

## Essential Tennis Podcast #169

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 podcast is brought to you by Tennis Express. Please check them out this week by going to [EssentialTennis.com/Express](http://EssentialTennis.com/Express).

Thanks very much for joining me. Today's episode is going to be completely about the two-handed backhand, a topic that's been a long time coming. I haven't covered it much on the podcast, but a listener finally got a question in about it. And before we get to that, I want to remind you all that the free course that I've been releasing over the past week is just about over. And I've released now three instructional videos. One about creating more power on the forehand, one about hitting a more aggressive serve, and one about hitting a more efficient two-handed backhand. So check those out by going to [PlatinumTennis.com](http://PlatinumTennis.com). Those are only going to be available until Wednesday the 11<sup>th</sup>. That's two days from today. I'm releasing the show on Monday the 9<sup>th</sup>.

So the free instructional videos will be up until Wednesday at noon. After that, I'll be putting up a signup for Essential Tennis Platinum, and if you're really serious about improving your tennis game, I strongly suggest that you try to be one of the people who gets in this time when I open the doors. I'm only accepted 50 people into the platinum program. No more than that. And I'm going to be giving away some video cameras as well to some of the people who are one of those 50. So if it's after Wednesday the 11<sup>th</sup>, or after noon on the 11<sup>th</sup>, go to [PlatinumTennis.com](http://PlatinumTennis.com) and you'll see the signup page and full details on how Platinum works exactly.

Basically, it's personal instruction from me via the internet. It's a really, really cool way to use technology to give personalized tennis instruction, and I've really enjoyed spending the time with all of those that are in the program already in Platinum. Looking forward to expanding that. So with that let's go ahead to today's show. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright. Let's go ahead and get started with today's episode, which is going to be all about the two-handed backhand. Our topic comes to us from Beth, who has been bugging me about a two-handed backhand show for a while now. And it's about time we have a show dedicated to that shot since it's definitely very widely used and very important.

So Beth wrote and said, so simply an overview of the two-handed backhand basics would be great. The grip, the swing basics from how to prep the core turn on the racket drop, hitting out, hitting low and high balls especially high balls, how to grip for the return of serve, getting topspin, the role of the left-hand. In my Fuzzy Yellow Ball studies, there seems to be a difference between men's and women's swings. Women seem to have elbows way more bent and men just lock them open and rotate the core. Where is the correct contact point for the two-handed backhand? Does the ball need to come in a bit more versus a one-handed backhand or the forehand? Can we all be Serena and hit our two-handed backhands with an open stance or maybe simply can you explain to all of us how to hit our two-handed backhand like Davydenko.

Sure. If I can explain to all of you how to hit a two-handed backhand like Davydenko, that would be sweet. I'll do my best today. And then lastly from Beth, or better still what do you find lacking or what do you need to emphasize most often when teaching the two-handed backhand to your students? What do your students from 3.0 on up find the most difficult to master with the two-handed backhand and what's the difference between a 3.0 two-handed backhand and a 4.5 two-handed backhand?

Alright, so a lot of potential different topics here from Beth, and I'm going to pretty much talk about all of those topics. Probably not 100% of them, but definitely most of the most important ones. Everything that I feel is definitely essential to understand to hit a solid quality two-handed backhand, we're going to talk about today. All of the major parts. So it's going to be a good general overview. If you're already a pretty high level player, a lot of this might be review for you.

But you know what, reviewing a lot of times is great and it's good to get reminders about what's really important that you need to implement in your technique in order to hit a solid shot. And in order to continue building and becoming a better player. So let's start off with technique essentials, and I'm going to talk about grip first. That's one of the first thing that Beth mentioned, and it's definitely important. I strongly suggest -- and by the way, most of the instruction that I'm going to talk about today is basically where I begin with tennis players.

So if I have somebody whether they're a good athlete or somebody who is not really played sports before but they're coming to me and saying, I haven't really played much tennis yet, and I need to know how to hit. I just need to know how to play. So typically in that kind of lesson, I'll go over the forehand and backhand first. Really make sure they have a good solid understanding of how the technique works on both the forehand and backhand side. So I'm going to be relaying most of that to you listening today about the two-handed backhand.

With that in mind, grips first. I strongly suggest that all beginners start with a continental grip with the dominant hand. So if you're a right handed player, your right hand down at the bottom should be in a continental grip, the same grip that I recommend for volleys and serves as well. I'm not going to describe here what a continental grip is exactly, but you can find a ton of pictures online and videos.

By the way, I plan on doing all of this in video form as well and going over the two-handed backhand essentials in video form. That's something I plan on doing. So, dominant hand, continental group, and non-dominant hand, left hand for you right-handed players, I strongly recommend that you start off with an eastern forehand grip with your left hand. So if you were left handed, it would be an eastern forehand grip.

So basically a neutral grip with your right hand and a topspin grip with your left hand, not very extreme. In fact, not extreme at all. But far enough over that you should definitely be able to keep the racket face closed in order to hit the ball pretty confidently without worrying about it going too far. You shouldn't have to turn it much further than that. Now if you're constantly missing deep, you can definitely try turning your grip further. And I recommend that you take your left-hand and rotate your hand more towards the bottom of the handle. That would be more towards a semi-western or more towards a western grip with your left hand.

And don't turn it much. I would recommend taking small incremental adjustments with that left hand and experiment with it. Probably won't be necessary for you to mess with your dominant hand. I rarely ever recommend that the bottom hand turn more towards an eastern backhand grip more with the knuckles or the hand up towards the top side of the grip. I mean, you're going to have to really be accelerating a lot for you to not be able to keep the ball in play using a continental grip with that bottom hand. I definitely wouldn't recommend turning it further than continental. Once in a while, it can definitely be necessary but not very often.

Alright, on more thing having to do with grips before I get to the rest of technique, and that is returning serve. If you like your forehand better than your backhand, then I recommend that you have a forehand grip with your right hand. So you wait with that forehand grip the shot that you like better. Again, if you like your forehand better than your backhand and with your non-dominant hand, your left hand, wait with a two-handed backhand grip. So let's say eastern forehand grip with your left hand and maybe you use a semi-western forehand grip with your right hand.

You'll very often see players starting this way who use a two-handed backhand when you watch on TV. Not always. But when you start with this grip you're prepared automatically to hit a forehand with your dominant hand, and that's the shot that you

want to hit more of anyway if it's your stronger shot and it's favorite shot from the baseline. But with your non-dominant hand, you're also prepared to hit a backhand.

So if it comes to your backhand side, you can make a quick switch with your right hand if you're right handed. Go to that continental grip and then go ahead and make a backhand swing. And having your left hand already on the grip can definitely help rotate your right hand over towards that backhand grip. If you like your backhand better then go ahead and wait with a backhand grip with both hands, both your right and left hand. It's probably going to be the way to go. I don't know many players that really prefer their backhand to the point where they're going to run around a forehand to hit a backhand. So for most of you listening, that means that my first suggestion will probably be best waiting with a forehand grip in your right hand and a backhand grip with your left hand so that you're well-prepared for both.

Alright, with that let's go ahead and get to technique essentials, and we'll start with the backswing first. I personally really like the rhythm and timing of the reverse C backswing, and I'm not going to get into specifics on how to do that. But basically it's beginning by turning your body and taking your hands up so that the tip of your racket is pointing up towards the sky, hands up about chest height or so, racket a little bit higher than that. And then taking the racket around in a circular path to drop it below the ball and then make your follow through. It's kind of a figure 8 pattern with your hands and with the racket.

That's really what I like the best for both forehand and backhand, but when I'm working with a beginner, I typically don't talk to them about that. I typically have them turn to the side and I let them know that the before the ball gets there, they're going to have to drop the racket lower than the ball to be able to lift up and make a topspin swing. And yes, I start with a drive/topspin swing with beginners. I simply explain to them that the racket needs to be below where the ball is before lifting up. Contact should be around waist height, and then the follow through should finish above where the ball was when they made contact.

And that simple explanation of a low to high swing usually is more than enough for players to understand the path of the racket and what it should be doing as they make contact. And the reverse C takeback takes a little bit for a beginner takes more skill, takes more timing, and there's more going on. So typically I don't explain it until after they're pretty competent at making good contact, making a good follow through, getting the ball in the right place around waist height, etcetera. And then I'll introduce the reverse C backswing to them.

But typically for beginners I don't explain it right away. Next up, contact point. Well, one more thing with the backswing. In addition to preferring the reverse C takeback, it's

important to know that you don't have to turn any further back than perpendicular to the baseline. And really what I've said, really just those two things is all I'll tell to a beginner. You want to turn so that you're perpendicular to the baseline, and at some point before you make contact, the racket has got to drop below where the ball is so that we can lift up and make contact moving past the ball moving upwards. That's pretty much it, and then I leave it up to the individual player to do what's comfortable within that framework. Usually players find what's comfortable for them, and it's usually right around what is looking good technique-wise, and I just let them run with that until they get pretty competent with their swing.

Alright, so that's backswing. Next up contact point. Real simple here. Contact should be right around the front edge of your body. If you are going to be looking at contact from directly to the side kind of looking down the baseline and at the side of your body, which is typically where I position video cameras by the way to film technique, you should see contact being made right around the front edge of your body. And this depends a little bit on the grip that you're using. If your grip with your non-dominant hand is further towards a western forehand grip with your left hand, if you're a right-handed player, then contact point should be a little bit further in front. But not much further in front than the front edge of your body.

So if you turn towards the side, rotate forwards, and make contact right around the right edge of your body if you're a right-handed player, that means right around your right hip, that's just about right. A little bit further than that maybe in front, but not by much. And to answer your question Beth specifically, yes this is further back than both the one-handed back-hand contact point and a forehand contact point with a couple of variables thrown in. But in general, yes it's further back.

And the reason for that is simply you've got both sides of your body, both your right hand and your left hand attached to the racket, so there's just not the same length of extension out in front of your body to make a comfortable contact point with the ball. So that's contact point. Now let's talk about follow-through, which to be honest is really what I probably emphasize the most with my beginner students is finishing in a good solid finishing position. And follow through is so important to me with beginner and really lower level players on up through probably a stronger 3-5 level. Typically those level of players don't have a very good range of motion with the racket. They don't hit the ball confidently. They don't finish through the point of contact smoothly and relaxed. Typically those levels of players are tight, and the racket does not move very freely.

And so I strongly emphasize the follow through probably more than the rest of the swing at first for the majority of students that I have starting off, especially if they're just learning how to swing. It's really what I make them most conscious of. So I've got four different steps here, four different criteria that I have for a good follow through position.

First of all, your chest should be facing towards your target when you finish, which means right around a 90 degree turn with your core. As I said before you should begin around perpendicular to the baseline when you turn and take your racket back. When you finish, your chest should be facing forwards right around parallel to the baseline, right around parallel to the net. So about a 90 degree turn. That's number one.

Number two, your racket should be up over the top of your opposite shoulder. And when I say up over the top, I mean like 4 to 6 inches over your opposite shoulder. So if you're a right-handed player, that means finishing over your right shoulder. I should've been more clear when I wrote that. When I say opposite shoulder, I mean opposite from where you made contact. So that ends up being your dominant shoulder, let's say it that way. You finish over your dominant shoulder. So if you're a right handed player, you should finish with the racket 4 to 6 inches over the top of your right shoulder, and the racket should move all the way up there smoothly and without any hitches, without any jerkiness. Just one smooth fluid motion all the way up to that position high over your shoulder.

Number three, the racket should be on edge. That means that the strings, the string face, the racket face, should be perpendicular to the court surface. And that also means that as you finish with that racket up over your right shoulder if you're a right handed player, if you were to stop in your finishing position that I'm describing and open your left palm, open up your left hand from the grip, your left hand should be facing towards the wall or the curtain or the fence to your right. So that means your palm perpendicular to the court surface and right around parallel to the racket face, which should also be facing to your right.

And the racket should finish this way because you should pronate with your left hand, your opposite hand. Your left hand, your left forearm, should turn and rotate as the racket is lifted up over to your right shoulder. Again, all these references are for righties. I apologize to any lefties out there. So that means if you open your hand, your palm would be facing to the wall or to the fence to your right as you're facing forwards. So that's number three, racket on edge.

And then number four, the butt cap facing towards your target forwards. The very bottom of the racket, the butt cap, that should be pointing out towards your target. Really if you're finished with the racket on edge up over your right shoulder, the butt cap really should be point out towards your target anyway, but that's just another reference point that I'll throw out there.

So follow through position, chest facing forwards, racket up over the top of your right shoulder. The racket face should be on edge so that if you open your left palm, it should be facing straight to the right perpendicular to the court surface. And your butt camp

should be facing towards your target. So finishing in this position, that might seem complicated at first. I just threw out four different reference points as far as the technique of the follow-through is concerned.

That's more things I typically tell to a student at once, but usually when I put a student in that position, and I won't even go down the list. This is an audio podcast, so I have to explain. But in person I will typically say, I'll have them try a couple of practice backhand swings and then I will come over and adjust their follow through position, simply put them in the position that I just described, those four different reference points, and say from here on out you will finish all of your backhands in this position. For the rest of today, for the rest of this hour or however much time we have together, you will do the best that you can to finish in this position right here.

And so I'll put them in that follow through position. I'll have them make a mental note of where that is. When I'm sure that they understand it, I'll drop the next ball to them and have them follow through to that position smoothly and relaxed and at half speed. So as far as follow through is concerned, that's definitely what I recommend especially for those of you that are relative beginners or if you really want to kind of rebuild your two-handed backhand and be sure that you're in a solid fundamental finishing position.

Again, the follow through is so important because it really sets the stage for how your racket moves. It also will dictate whether or not you have a good length of swing, whether or not you're relaxed, how good your range of motion is, how much potential you have for racket head speed, etcetera. The follow through position is just vital to having a good swing, and this is the case for the forehand ground stroke as well and for the serve. Just really important stuff.

So those are all the technique basics. We talked about the grip. We talked about the backswing. Talked about the contact point, and talked about the follow through. Now let's talk about a couple other things that Beth brought up, and one or two things I'm going to interject as well. Something else that's really important besides all the specific technique points that you need to hit, number one the kinetic chain. And I talk about this in video number one.

Again, if you're listening to this before Wednesday at noon Eastern time, then I strongly recommend you go to [PlatinumTennis.com](http://PlatinumTennis.com) and check out the very first video titled less effort more power. It was about the forehand specifically, but I go through frame by frame and describe using video what the kinetic chain and how it's used correctly, how you should use your body correctly, and the kinetic chain completely should be used for the twohanded backhand as well.

Basically what that means is your body should initiate the swing. And by body I mean your core. Your chest, your shoulders, your abs, basically your entire abdominal mid-

section. That is what should initiate the swing, your core. And then from there, your arms, your hands, and the racket should follow behind. And if you get that order in correct, then you'll be using your arms and your hands much more than you should be, which will result in a lot of effort and not much result. Not much racket head speed, which means not much power, not much spin. Even though you might feel like you're really trying hard, you'll never see a big result.

So the kinetic chain is big for the two-handed backhand. Make sure your hips, your core, your shoulders are initiating the swing by rotating forwards ahead of your arms and your racket. And then your arms and racket should be loose, relaxed, and flow smoothly all the way up to that follow through position that I described earlier. So that's number one.

Secondly, I want to talk about the transfer of energy between the right and the left side, and Beth asked me to talk about the use of the left hand, and that's exactly what I'm going to be talking about here. I used to believe like a lot of teaching pros do in my experience that a two-handed backhand really is dominated by the non-dominant side.

So if you're a right-handed player, two handed backhand -- you've probably all seen the tip or the instruction where the teaching pro will say, alright now take your right hand off the racket and just use your left hand and hit a left-handed forehand. And then the student will hit a couple of left-handed forehands, usually really poorly at first, but they'll kind of get the feel for it. Maybe even hit a couple nice ones. And then the teacher will have them put the right hand back on again and hit a two-handed backhand.

There are a lot of things that you can take from that, and that's not bad instruction. However, when you look at advanced players who hit a two-handed backhand, it's not left side dominated. Yes, the left side has a lot to do with, but there actually should be a smooth transfer of energy from your right side to your left side.

And I first heard this explained when I was watching a match on TV several years ago. It was shortly after Agassi retired. I can't remember who was playing against Roddick, but he was joining the commentators. It was a US Open match. It may have been just a year after he retired, and he joined the commentators in the booth to be a guest commentator. And somebody asked, at the time Roddick's backhand was really a liability. At the time he was still kind of known for the big serve, the big forehand, and that was kind of it. And Agassi was talking about two-handed backhand technique.

Clearly, Agassi had a great two-handed backhand, and he was talking about what Roddick needed to do to improve his two-handed backhand. And what he was saying made so much sense to me athletically. He was describing the rotation of the body and the right side initially pulling the racket forward towards the point of contact. So, the core starts to turn forwards, racket starts to drop, and then he was describing how the right hand and the right should pull and drag the racket forwards toward the point of contact



strongly. And then right before contact, the left side should take over and that right hand should turn and rotate, and the forearm should pronate to rotate the racket and kind of snap it through the point of contact, and then up through the follow through position.

So what he was describing was a pull with the right side and then a rotation and a release and a push with the left side. So a pull and then a push. And that's a great way to kind of picture or feel a smooth transfer of energy and the correct usage of both sides of your body. Yes, the left side is very, very active in a two-handed backhand, but it shouldn't be left-side dominated. It should be right side pulling and then your left side pushing, and then that transfer will accelerate the racket head and fully utilize your body.

So hopefully that makes sense. Just wanted to give a quick recount of that, and that just really made sense to me in my head, and I've been teaching -- once in a while I'll see a player who just has a stiff clunky looking two-handed backhand. It's just kind of rigid, and this is the number one thing that I try to get them to understand when I see that. And I've seen this instruction make some really big improvements to players before. It's something that I really think is important.

Okay, and then lastly two more quick points that Beth asked me to talk about specifically. Elbows in versus elbows out. Yes, typically you'll see WTA players with their elbows more bent through the point of contact and during their follow throughs as well versus the male players who typically will extend their arms, and that's really ideal if you can do it that way. As you take the racket back, your arms should be bent. And then as the racket drops and starts to accelerate up towards the ball, your arms should straighten and extend out through the ball, out through the point of contact, and out towards your target.

It's not necessary to do it that way to hit a good shot. Obviously there's a lot of WTA players that have big two-handed backhands, and many of them really keep a bend in both arms as they make contact. So it's not essential, but I just wanted to comment on it briefly and extending out through the ball is definitely better. But not essential.

And then lastly, open stance. I definitely don't recommend open stance in general on a two-handed backhand. The reason for that is, and especially since you have both arms connected to the racket, the tendency is for players to greatly under rotate their upper body. Since their lower body is open or their stance is open, if you're going to use an open stance, you still want your hips and shoulders and core to fully rotate back 90 degrees. And when lower level players try to hit with an open stance two-handed backhand, typically they don't get that full coil basically from the hips up.

And if you can do it correctly, then it can be done. Again, this is kind of like the bent elbows. It's not that you can't hit a good shot this way, but it's something that I think is

difficult for a lot of players to do correctly. And so it's not something I would recommend, but you can hit a good shot this way as long as you rotate your body correctly.

Alright, lots of stuff here today, and I'll do a quick overview. The essentials, first was the grip. Strongly recommend continental with the right hand, eastern forehand with the left hand. Technique backswing, I like the reverse C, but with beginners I usually don't teach it to them right away. It's just important to know that the racket should get below the ball. And then contact point, right around even with the front edge of your body, should be your right hip for right handed players. Follow through, chest facing forwards, racket on edge, butt cap facing towards your target. And then kinetic chain, transfer from right side to left side, elbows extending out is better. And I don't like open stance usually for most players.

So that does it, and those are really all the most important parts to hitting a solid two-handed backhand. Beth, hopefully you enjoyed this episode. I definitely could talk about more that you threw in there, but I really just wanted to focus on the most important stuff and didn't want to draw it out too long. We still had no problem filling a full show here, so Beth thank you very much for your continued suggestion for the two-handed backhand show. I hope you enjoyed it. I hope the rest of you listening enjoyed it as well.

Alright. That does it for episode number 169 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you for joining me. Just a quick reminder about the official sponsor, which is Tennis Express. I know that you all need strings, you need rackets, you need shoes, clothing, all that stuff, so you might as well head over to Tennis Express and help support the Essential Tennis podcast. Either check them out by going to [EssentialTennis.com/Express](https://EssentialTennis.com/Express) or just go to [EssentialTennis.com](https://EssentialTennis.com) and click on any of the Tennis Express banners over on the right side of the page. And that will put a little tracking code in your browser, and the Essential Tennis podcast will get a small percentage of any purchases that you make through Tennis Express.

So thank you all very much that have been doing that. I really appreciate the support. Wrapping up today's show, I want to read one quick comment here. I don't want the show to run quite as long as it did last week, and this was a comment from last week's episode. This comment is in regards to something that I mentioned, and that is I was signing up for a league here in my local area in Maryland. And this comment is from somebody who just signed their name as the letter A. They said, Ian I can't wait to hear your personal tennis experiences of your league play this year. It would be great to hear someone talk out loud about what they learn from each match and what they have to work on before the next match, etcetera.

I totally agree. That was part of the reason -- my main motivation for signing up and wanting to do competition again was just because I miss it. I miss the -- I'm a really

competitive guy, and I just really miss the fight and struggle and the hard physical effort that goes into winning a tennis match, especially at a 4-5 or a 5-0 level. And so I was really looking forward to that, but on the other hand I also was looking forward to it from a teacher's perspective because it would keep me in the game and keep me remembering what it's like to go through the stress of a match and what it's like to try to figure out how to win and what it's like to deal with nervousness or deal with mental toughness issues.

Unfortunately since I recorded that show I've run into a roadblock. I've been previously rated at a 5-0 level. Right out of high school I played actually for a 5-0 league in the Milwaukee area, where I'm from. And that was a while ago, almost 10 years ago now. And so I haven't really played USCA tennis since then, and I went and tried to sign up for my local league, which there aren't 5-0 leagues, USCA leagues in my area, which is Frederick, Maryland. But there are a couple of 4-5 teams.

So I was kind of recruited for one of those 4-5 teams by the captain. He and I was really close with each other, and he played the top spot on the team last year. He's probably going to get bumped up soon, but he's at a 4-5 level. Anyway, I went to sign up on the USCA website and they wouldn't let me self-rate at a 4-5 level citing the fact that I previously played at 5-0. And I actually appealed that because I'd like to play, and there's not really any opportunity for me to do 5-0 here in the Frederick area. I could drive an hour each way and play down in Montgomery county, but I don't want to do that. Plus I'm not anywhere near my top form right now because I haven't been competing for years and years now. My body is weak. I'm starting to work out again. I'm getting stronger, but I'm just not in playing shape right now, at least not the way I used to be.

So anyway, that's my story right now. I thought I'd recount that quickly for any of you that might be interested, and so I appealed and I put in an appeal to get rated at 4-5. And if I get bumped up after a season, that's fine. I don't care. But I would just like to start somewhere and start playing again. Now from what I hear, I'm not going to get the appeal. From what I hear, you pretty much have to have lost an arm and play opposite handed to ever get approved to move down a level, but we'll see what happens. I would like to play at least one season at 4-5. And from there on out I guess I would just play tournaments in this area, probably at the open level and go from there.

So anyway, I'll hopefully get to play in that league team, but it's not looking very promising. At the very least, I plan on signing up for tournaments, and I'll definitely be using my experiences from whatever competitive play I do to be able to teach more effectively and really empathize with all of you out there. It's really important for me that I keep in touch with tennis and I remember how much I used to love to play, and I never know if I start again that I'll enjoy it just as much.

Alright, so with that I'll wrap up today's show. Thank you very much for listening. If you're hearing my voice right now, I really appreciate having you as a listener. That really means a lot to me. I hope today's show was interesting and informative, and I look forward to talking to you all again next week. Until then, take care and good luck with your tennis.