to be how to beat, serve, and volley players, I just want to talk to you about two quick things. First of all, make sure to check out the recent video instruction that I've been putting out at EssentialTennis.com. It's one of the things that I'm really going to make a big priority moving forward on the website, and I just put out a series of videos on the serve, kind of rebuilding your serve from the ground up. I've got a three video series on the progression of drills to do. I guess it's one drill but broken into six different progressions that can show you how to build your serve from the ground up and really have a fundamental service motion.

I also just put out a video on how to juggle to improve your eye hand coordination. You can view all four of those videos for free at EssentialTennis.com. Just click on video. If you want to go past the two most recent videos, you have to sign up for the archives, the video archives, but that's totally free.

Secondly before we get to today's topic, just a quick reminder that iTunes is by far the best way to get this podcast. Just download iTunes from Apple.com whether you're on a Windows or Mac computer, doesn't matter. Then go to iTunes music store, do a search for tennis podcast. You can subscribe to the Essential Tennis podcast, which means that every time a new episode comes out, you'll get it automatically. You don't have to go to the website and download the file to your computer and drag it over to your iPod or other music player. You can get it automatically which is great. So check that out.

Alright, let's get to today's episode. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction. Alright let's get to our featured topic on today's episode of the podcast. It comes to us from David in Orlando, Florida. He's a 4-5 level player. He said, I struggle to beat guys that serve and volley. What strategies will help overcome this deficiency? Good question, David. Who says serve volley is dead, right? Who says no one comes to the net anymore?

I guess when they say that, they mean professional players, but there's certainly players out there that are comfortable at the net and still will come in when they see an opportunity and have a chance to be offensive and more forward and take over the point, professional and recreational players as well. So it's nice to hear that you have

this problem, David, as somebody who hears complaints a lot from people who say that the game is all power now and nobody works on coming in to the net anymore.

To get to your question, yeah it can be really tough beating this type of player, especially one who is very comfortable up there and does it exclusive and really has good skills at the net. This type of player really forces you to come up with the kids. They don't just sit back and be comfortable and relaxed and wait for you to make a mistake or wait for you to take over the point. They're moving in and really forcing the issue.

So you really have to be sharp and on your game to beat a good serve and volley player, especially at a 4-5 level which is where you're playing. So let's talk about this. We're going to split it up into a couple of different sections. This is going to be the only topic we talk about today, so I'm going to really go into detail on it because it's a topic that I haven't covered before on the podcast. The first thing we're going to talk about is probably the most important, and that is the quality of your return placement. The quality of your return of serve simply just has to be good, especially at a 4-5 level and especially against someone who serves and volleys very frequently and is very competent at it. You can't just hit any old return of serve.

In singles against somebody who serves and stays back, you can really get away with quite a lot. You can just block the ball. As long as it goes relatively deep in the court, as long as it lands past the service line at least a little ways, it doesn't have to be hit hard or hit with a lot of a lot of spin, or hit to a corner. You can neutralize the serve and get into the point and start off from at least a neutral stance, a neutral setting. You get the idea in terms of the phase of play, but against a serve and volley player, you don't have that luxury. That's really what makes it so difficult. You can't just block any old return back in play because your opponent is immediately coming up to the net. If you give them an easy ball, then you're going to be immediately on the defense right off the first shot. It makes life very, very difficult and very frustrating especially if you keep doing that and feeding them easy shots over and over again.

So we're going to be talking about three criteria having to do with a return of serve, and we're going to be really specific on each on what you can do to make this opponent's life difficult as a serve and volley player. The first one is height. This is probably the most important thing that I'm going to be talking about today as far as beating this type of player is the height of the return. If you can get your return of serve low to them, then your life is going to be so much easier that day trying to be this type of player. Even if you don't hit it hard, and honestly even if you hit it to them, if you can get it down low anywhere around their feet or at least around knee height, if it's below the height of the net, if it's below their waste, and especially if it's kind of knee height or below, if you can

get it down by their feet, then you really take away a lot of their offense. You take away a lot of their ability to be able to attack.

It's not to say that they still can't hit a good shot, but you challenge them so much more even if you don't hit it with a lot of pace or with a lot of spin or hit it at a sharp angle or right down the line, whatever. If you can just get the height correct, then you're going to have a much easier time trying to beat this player. It forces your opponent to play something relatively neutral. And the word relatively there is pretty important.

Again, I don't want to make it sound like if you get it low then all your problems are going away, but when you get it low you force them to have to hit up to avoid the net. And from that hitting position, they have to play some kind of placement shot. They have to place it safely someplace. They can't hit the ball hard. They could still maybe hit a really nice drop volley, or they could still hit a nice angle, or they could hit something really deep in the court, and all those things could challenge, but they can't hit the ball hard. It's pretty much impossible to hit the ball hard as a serve and volleyer when the return gets down to your feet.

So you at least have that going for you when you can get the return of serve low. So how do you hit it low? You have three main options. Number one, you could use a slice, and slice shots are not as aggressive, not as offensive, but very often it's easier to place the ball very accurately with a slice instead of taking kind of a full wind up and making a topspin swing on either your forehand or your backhand side. Using the slice a lot of times helps you keep the ball lower, helps you be more consistent, and can help you be more accurate.

David, I don't know your specific strokes and your specific strengths and weaknesses, but I just want to throw that out there as one option. You can use a slice, and as long as you place it well then you're in good shape. It doesn't have to be a big fancy and aggressive shot.

Number two, you can hit with heavy topspin on either side. Again, this might not be necessary, but if you have it and if this is your bread and butter shot is taking a cut at the ball and hitting with heavy topspin, then this can be really effective. And it can be really effective because topspin makes the ball dip down. So if you can effectively and consistently hit with the right amount of spin and the right height and the right depth so that the ball keeps dipping down at the feet of your approaching opponent who is serving and volleying, then this can be an excellent, excellent shot.

Personally when I play serve and volleyers and they hit to my forehand side, that's really my shot of choice as kind of heavy looping shot that dips down at their feet. On my backhand side, I definitely like to play a slice. I'm not as good at hitting topspin on

my backhand side. It's more of a drive, and so I have a hard time getting that low consistently.

My slice on the other hand takes some pace off and I have good control and touch with it, and so I'm able to place the ball low much easier on my backhand side when I use slice. So I personally use both. Just kind of depends on which side my opponent is serving to.

And then the third way, third main way to get the ball low is just to simply block it. You can use a continental grip to do this, or you can use your regular forehand or backhand grip and just put your racket out there and just block it back. Just kind of a flat straight blocking shot, and this is what you want to use against somebody who has got a big serve. David at a 4-5 level I'm sure sees some big serves from his opponents. I don't know if he sees those against his serve and volley opponents specifically, but against somebody with a really big serve who's also coming up to the net after it, then just simply blocking the ball back and just placing it low is a really smart play. It puts the ball in the court consistently and it's very easy to control.

Very often recreational players see the serve and volley tactic, and they think wow here they come, I've got to just haul off and just hit the heck off of this shot, meaning the return of serve. And they go for all these big returns of serve and end up just giving away point after point. Don't do that. We're going to talk more about that a little bit later.

So that's priority number one on the return of serve is the height, and there's three ways that you can get it low. Which one you choose is going to depend on what you're most comfortable with, what you are most effective with. So that's priority number one.

Number two on the return of serve is width, and you've got basically two choices when your opponent is serving and volleying. You can either try for a sharp cross-court angle or you can try down the line. Now since they're moving in and they just hit a cross-court serve from deuce side to deuce side or ad side to ad side, then usually typically the biggest chunk of court is going to be down the line to aim for. Now if they're smart, they're serving most of their serves down the tee, which takes a little bit of -- depends.

On a wide serve, it really takes away a lot of your ability to be able to hit past them down the line. But keep in mind that's usually going to be the biggest chunk of court. Hitting past them back in the direction that they hit back from, meaning cross-court, is going to really tough. It has to be really sharply angled to hit past them. That's not to say that it can't be done. Clearly you can still be effective hitting an angle as well, but I just wanted to throw that out there. Keep in mind that down the line is going to be your biggest piece of real estate.

As far as width is concerned also, keep in mind that you don't want to consistently try to hit it past them or around them unless their serve is pretty weak and/or you're just confident with hitting a return game, or you're really confident with your return game on that given day and you're just taking big cuts at the ball and you're hitting it real clean and real solid. Maybe they're serving and volleying and don't have a good serve, and so you're really comfortable and stepping up and taking a good cut at the return of serve. If that's the case and you can consistently aim around them, then go ahead and go for it, but a lot of you listening are going to fall for this sucker play of seeing them serve and volley. You think ah crap, I've got to hit a winner. They serve and move in, and you see that space on either side of them, and you're just hauling off and just hitting the heck out of the ball over and over again trying to hit winners past them. You don't have to put that much pressure on yourself to hit a perfect shot. So just keep that in mind.

So that's the thing to keep in mind or tactic number two is the width. Keep in mind that down the line usually gives you more space. Also keep in mind, don't go for the big winner return of serve over and over again. That's probably not going to win you the match or get you the break of serve that you were hoping for unless you can, not get lucky but string together a couple really big ones. Hopefully that'll work out for you, but keep in mind you're going to make a lot of mistakes consistently trying to hit around them.

And then lastly, power. You might be a little bit surprised to hear me talking about power, but often times this can be really effective against a serve and volley player. If you just hit it hard, especially right at them, often times it can be really effective in throwing them off and knocking them off balance. You can a lot of times get a weak first volley or a weak half-volley or whatever, a weak first shot from that serve and volley player if you can just simply put a lot of pace on it, take their time away to react. This is especially effective if you're playing with a serve and volley player who doesn't split step and they're just running into the net to try to pressure you. Hitting it hard right at them a lot of times is a great play, even if it's not especially low. Just take away their time, rush them, and put the pressure on them to have some great hands and really place the ball well even though you're hitting the ball really aggressively.

So those are your three main things to keep in mind on the return of serve, David. Priority number one, height. If you can get it low, awesome. And then number two, width. You can pressure them by hitting a sharp angle. You can pressure them by hitting around them down the line. There's more space down the line typically, and don't try to go for that perfect winner around them every time. That's a sucker play. Then lastly, power. If you can just hit it hard, especially right at them, very often that can be effective.

Of course we can mix and match and combine these different options as well. If you can get it low and hard, then awesome. Or if you can hit it low and at an angle and hard,

well great. But that's asking for a lot, especially if you're below a 4-5 level like where David is at. If you're at a 5 level and listening to me, then to be honest at that level you kind of have to go for big offensive shots like that against somebody who is serving and volleying and really has a good net game. Most of you listening if you're at a 3-0 or 3-5 level, that's really going to cause more errors than win points. So don't feel like you have to make a perfect return. Make them have to volley.

And that's a perfect segue right into my second section. The first section there was all about the return of serve. Second section we're going to talk about tactics to use once the return has been hit and the point starts. I'm going to talk about two main tactics.

The first tactic, number one, and this is the first tactic that you always use when you're playing against a serve and volley player or just any net-rusher in general if they're serving and volleying or if they just like to come into the net. Number one tactic, listen carefully. Be certain that they can volley. Be certain that they can volley. Don't panic and get all fancy and try to hit perfect shots.

I've already mentioned that several times with the return of serve, but even once the point gets started, number one tactic needs to be to give them volleys and see if they have the goods, see if they have the ability. Make them prove themselves consistently that they have the ability to finish points effectively, and they can angle the ball away or hit that soft touch drop volley, or they can hit a firm deep volley and hit it past you to the other side of the court, whatever. Or overhands, I need to throw that in as well. Don't make sure that they're able to hit those shots and they have the ability to actually win the point consistently, and that's a key word, consistently, once they get up to the net.

If they serve and volley the first game and you kind of panic and go for some big returns and you miss two of them, and then the other two points maybe they put away an overhead and angle a volley away, don't panic and continue going for that big return of serve especially since they only had to earn two out of the four points for them to hold serve their very first game. Go several games giving them the opportunity to put the ball away first, and that means not going for a hug return of serve. That means not trying to place it perfectly. That means that you give two, three, four, five volleys per point, volleys and overhands per point. Make them have to hit several shots and give them the opportunity to screw up.

They're being very offensive, which means that very often if you give them the chance, they will make unforced errors and will give you some points. And too often I see recreational players panic when they see that net player up there. They make a ton of mistakes and they give the match to their opponent instead of ever actually seeing if they had the ability to even put the ball away.

For some of you that's going to be hard to do because you hate losing points and you feel the need to have to hit a winner every time you're challenged. Ratchet it back please or you're going to just give the match away. So that's tactic number one. Aim for the middle of the court. Get the ball low off the return if possible. If not, no big deal. Don't hit the net a bunch of times trying to get it low. The first two or three games that your opponent serves, give them the ball. And if over those two or three games they just consistently bam, bam, bam, like clockwork they're just putting the ball away, volleying it away, overhead, putting it away, then okay we need to go to step 2, tactic number 2.

One more time I want to throw in there, make sure you test their overhead. Put lobs up in the air. Put two or three up in a row and see if they're comfortable with it. See if they can put it away. Test them, and make sure that they have the offense with their strokes to back up what they've done by moving into the net. I really can't stress this section enough. I mean, really make sure that they have the goods to beat you up there.

Okay, tactic number 2. If they prove that they have the goods, and they prove that they have the proficiency with their strokes to put the ball away consistently, then we're going to need some kind of combination of great offense and great defense. How that looks exactly is going to be determined by your strengths and weaknesses and your opponent's strengths and weaknesses. In other words, if you're mainly an offensive player and you don't have good defense, you're not good at lobs, you're not good at playing soft shots down at the feet of your opponent, then more than likely we're going to be mostly offense. We're going to be trying to hit solid offensive shots which means trying to hit around them. Trying to hit hard at them.

On the other hand if your opponent -- some things you have to keep in mind are first of all, let me start over here. Your strengths and weaknesses, so whether or not you're good at offense or you're good at defense. You have to keep in mind. And then the second thing you have to keep in mind is your opponent's strengths and weaknesses, how offensive are they? By moving into the net, yes that's offensive in general, but keep in mind things like how close they get to the net, whether they're really good at high put-away volleys, or maybe they're really good at low touch volleys. Maybe they're really good at overheads, or maybe they're bad at one of those three types of net shots.

You have to keep those things in mind. You have to be observant and see what types of shots they're really good at and what types of shots they're not so good at. And then mix that with what you're good at, and there's your strategy as far as what combination of shots you're going to play offensively and what combination or what ratio of shots you're going to play defensively.

So let's go over a couple of specific examples just to give you an idea. I'm just going to talk about four types of players you might encounter that are serve and volleyers.

Number one is the super tight closer. This is somebody that just bum rushes and they're coming way into the net, and every time you try to pass they're just right on top of that net really close and just slamming the ball away. Against that player even if you're mostly an offense player, you're going to want to play more defense than offense, at least until they make a chance and mix it up.

Type of player number two, a careful closer with a good overhead. Sometimes you'll play somebody who serves and volleys but they stay closer to the service line than they stay to the net. And they stay relatively far back for somebody who is playing the net, and they cover lobs really well. If you're primarily a defensive type player, then this type of player is going to be trouble for you because it means that your lob is not going to be that effective because they're already pretty far back and they've got a good overhead, so you're going to want to play more offensive than defensive against this type of serve and volley player.

Then thirdly, we've got your crafty all-arounder, somebody who is good at closing in and putting the ball away. Somebody who also is pretty smart about not getting too close and is able to read the lob and get back quickly. They've got a good overhead. Against this player, you're going to have to mix it up. Don't be predictable. This player is all around good enough and smart enough to never get super close consistently and burned by the lob. They also are not sitting back on the service line and not giving you space to pass them either. They're just kind of a smart all around good net player. You're going to have to mix it up, play lobs, play drives. Don't be predictable.

This is going to be the toughest type of serve and volley player to beat because if you do the same thing over and over again, they're smart enough and agile enough at the net to be able to do what it takes to put the ball away. You kind of have to keep them off balance and throw in some lobs, throw in some passing shots, and not fall into a pattern where they know what's coming.

Then fourthly, a specific type of serve and volley player, a lot of times you'll find that a serve and volley player or a net-rusher will really like to cover either the line or the angle for the cross-court shot. In this case you're going to want to go with offense and be prepared to hit a consistent target over and over and over again. Maybe they like to serve and volley, go to your backhand, and they just camp out for that down the line passing shot. Well, you know exactly what you have to do.

It means you're going to have to hit a whole bunch of backhand passing shots cross court over and over again. If they start adjusting and this goes for all four of the specific examples, if you start finding something that works and they adjust, then be prepared to counter adjust and change it up, change up your target or change up from mostly

offense to maybe a little bit defense, or maybe mostly defense to a bit more offense. You get the idea.

You have to be smart out there. You have to adjust in order to win consistently. So there you go. As you can tell, there are a lot of variables involved here. I can't tell you David, use this tactic and you'll always beat serve and volleyers. It's not that simple. It's a chess-game out there, and your opponent is going to have specific strengths and weaknesses. You're going to have specific strengths and weaknesses. You have to come up with an initial game plan and use it, as long as it works consistently, and that means more than 50% of the time. You only need 51% of the time to be successful to win the match really. But if they make an adjustment and they tilt things in their favor, you have to counter-adjust and come up with something a little bit different to challenge them further.

Alright, just two more quick things here on beating the serve and volley player. Number one, be ready for a battle, David. Very often, these types of players are bull-rushers. They will continue to just close over and over and over. They will continue to keep the pressure on. They never stop. They never give up, and mentally you just have to be really resilient, and you have to be ready for a mental and physical battle out there. A really tactical battle too.

Very often you'll see what shot is available, what they're leaving open, and you just have to come up with the goods. You have to execute, and you have to hit X, Y, or Z, maybe X, Y, or Z patterns of shots, or whatever in order to beat this type of player. And it takes a lot of focus and a lot of discipline in order to do that over the course of an hour or a two hour long match. Probably not going to be two hours with somebody who is coming to the net consistently, but you get the idea. You have to really keep your focus, and it's going to be hard work. Just be prepared for that.

Lastly, keep an eye on your opponent, and keep in mind the quality of shot that you hit. Be prepared to close in yourself after hitting either a great offensive or a great defensive shot. If you do manage to get the ball low off the return, or you manage to hit a good passing shot attempt and they're stretching out or bending down for a tough shot, look for a short reply.

I can't even tell you how many times in my career I've seen a recreational player come up with a good shot, a good passing shot attempt or a good lob attempt or a good low attempt to get the ball low to a closing net player, and then they just stand there and watch it. The person just gets a racket on it, just kind of dinks it back, and the person who hit that great shot is standing there watching not reacting. And the net player ends up hitting a winner off what was really a defensive shot. They just kind of dink it over,

just shank it over, and the person who hit the good solid shot loses the point because they didn't anticipate that weak reply coming back.

Look for what when you have somebody who is closing in all of the time and you are trying to find ways to make them uncomfortable and trying to come up with good replies to their attacking game. You have to really be sharp and pay attention to what they're doing so that when you do hit a good shot and they are thrown off balance, you're ready to immediately close forward and attack, take over the point, and really make the most out of the attacking or defensive attempt that you made the shot before.

Okay so there you go. Obviously a lot to keep in mind here. David, best of luck with this. Just a quick review. Return, height is key number one. Get it low if it at all possible. Width can also be effective. Keep in mind down the line is going to be your biggest chunk or court. Power, a lot of times hitting it hard can be effective. Tactically, tactic number one, make sure that they have the goods. Make them have to put it away and make them prove themselves before you go for anything fancy.

Then tactic number two, mix and match their strengths and weaknesses with your strengths and weaknesses. See how offensive or defensive they are and then counteract that with the type of shot that makes the most amount of sense. Be ready for a battle and be prepared to close in and take advantage and pounce on a weak reply from your opponent after you've hit a good and solid shot.

So there you go. In a nutshell, that's how you beat a serve and volley player. There's many variables involved, and David if you have anything else specific please let me know. But there's a good solid overview of how you can beat this type of player. Not just a serve and volley player, but somebody who just closes in consistently. They can be really tough to beat. These are the things you have to keep in mind in order to be successful. Best of luck, David.

Alright, that does it for episode number 166 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you very much for joining me on today's show. I really appreciate it. In wrapping up, I'm going to read two comments that were left for episode number 165 of the show which was about breaking the directionals and also using lead tape on your racket.

Interestingly, it seemed like most people, at least based on the comments, were more interested in the lead tape section of that show as opposed to when to not use the directionals during your singles play. Both the comments I'm going to read here have to do with that.

First one comes to us from Steve who just wanted to talk about his experiences with using lead tape. He wrote and said, I've been experimenting with lead tape lately and I found that you're absolutely right with respect to small weight increments. I tried

increasing a full ounce in one leap, and it was just ridiculous the difference. I just couldn't play with the racket at all. I found that increasing even a quarter of an ounce increment at a time made a significant difference in feel. If I can suggest to your listeners that people might want to give each increment a really good long try, maybe three or four playing sessions over a couple of weeks to let your muscles and stroke form adjust before giving another quarter of an ounce.

This worked for me. Over the last several months, I've gone from 11 ounces to 12.4 ounces. It's made a huge overall difference in my game. The shots are like canons coming off of my frame. There's hardly any frame twisting on off-center shots, and it's definitely something very worth-while experimenting with. As an added bonus, my tennis elbow is a lot better as well.

Steve, that's great. Really happy to hear that your experimentation has paid off both in terms of the resulting shots and tennis elbow as well. That surprises a lot of people, but a heavier racket is actually better for tennis elbow all things being equal. The reason for that is the greater mass of the frame absorbs more of the shock from impact with the ball, and a really light racket your body receives more of that shock and that's not good. That repeated shock over and over again will start to stress the smaller parts of your body. Of course the smaller muscles in your forearm a lot of times are commonly inflamed due to that, and that's what tennis elbow is. So that's excellent.

A 12.4 ounces is a real beast of a racket, but Steve has talked about how he has gone a quarter ounce at a time and gotten used to it, and then continued forwards. So it's great that you've kind of backed into it a little bit at a time. I think that's a really smart way to do it Steve. As you mentioned, that's what I suggested during the show. So, great job.

Then lastly from Jack Johnson. I wouldn't recommend those scales. I recommended scale to be able to measure your lead tape and also measure your overall racket weight. It was just a postal scale on Amazon. He says, I wouldn't recommend those scales. Scales that can weigh up to 75 pounds and half a 0.2 ounce/6 gram margin of error would not produce enough accuracy for adding lead to rackets. It would be better to buy electronic scales that weigh up to 0.5 kilograms with a margin of error of say 0.2 grams instead of 0.2 ounces, which is obviously a lot smaller. Then he says the lower the better. For example -- then he gave a link to a different scale on Amazon.

Jack, thanks a lot for posting that. I'm definitely not a scale expert. I just kind of found the first postal scale that was on there. I totally agree. Obviously the lower the margin for error the better, especially when we're dealing with really small increments in weight, like a quarter of an ounce at a time like what Steve was talking about.

So, Jack, thank you very much for showing me that different model. I agree that's definitely better. I didn't do a lot of research. To be honest, I probably should have

before recommending a scale. So the one that Jack linked to not only has a much, much smaller margin of error, but it's 8 bucks. That's pretty tough to beat. So I changed the link in the show notes for episode 165. Now it links to the scale that Jack recommended. So, Jack, thanks very much for writing and for showing me that scale. I think that's definitely better so I appreciate that.

So, Steve and Jack and everybody else who commented on episode 165, thanks very much for that. I really appreciate getting feedback and thoughts and comments and questions, and to do that for this episode simply go to EssentialTennis.com/podcast, go to episode 166 and leave your comments or questions. I read all of those. I try my best to reply to all of them, and it's really great to see what all of you think. Alright, so with that I'm going to wrap up today's show. Thanks very much for joining me. Take care and good luck with your tennis.