

Essential Tennis Podcast #172

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.

Thanks very much for joining me on today's episode. Today's topic is going to be focusing on hitting the drop volley, which is a really fun shot to hit and can be very useful both in singles and doubles. So we're going to be talking about the tactics of using it and probably more importantly the technique of hitting it correctly.

Before that, just wanted to say that I hope that you're all taking some time to watch the French Open. My wife and I have been without cable or satellite for a while now, but I'm really happy that Tennis Channel is actually live streaming online the French Open, which is great. I don't have a direct link to that here, but if you just Google French Open live stream, it comes up. I think it's second or third. So I've got that streaming right now and been enjoying that a lot.

You can a lot from watching the pros, so I hope that all of you take at least a little bit of time to watch some of it on TV or on your computer. With that let's go ahead and get to today's topic. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright. Today's topic comes to us from Richard in Kansas City, Missouri. He wrote to me and said, I'm a solid 3.5 player trying to break through to the 4.0 level. I'm in a tennis ladder and consistently beat all of the 3.5 players. I've done a lot of work on my serve and backhand over the past year in order to get them consistent enough to play with the 4.0 guys. So my question is how do I go about practicing a drop volley? Here's why I asked the question.

There's a 4.0 player with whom I've played several times. I have had good competitive matches with him, but I can't seem to beat him. He's a baseliner with very consistent ground strokes, but he is not comfortable at all when approaching the net. I like to attack at the net, but when I approach and hit a couple of solid deep volleys, he's almost always to find a passing shot. I feel that if I had a drop volley in my bag, it would go a long way towards beating him. He would be forced to come up to the net, something that he does not like to do, and most likely hit up so that I would have an easy ball to put away.

Even if he gets to the ball, makes an amazing shot, and I lose the point, I would still be happy with the strategy because I would do it over and over and over again since he stays so far behind the baseline. Eventually he would start missing the shot or get tired of running so far to the net and be forced to adjust his distance from the baseline.

Just to sum it up, my question is about how to execute and practice a drop volley. I'm not trying to come up with a low percentage drop shot from behind the baseline. I just want to be able to hit a drop volley in short and force my baseline opponent to come up to the net when they would rather not. If you have any other suggestions as far as how can I pull an unsuspecting opponent into the net, I'm all ears.

Okay, Richard, good question. First of all, and I don't have this in my notes, but reading through this for the second it just occurred to me that I'm happy that you're attacking the net. That's great. To be honest, there's not many 3.5 level players, and I know that you're getting real close now to getting bumped up to 4.0 and that's great, but there's not a lot of players around your level that are very comfortable moving in much less consistently to be able to pressure their opponent. So that's great, and don't give up on that tactic. It's something that if you continue to practice and get more and more competent with, it will definitely serve you well. So keep that up. Good job.

Now secondly, being able to vary the depth of your shots once you get up there to the net and you're using volleys and using overheads but mostly volleys obviously is really important, especially when you're playing against somebody who has a really strong preference for the baseline. Being able to hit a deep volley is great, and just being able to create depth in general is always good on all shots in tennis, but if that's the only shot that you have -- in other words, deep volley, deep volley, and you just keep going shot after shot deep in the court, then eventually your opponent is going to get comfortable with it.

Really if you think about it if you hit any type of shot over and over again, unless it's just a shot that's super effective against a certain opponent, more likely than not they're probably going to get used to it eventually. Not always. Again, sometimes you're going to find a certain shot that a certain opponent just doesn't like. And so you should keep going to the well and keep using it. But in a situation where this particular opponent likes being behind the baseline going deep over and over and over again is kind of playing to his strength.

So it is good that you're trying to figure out how to hit more softly so that you can vary your shots, and we need to learn the technique and then be able to use that in order to mix up your shot selection. So of course the big question at hand is how do we hit this shot? How do we hit the drop volley?

There's two huge keys that you need to be able to do in order to hit this shot effectively. Number one is we need an open racket face. We have to be able to control closely the angle of the racket face. And in general the more open your racket face is, the shorter of a shot you have potential for. The more closed the racket face is, the further it's going to want to travel, the ball that is. When I say open, I mean that your strings are facing more up towards the sky. When I say closed, I mean they're facing more towards the net or more towards the court.

And again just to repeat, the more your racket face is the more potential you have to be able to hit a drop volley or a short shot in general. Now the flipside of the coin, and there's probably a lot of you out there that are saying, Ian that just doesn't sound right because when I open my racket up more, the ball pops up in the air. When I pop the ball up in the air, then it kind of makes it sit up. A lot of times it'll make the ball travel farther into the court. It's just not a very good shot. How can I possibly hit the ball short if my racket is facing up and I'm hitting the ball up into the air at an angle. And that's the flipside. You have to realize that the more the face opens, the more potential also you have to pop the ball up.

So how can we have both? I said that we have potential to short. There's also the potential to pop the ball up. Both the potential to have either one of those happen occurs when you open the face up. Now what controls which one happens? And this is key number two to hitting a drop volley. And this really is the most important part, and that is the softness of your grip. How firmly or softly you're physically gripping the racket, and this is what recreational players miss or totally don't get. They either are completely unaware of this variable, or maybe they're aware of it and they've just never really done it correctly. They think that they do it correctly, but in reality their touch and their feel for what they're doing with their grip and how firm they are is just not there, and it's not developed.

Basically the way that this works is this. The more relaxed your hand is, the more the racket will recoil from the point of contact. So when the ball comes and actually meets your racket and there's that collision there between the ball and your racket, the softer your grip is, and I mean literally physically how hard you're gripping the racket, the looser you grip it when you hits your strings the more the racket will be pushed back by the impact of the ball hitting your racket.

And the more that the racket recoils, the more that the racket is pushed back from the point of contact by the ball, the more momentum is absorbed and taken away from the ball. The softer your hand is, the more the racket recoils, the more momentum is taken away from the ball, and the more momentum is taken away from the ball the softer of a shot comes off the racket.

This is really the most important part, and the racket if you're trying to hit a soft shot, and especially when you're taking the ball out of the air, the racket should be hit back away from the point of contact, from the force of the ball hitting the racket, and if that doesn't happen then momentum will be retained on the ball. Some of you out there that are real physics nerds and you might call me on how exactly I'm explaining some of this and exactly what the terminology is that I'm using, but what I'm saying is generally correct. The way that I'm describing it, I'm trying to describe it in laymen's terms. Not that I could describe it super accurately in professional physicist terms or anything like that, and not that I'm really interested in being able to do that anyway. But anyway, you guys get the idea.

If your racket doesn't recoil from the point of contact backwards, then more momentum is kept within the ball. The ball will retain that speed, that force that was on it as it got to your racket. And then it will travel further. So this is a really, really important concept to grasp, and it really all comes down to that firmness of grip in the angle of the racket face.

To hit the ultimate drop volley, you want a really open racket face in a really soft grip. When we combine those two things together, really open and really soft, the ball will drop very, very short. If you do step one but not step two, if you open the racket face but you don't soften your grip enough, then what will happen is what I described before. The ball will pop up. And so that'll create a sitting shot and or a shot that travels much further in the court than what you were looking for, and that's obviously not going to be very effective.

So hopefully that makes sense in terms of technique, and I strongly recommend that you use a continental grip on both the forehand side and the backhand side. Open the racket up by turning your hand either towards palm up or palm down depending on if you're hitting a backhand or a forehand. And physically loosen your hand and your grip.

Okay, now next step, I want to talk about the two biggest mistakes that recreational make when they're trying to do this correctly. First of all, it's a technique mistake, and the way that I most commonly see recreational players attempt to hit a drop volley is they will try to chop kind of underneath or below the ball instead of simply opening the racket and softening and relaxing their grip, they'll try to spin the ball and kind of accelerate downwards as the ball gets to their racket thinking that the more backspin that they make the better the result will be.

Well, instead of that they very much complicate the motion. They complicate the technique. It makes it much more difficult to hit accurately because there's just a lot more going on. When you start chopping at the ball in the air, there's just a lot of variables in play there, and you have to hit it just right in order to make it effective.

Now when you do hit it just right, then all of that backspin that you make can make it a super, super good shot. But that's not the way that I recommend that you try to hit this shot, Richard, because it's just much more difficult than simply working with touch and firmness of grip and using that open racket face.

So that's number one, the chop. Don't do that. It complicates it. The second reason why the chop is not good is it typically creates more tension around the grip when players start chopping and coming down at the ball quickly. Very often that leads to more tension which takes away from your feel and your ability to hit the ball softly. That's not good.

All of this just makes it much more easy to screw the shot up. So don't try to chop and make a ton of spin. In fact you probably don't even need to really manually add any backspin at all to make this an effective shot. I'll tell you that most of the time I don't, and just by hitting softly without even worrying about spinning the ball can still be very effective.

The second big mistake that recreational players make is they will hit off center and then blame the fact that they think they hit too softly. And I can't even begin to count how many times I've seen this happen. We'll be practicing in a team practice or during a lesson either hitting soft shots in general or maybe going for like a soft angle volley or drop volley, or maybe a low volley where the racket has to be open. It's kind of a more delicate shot. And the ball will hit off center, maybe not even off the frame, but just not the middle of the racket. And as a result, the ball dies off the racket, goes into the net, and then my student, or just the player, will exclaim, oh I hit it too soft. And I hate that comment because it's totally wrong, and yet most players think that they have it right. It's just not the case at all.

So be aware of that, and to figure out whether or not you made that mistake, just be very cognizant of what the shot felt like and what it sounded like as you make contact. So when you go in practices Richard and you hit a couple into the net, try to remember what each of those shots felt like and what it sounded like. If it's off center, it's not going to sound as clean. It's not going to sound as nice. And it's probably going to make the racket twist and turn in your hand and feel kind of shaky and wobbly. If that happens, then it has nothing to do with you being too soft or being too relaxed.

Just make sure that you focus on the ball in the next shot. Make good clean contact. And then from there make adjustments with how firmly or how softly you're actually gripping the racket. But over and over again, I've seen players miss due to hitting off center. And they're like, oh I was too soft. And then on the next one, they'll firm it up. They'll hit the middle of the racket, and then they pop the ball way up in the air and it

goes too far based on where they were aiming. So don't keep see-sawing back and forth like that. That's a really, really common mistake.

Now, let's talk about tactics, Richard. Once you start to practice this shot and you start to get the hang of it, we can use this technique in a lot of different ways. You can use this technique for drop shots. You can also use this technique for angle volleys, and that's really probably the way that you want to use this the most in addition to using it as a drop volley. Especially when you're playing against this opponent who likes to be back behind the baseline, and ultimately what you want to be able to do is mix up the three choices that you'll have once you practice this. And that is a deep volley, which you already have, the drop volley, which you're going to practice now that you know how to do it, and then also develop an angle volley where you aim for, like right around the side service tee going in either direction so that the ball bounces, lands hopefully in play. And then travels off the court at a sharp angle, which means that your opponent is going to have to move well off the court to be able to get the ball.

That's especially true if he is well behind the baseline. The further behind the baseline he is, the more effective these types of shots are, as far as hitting really short or as far as angling the ball. That means that they just have to travel that much further to be able to get to your soft shot.

And by the way, angles are usually only really possible when you start softening things up. The more you try to angle the ball, the less court you have to work with. And the less court you have to work with, typically the softer you want to hit the ball to make sure it doesn't go too far. Exception to that is if you're right on top of the net and you're able to close the racket and hit directly at your racket, in which case you can go ahead and be firm and aggressive with it.

But most of the time that you try to angle a volley off sharply, you're going to have to be soft and relaxed to keep it from going too far. So, Richard, that's your long-term goal is to be able to hit the deep one, hit the drop volley, and hit an angle volley. And when you start to mix those up, then you're going to start to really challenge this opponent, especially if you can keep him guessing a little bit and you don't keep going back to the same one over and over again.

Again, unless it works over and over again, then by all means keep using it. But once you start mixing these up, you can be very effective in running him around, getting him tired. It also opens the court up and gives you openings to be able to put the ball away as opposed to what it sounds like you've been doing, which is just kind of deep, deep, deep and hoping he misses. And if he gets comfortable and starts hitting passing shots, then well that's kind of it. It's good to have these other options that we're talking about.

So, lastly let's talk about how to practice this Richard. I mean, the best way to practice hands down would be to get a ball machine and set it up to hit you the same shot over and over again so that you can have some consistent practice off a consistent ball coming at you the same way over and over so you can really practice and see exactly what the difference is when you change variables little by little, like how open the racket is or exactly how softly or how firmly you're gripping the racket. That's really the best way to practice this.

So what I would do is set the ball machine up to feed directly to you relatively firm shots, but not super hard or anything like that. I would stand probably two or three steps inside the service line. Set the ball machine up to give you like a waist high volley. No higher than waist height, and then practice opening your racket, physically relaxing your hand, and your goal should be to hit a volley that travels over the net by about two feet, no more than two feet. Like a foot or less would be great, but I don't want you to aim quite that low just for consistency sake.

So aim about two feet, between a foot or two feet would be great, and we're looking for a ball that bounces three times inside the service line on the other side. If you can hit a shot from two or three steps inside your service line that bounces three times inside of each other service box on the other side, then that's a great drop volley. Two bounces is good. Three bounces, you're really in business. And that's a really nice and soft shot.

Expect it to take a little while before you can get to three bounces. Expect it to take some experimenting, and it first it may take a shot that travels higher than two feet over the net to get it to bounce three times. But your goal should be to continue to soften it up, soften it up, until finally you get kind of an ideal shot like what I'm talking about.

If you don't have access to a ball machine, you can certainly have somebody feed shots to you as well. That's not going to be nearly as good a practice, but obviously a lot better than nothing. And I guess my last choice for practice would be a rally back and forth, but you're not going to get the consistency of shot there that we're looking for to really hone in and practice these different variables to really get a good feel for how to hit this shit.

So Richard, hopefully that makes sense. Thanks very much for your question. Great to hear from you in Kansas City. If you have any other further questions on this, definitely feel free to let me know. It's a great shot. It's a fun shot to hit once you learn how to do it. Hopefully my explanation of the technique made sense, and hopefully you can use this to practice. Get the feel for this shot, and then start to use it successfully against this 4.0 opponent. Best of luck to you and let me know how it goes.

Alright. That does it for today's episode of the podcast, number 172. Thank you very much for joining me and listening today. I really appreciate it very much. Great to have you as a listener.

If you have the chance, please check out my sponsor this week, which is Tennis Express. They have pretty much anything you can possibly want in terms of tennis gear and equipment. Please check them out by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express. That'll shoot you right over to Tennis Express and track any purchases you make, and a small percentage of any purchase you make comes back to help support the podcast.

Now in wrapping up today's show, I'm going to read and respond to a comment that was left on last week's show about working out in fitness and weight training to help improve your tennis game. And also I want to apologize to everybody that's left comments over the last two or three shows. I'm really sorry that I've gotten behind with responding directly to those in the comments section for each episode. I'm going to get caught up on that today, but I'm going to make a real effort moving forward to continue to answer those and respond to those as they come in. I've just really fallen behind with that. Sorry.

But I love reading through them and seeing those comments from those of you that listen and take a few minutes to tell me what you think about each show. So thank you all very much that continue to do that.

Now, comment on episode number 171 on fitness. This is from Ed. Ed wrote and said, Ian and Steve, Thanks for the podcast. Very helpful. One question I have is what is the right balance between playing tennis and doing gym work. I'll use my own situation as an example, I have about 7 to 8 hours per week which I can use and do use allocate to either the tennis court or the gym, but obviously I can't be in two places at the same time. That's a shame isn't it? I'm sure all of us would like to have that special power.

In the past I used to do around 3 hours of tennis per week and 5 hours in the gym. Right now it is more like 5 hours tennis and 3 hours in the gym. Thinking from a perspective of avoiding injury as well as becoming a better player, which would you say is the right balance? If I don't spend enough time hitting balls then my technique becomes a bit streaky and I risk injury through poor stroke mechanics. If I don't spend enough time in the gym then I risk injury due to poor strength and flexibility. I'd really appreciate any thoughts you have about this dilemma. Ed in Nairobi.

Well, Ed, first of all very cool to hear that I have a listener in Nairobi, Kenya. Great to hear from you. I always am fascinated to hear from people in other countries in different parts of the world. Great to have you as a listener there.

Now I actually just called Steve before recording this segment just to get his opinion. It was my initial thought that 5 hours on the court and 3 hours in the gym was definitely plenty and a good balance between the two. Steve was a little more iffy than I was. He said that would be adequate that split to keep you strong and keep you insulated from injuries as much as possible, to keep your body in good shape. He thinks that 5 and 3 is a good split as long as you're -- he said it depends on how Ed is spending his time exactly.

If you're really focused and targeting specific tennis areas, parts of your body, then three hours can definitely be adequate. But if you're wasting time doing things like running on a treadmill or things that aren't very tennis specific, not that running on a treadmill is bad for you by any stretch of the imagination, but it's just not a very tennis specific exercise.

So if you're following a good tennis specific program, then 3 hours can definitely be great. Just make sure that you target really important muscle groups, good upper body and lower body strength training to keep everything nice and strength. Flexibility stuff is great as well.

So those were Steve's thoughts, and those were my thoughts as well. It's great that you're spending that much time on your tennis game both on and off the court. I'm sure probably the majority of people listening are envious of the amount of time that you have to put into it, and that sounds like a good split to both Steve and I as long you're focused and putting in some good work specifically for your tennis game.

So, Ed, again thanks for listening in Nairobi. Thank you for taking the time to comment, and if you're listening right now and have some thoughts or comments on today's episode about the drop volley, please drop by and let me know what they are. You can do that by going to EssentialTennis.com/Podcast, click on episode number 172, and leave your comments or questions or thoughts at the bottom of that page.

So that's going to do it for this week. Thank you very much for listening once again. I really appreciate it. I'll be talking with you all again next week. Until then, take care and good luck with your tennis.