

Essential Tennis Podcast #170

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.

Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the podcast. Great to have you as a listener. Before we get to today's topic which is going to be a great one, just two quick announcements. First of all, I'm going to be giving away over \$500 in prizes this coming Thursday evening in the chat room at the EssentialTennis.com forums. To get more information about that, go to EssentialTennis.com/500. All you have to do is sign up for the forums and just be in the chat room, and I'm doing this to promote a weekly chat I'm going to be doing in the forum chat. And I'll be there every Thursday evening to answer questions, and it'll be just a fun time for members and fans of the site to get together and chat and have a good time talking about tennis. So check that out. Again, EssentialTennis.com/500, and that will take you to the post I made with full details. I'm going to be giving away an HD flip cam and also a couple memberships to Doubles Domination 2.0.

And lastly before we get to today's topic, I want to let you all know that this will be the last week to get into Platinum. If you want to utilize me as your personal coach, get feedback on your videos and feedback on your questions the very same week that you submit them and ask them, then go to EssentialTennis.com/Chance. I'm not sure exactly what day I'm going to close Platinum yet, but probably going to be Wednesday or Thursday sometime. If you have any questions about Platinum, definitely let me know. Just send me an email to ian@essentialtennis.com. Okay, let's get to today's show. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright, let's get to today's topic, and it's a great one that comes to us from Paul in North Carolina who is a 4.0 player. He wrote to me and said, I'm entering my third year of playing tennis. I started as a 3.0 and have recently been bumped up to the 4.0 level. I try to hit as much as I can, three or four times per week, and I will from time to time take lessons at my club. I usually schedule a lesson when there is something I'm having trouble with, but now at the 4.0 level I think I might need something more or different from professional instruction.

The question is for someone like me who wants to get better, what is the best way to utilize professional instruction? The budget is not unlimited of course. So should I take a lesson once per week, once per month? Should I focus more on stroke mechanics or point strategy? Should I tell the pro what help I think I need? Or just take their advice about what I should work on? Also, what qualities make an ideal student? How much time should I spend practicing what we worked on during the lesson before my next lesson? I could go on, but you get the picture. How can I make the most out of professional instruction?

Paul, that's an awesome question, and one I've got a great outline for here, and I'm looking forward to talk about it. Let's start off by talking about your situation in general and just discuss I guess whether or not tennis professionals are needed, or at what point they are needed for all of you listening that are trying to take your game to the next level. And I want to start off by simply saying that every person has a certain level that they can easily achieve alone without any outside help, without any guidance, and they can reach that level simply through whatever natural talent they have, whatever natural work ethic that they have, how much time they put in researching maybe online or in books, if people still read books. But of course there's a lot of free instruction online. There's some good books too. Obviously there's a lot more available online these days. Anyway, how much time they put in researching and practicing what they learn is a factor as well.

And when you combine all those things together, you will come up -- each individual person will have a different level that they can reach themselves without a whole lot of external help or a whole lot of external guidance. But sooner or later you're going to plateau, and that's just life. Everybody has certain ability levels, and again certain work ethics to be able to build themselves up to a certain level. And for some people that's totally fine. Some people are going to plateau at 3.5. Some people are going to naturally plateau at 4.5. And you might be fine with that, and if that's the case then great. If you're happy wherever you are right now and maybe you just want to make small tweaks, some adjustments here and there, and you're just having fun with what you're doing currently, then that's perfectly fine.

For others, you still have that desire to improve and that desire to make it to the next level just like Paul, and so at that point professional instruction is absolutely the way to go. We're talking about getting advice from somebody whose job, who has made it their career to help other people get better at tennis. And so that's all they do every single day. So it's absolutely worthwhile, it's worth your time, and it's worth your money to spend time with somebody like that if in fact it's a big goal of yours to get better, because they'll be able to give you a battle plan, they'll be able to give you a plan of action to fix whatever they feel is going to help you make that next big jump.

Now to start talking about Paul's specific questions, let's talk first about the difference between technique and strategy. I think that's an important question to ask. Which is more important to help from a pro on? Well, technique improvement is very individualized. It's very different from person to person. If you look at 10 different forehands, let's say that all 10 players are a 4.0 level, all 10 players are going to have at least small differences from player to player on what exactly they need to change to make their forehand a 4.5 level forehand or certainly a 5.0 level forehand.

Now there's going to be similarities, and you can certainly still get good general advice online and in other sources and in other places, but technique is very individualized. So it can be difficult to figure out what exactly needs to be changed. Once you get to that plateau area in your game and you don't feel like you're making big improvements anymore by yourself, hiring a trained eye to look at your strokes can be extremely helpful, and that's because there are a lot of variables. There's so many different things going on and working at the same time physically as you try to make your forehand swing just as an example.

So it can save you a lot of time to get that professional help. Now strategy on the other hand is a lot more generic. In general, good singles strategy is good singles strategy no matter which player you're looking at or, or almost it doesn't even matter what level we're talking about. Now it does and there's variations, and it always depends on who you're playing exactly and what their strengths and weaknesses are, etcetera. But in general, and you know my point is, just to take a specific example, an outside forehand or an outside ground stroke in general is always smart to go cross court with. And that doesn't matter if you're a 3.0 player or you play on the ATP tour.

So I'm not trying to say that a professional tennis instructor can't help you with strategy, but strategy is really mostly about shot selection and the choices you make during points, and it's much easier to be aware of what you are doing when it comes to shot selection than it is to be aware of your racket drop on your serve and whether or not you're doing that correctly.

I'm just pointing out these differences to say that in general I think getting technique help, paying for the time of a tennis professional, you're probably going to get the biggest bang for your buck by working on technique. Strategy is much more generic and much more cookie cutter. Again, that's not to say that it's not individualized. It is. Different players have different playing styles, and so should focus on certain parts of strategy more than others, but it's much easier to learn strategy in other ways. Whereas technique, really having a trained eye look at your specific strokes is going to really be very, very valuable.

Now let's talk about fixing technique specifically, and Paul was asking questions as far as how often should I take lessons, how much should I practice between lessons? Now that we're established that in general working on technique with a trained professional is probably the way to go most of the time. Let's talk about that process in general, and I use the word process on purpose. It requires work and it requires patience, and it requires time. It's not like a lot of strategy learning is where you get the information in your head and you pretty much have it, and then it's just a matter of okay I need to use that information on the courts and it's a matter of picking the right target, or being aware of what your opponent is doing, etcetera.

Technique rather is much more difficult because it involves retraining your body. It's not just a matter of having the information and then utilizing the information and learning when is best to use this or that shot selection, etcetera. Once you have the information in your head, it still might take weeks and months to actually even be able to use it at all period, because we're talking about re-training muscle memory and re-training your body to replace certain bad habits that you might have.

And what a tennis professional is going to help you with is he or she is going to help you create a plan to be able to fix X Y or Z technique. That tennis professional is also going to help you put in the repetitions to help develop that new muscle memory. They can help you by giving you consistent shots over and over again so you can work on that plan to be able to fix that specific stroke. And that tennis professional is also going to help by keeping tabs on what you're doing to make sure that you don't revert to what your old habit was. And it can be very easy if you take a lesson say once per month to go into the pro and maybe they look at your backhand ground stroke, and the pro says we need to change this and we need to change that. Let's work on it.

And they feed you a bunch of shots and you try the new change that they suggested, and it works great. And you say awesome. This is outstanding. I've got a new backhand. I was just hitting it the best I've ever hit it before. Then you go practice it a couple of times here or there, and then two or three weeks later you're hitting it just the same way that you hit it before that lesson. So you go back and take a lesson again, and they remind you. You're not doing this and not doing that. That's what we worked on last time. And then you work on it again for the next 45 minutes. They feed you balls, and you hit it great again and say awesome. That was it. I've got it again. No problem.

Then you go for another three weeks and you revert, and there's a lot of you out there listening to my voice right now that are nodding your head and saying, yes I know exactly what you're talking about Ian. It's the most frustrating thing ever, and it is. I can tell you from experience as a tennis professional, it can be really frustrating for the pro as well because it's frustrating to see a student, especially one who really wants to get better, keep coming back and continuing to have the same problem over and over again.

So to try to avoid this, what I recommend at a minimum to try to improve your technique, Paul, really you should be doing a lesson per week for technique changes. And this is so that the tennis pro that you're working with can actively keep tabs on what's going on so that you're not constantly falling back into old habits. Then on top of that, I strongly recommend that you use at least two other sessions between your lessons, practice session by yourself or with a hitting partner or with a ball machine or against a wall or whatever to repeat that new technique and continue to reinforce it within your body and within your brain so you can make it a new habit.

If you take a lesson every couple of weeks or every month, then you'll find that it's very easy to slide back into your old habits. Is it possible to take one lesson per month and still improve? Yeah, sure. It is. And listen, I'm not giving lessons at a club anymore, so it's not like I'm giving this advice because I hope everybody goes out there and takes more lessons so I can earn more money. I don't have a dog in this fight anymore. I'm 100% online instructor now. So I'm just giving you this information for the benefit of all of you listening because I don't want you to get into that cycle of reverting and learning and then reverting and learning. It's possible to take a lesson per month and really keep on top of it yourself, and you can do that by practicing several times a week specifically whatever change that your teaching pro laid out for you.

And you can also help yourself a great deal by using video to video what you're doing and look it so you can see exactly what you're doing so that again you can keep track of your own progress and/or regressions. If you regress, then you can go look at the video and say wow look I'm going right back into that old habit again.

So is it necessary to take a lesson per week? No. It's not necessary. Is it going to be really helpful? Yes, it is because the pro is going to help you keep on top of what's going on, and as you try to build a new habit and build new muscle memory, that can really be invaluable to have that second set of eyes watching you and telling you immediately no that was not correct, or yes that's it do it that way. And then having the benefit of them guide you through that process on a regular basis.

Okay, we're about halfway through here. At this point I want to quickly tell you about my sponsor of today's podcast. That is Tennis Express where you can go to fulfill all of your tennis gear and equipment needs, whether it be strings or rackets or grips or clothing, shoes, bags, whatever. They've got great selection, great service, free shipping for orders of \$75 or more, and you can help support the Essential Tennis podcast by purchasing your tennis gear through them by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express or by clicking on any of the Tennis Express boxes that are on EssentialTennis.com. Either way, your purchases will be tracked and a small percentage of your purchases will come back to help support EssentialTennis.com.

So a big thank you to Tennis Express for being a sponsor, and a big thank you for all of you that have been making purchases through them and through my link and my boxes on the site. That really helps out a lot.

We've got two more quick sections to talk about. First of all, a good question that Paul asked was what should I work on first? Should I go tell the pro what I want to work on, what I want to improve? Or should I trust their judgment and go with whatever they say that I should be working on? I would recommend Paul, and especially if you're starting off with a pro that you're not familiar with, somebody that you don't have a relationship with yet, you don't have a track record with yet, somebody who has not helped your game and kind of proven themselves as a teacher.

I suggest that you walk into that first lesson and come prepared to work on whatever your biggest weakness is. So for me that would be my topspin backhand. If I was going to take a lesson, I would walk in and say, hey my name is Ian. I'm a 4.5 level player. My biggest weakness by far is my one handed backhand. I'd be happy to spend a little bit of time on other things, but I really want to focus on that, and I want your feedback on how to make that a better stroke. I'd really like to spend most of our time together working on that.

So tell the pro what your goals are, and then focus on it. Once you have gone through enough lessons where you feel like you have a solid feel, like you have a solid grasp on what you need to do to improve, and you feel like you're on the right track, and in your outside practice you're doing a good job as well and you're not reverting, and you've just got a solid handle on what you need to do to continue on the right path to improve that part of your game, then move on to the next thing and take one accomplishment at a time.

Unless you have a lot of time outside of lessons to work on your game, I don't recommend that you have a project going in every single part of your game and you have a technique change in your volleys and in your forehand and in your backhand and in your serves and in your overheads, and you have all of these technique changes that you're trying to juggle all at the same time. If you can take more than a lesson a week and you can spend several times per week practicing those things to keep on top of all of them, then great, but the reality is that most of you listening probably can't afford more than one lesson per week. And most of you listening you have jobs and you have lives. You have families. So you can't practice three or four times per week outside of taking lessons in addition to whatever competition you may be doing.

So I recommend that you take one weakness at a time. Start with your biggest one first. Work on that. And make sure that the pro you're working with, by doing it this way you can also ensure that you're getting along well with this pro and the two of you click and

mesh and your styles work well together. And you can ensure that the pro is going to be effective for you. And I really think you should do that one stroke at a time. Not give your entire game over to this person, and then four or six weeks later figure out that their teaching style doesn't work for you, and you're not even sure if the changes they're asking you to make are even working. And you've got a project going in four different strokes in your game, and before you even know it maybe you feel less confident now than you did when you started. So just be wary of that.

It's worth mentioning that not every tennis professional out there is worth giving your money to, whether they're certified or not. Not every tennis professional you should be giving your time to. There are those out there -- it's just like any other profession. Those of you that are professional, you're in the workforce and you have a career, you know that when you go to work every day and you take a look around you, there are certain percentage of people that are just showing up just to collect a check, right? They don't really have any particular passion or enthusiasm for what they're doing. Maybe they're even okay at it, but they just don't care that much. Those are not the types of people that you want to spend your time and money with when it comes to tennis professionals.

You might think that every professional is great because it's tennis, right? Who would be teaching tennis if they didn't really love it and they weren't super good at it? Oh, they're certified, so they must really know what they're talking about. I wish I could tell you that's the case, but it's not. I'm just being upfront with you guys. I'm telling you the truth here. It's just like any other profession, so just be aware of that and take that into account.

Okay, and lastly from Paul. Paul wanted to know what qualities make an ideal student. So I've got two, four, six different qualities that in my opinion make up an ideal student. This is something that I feel really strongly about it, and it's a big reason why I got out of the club game because I didn't get to pick who my students were. At the end of the day, I had to give lessons to whoever signed up for them, and a lot of people who signed up for lessons weren't good students. And I didn't enjoy my time with them. They didn't enjoy their time with me either a lot of times because our ideas of what would happen in a quality lesson were different. We didn't see eye to eye, and as a result there was a lot of tension there.

Again, a lot of you listening might be thinking, Ian are you serious? You're telling me people would sign up for lessons with you and not just listen to whatever you have to say and do exactly what you asked them? And I'm here to tell you yes, absolutely. There are people who signed up for lessons where it was a total waste of time. It was a waste of my time. It was a waste of their time, and they didn't get any better because they had different goals and objectives than I did. They might have had totally different

goals and objectives than getting better at tennis, and I'm not going to go any further into that. I'm just going to leave it at that. I can talk about that for a while.

So here's my list of six different qualities that make up an ideal student. Number one, you have to be a good listener. If you're taking instruction from a good quality pro, they are going to be trying to give you a lot of good information. And everybody thinks they're good at listening, but a lot of people are wrong. And they're more interested in what they have to say or what they have to give to the conversation, and they're more interested in hearing their own thoughts and theories on whatever is being discussed. When you find a good tennis pro, let them do most of the talking and listen carefully to make sure that you really understand what they're saying and that you really store away as much of the information as possible that you can get from them. That's number one is you need to be a good listener.

Number two, you should ask questions, and listening well is the first part of that so that you can understand as best as you can what's being transferred to you in the way of information. And then anything that doesn't make sense or that you're not sure if you understand completely, ask questions. The more questions you can ask, the more you're going to get out of your lesson because you will understand more and more. And you might have a great tennis pro, somebody who really knows what they're doing and they love it, and they're passionate about it and they're helping you become a better player, but everybody learns a little bit differently.

Not everybody absorbs information in the same way. So if something doesn't click with you and doesn't quite make sense, there's nothing wrong with asking for further explanation. That's something you should do on a regular basis when you're receiving any kind of instruction or feedback.

Thirdly, you need to have an open mind. I guess you need to walk a fine line between finding a good pro, figuring out if they know what they're talking about, and having an open mind. You should be a little guarded at first when you're first taking your first couple of lessons from a teaching pro to make sure that the instruction they're giving you is solid and it's going to be helpful, but once you form that trust with a teacher and you know that they really know what they're talking about and they have your best interest at heart, have an open mind and be accepting of whatever concepts they're trying to explain to you, be accepting of whatever they're trying to get you to try.

And that brings me to point number four, give an honest effort to try new things. And it might not make any sense to you in the moment as they're asking you to try something different or something new. It might feel completely wrong, and you might think to yourself wow how could that possibly be correct. There is no way, but just give it an honest effort. You're working with somebody who does this for a living. They have seen

the trials and errors and failures of recreational tennis players just like yourself, day in and day out, hour after hour after hour. If they ask you to try something, there's probably a reason for it even if it doesn't feel right to you the first time.

So give an honest effort, and whatever they ask you to do, however many times they ask you to do it, again once you trust this person and you really know that they have your best interests in mind and you trust the instruction that they give you, then be open minded and give them an honest effort.

Number five, an ideal student works hard physically. An ideal student hustles for every ball, and this is true both in practice and during competition by the way. But give a full effort physically. Number six, practice what he or she told you, whatever they give you to work on, whatever homework. If they're a good teaching pro, they will give you homework to work on, something to work on before they see you next. Go and do whatever they gave you, and do it as often as you can so what when you come back to them again you at least are right where you left off. And you can go ahead and move to the next step.

Or maybe you even got better at it since you last saw them last. Great. Maybe you can even move onto something new and different, but do them a favor and do yourself a favor and practice what they have taught you. And you'll be a better student, and you'll get more out of your lessons because of it.

Alright. Really great topic today from Paul. Paul, I want to thank you very much for writing in with this topic. As a quick review of my outline here, every person has a certain level where they're going to plateau, and the best utilization of a teaching professional when you decide to go to them is technique. You can certainly work on strategy as well, but I think the best overall use for a teaching pro is really to improve your stroke technique. Fixing technique is a process. It requires work and patience, and really if you can do it, I recommend at a minimum one lesson per week and practice several times besides that if possible.

I recommend that you start with your biggest weaknesses. Get that nail down, and then move down to the next thing. Don't go to your first lesson and open up five different projects as far as technique is concerned. An ideal student listens, asks questions, has an open mind, gives an honest effort, works hard physically, and practices what he or she has learned off the teaching court, on the practice court. So there you go Paul. I hope that you enjoyed my answers there, and the rest of you listening, I hope that you enjoyed the show as well. Great topic. I enjoyed talking about it. And hopefully that's helpful.

That does it for episode 170 of the Essential Tennis podcast. If you have any comments or questions or feedback about today's episode, I'd love to hear from you. Simply go to

EssentialTennis.com/Podcast, click on episode 170, and you can leave your comments and questions right there. I'm going to go ahead and read one comment that was left on last week's episode, 169, which was all about the two-handed backhand. Beth stopped by and left a comment, who was the person who actually asked the question about the two-handed backhand for last week.

She wrote and said, I had never heard the term figure 8 pattern when watching pros' two handed backhands before. But I have been watching player's hands now on video for a few days. It is now so obvious. And on the up side I am seeing a little transference into my own swing. Thanks as always for the useful info.

Yes, figure 8 pattern refers to the reverse C takeback. If you trace the tip of the racket and/or the hands of somebody who uses a reverse C backswing either for a forehand or backhand, as the racket goes up to prepare and then drops down below the ball, that's a half circle. Then the racket comes up again to contact. That completes the first circle. And then the racket continues upwards past contact, pronates and rotates. The tip of the racket rotates around and then comes back up and down again to the follow through position, wherever that might be. Might be over the shoulder. Might even be a partial windshield wiper type motion on the forehand side. Or full windshield wiper motion, which would really be the best example of a full kind of figure 8 motion. But it's a smooth circular path from start to finish. That's really the best way to have a long range of motion with the racket and continue the momentum of the racket moving smoothly throughout the swing.

If you don't have that smooth circular flow to your swing and everything is kind of angular and jerky and back and forth, then you won't nearly be as efficient with your ground strokes as what you could be. That's why I'm a big fan of the reverse C backswing.

Okay, Beth thanks for your comment there. If you have a comment about today's show, again please leave it at EssentialTennis.com/Podcast. Also, make sure before Thursday to go to EssentialTennis.com/500 to check out the giveaway that I'm doing on Thursday night. Again, \$500 in giveaways. I'm looking forward to that. If you're interested in Platinum, go to EssentialTennis.com/Chance. I'm going to be closing the doors later this week. So until next week, take care and good luck with your tennis.