

## Essential Tennis Podcast #173

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

Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the podcast. I'm going to be talking about dealing with spin, and specifically kind of crazy funky spin that you get from those kind of old time players that have been playing a long time and just know how to make you uncomfortable and put you out of balance. So that's going to be a great topic.

Before we get to that, I just want to congratulate Rafael Nadal on winning his sixth French Open. I'll admit I was a little bit disappointed in the match, a little bit. I wanted Federer to play Nadal a little bit more closely, granted I know what I'm asking for because historically that was the closest Federer has ever gotten to Nadal at the French on red clay. Roger has learned I think from his mistakes in the past on that surface against that opponent specifically, and he did better, but he had opportunities that he could've still taken advantage of. I think it's too bad that the match wasn't closer. Although to be honest I wasn't expecting him to win the third set, so that was a nice surprise. But I think it could've been much closer than that had Roger really capitalized, especially in that first set. But it was still fun to watch, and Nadal obviously great champion. It's going to be interesting to see over the next four or five years exactly where he ends up in the record books.

With that let's go ahead and get to today's topic. Hopefully all of you enjoyed watching the match as well. And if you didn't see it, you should definitely see a replay of it. It was a great match. Let's go ahead and get down to business. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright. Let's get to today's topic on the podcast, and it comes to us from Dwight in Washington D.C. Just about an hour south from where my wife and I live. He wrote and said, my question is seeking instruction how to deal with ground strokes that have heavy slice/side spin. These shots are at times unpredictable and make you look silly on the court flailing at or missing balls altogether shaking your all important confidence. I played in a 7.0 mixed doubles match yesterday, and my partner and I were both 3.5

level players and were caught off guard by the unconventional shots by our much more experienced male opponent. He's probably been a 4.0 or 3.5 player for over a decade.

Frequently he'd hit backhand slice shots that kick to a right-handers right and just die on the bounce in terms of forward motion. He'd often hit his forehands the same way with a forehand volley style grip with his palm facing towards the net swinging downwards and across his body from his right shoulder down towards his knees. His spin would kick the ball to the righty's left into their body.

The result would be either over running the ball or not being close enough to the ball to hit it solidly or at all. I understand that developing and having an awareness of how your opponent is preparing to hit and how they hit the ball is key, and also how one executes their footwork and gets to the shot is key as well.

What else can be done to deal with these crafty slice and sidespin shots? There are a ton of older and more experienced players at 3.5 level that use these shots to their advantage. So some much needed advice will help. Dwight.

Alright. Dwight, this can be really frustrating. I totally feel your pain on this, and the first thing I want to talk about has nothing to do with identifying or dealing with this type of shot. Not so much physically but kind of more emotionally. I had a similar introduction to the pusher podcast. I've actually done two pusher podcasts, and the first key when playing a pusher is to respect their game style. Huge mistake that recreational players make is they disrespect the player. They don't consider the pusher as being a legitimate style of play. So before they know it, the player is sulking and upset. Even if they're in the match with the pusher, they're like I can't believe how close this match is. I should be dominating this guy. This is a joke. Before you know it, your emotions go just right down the toilet, and your performance goes right down the toilet with your emotions.

We need to be very careful about that same thing against this style of player. We'll call him the spin doctor. Yeah, very typically this is somebody who is very experienced, somebody who has played tennis for a long time. Not necessarily is an older player, but sometimes. It can be really easy to get sucked into a negative attitude when playing somebody like this. It's very easy to start disrespecting this kind of opponent internally. I'm not necessarily saying overtly like to their face, but internally you're thinking to yourself, man this guy's technique is terrible. Looks ugly the way he hits the ball. It's unconventional was a word that Dwight used. What am I doing out here with this guy?

All of you listening know exactly what I'm talking about. Getting into that attitude is a trap, and before you know it you're out of the match emotionally, and you're just in a negative attitude and you lose it. It's just a really bad cycle to fall into. So Dwight, and you didn't say anything really that really told me that you're having these emotional issues on the court against this player, but I just need to throw that out there both for

you and for everybody else listening because it's a really common response to this kind of unconventional player.

Now moving on to dealing with the spin specifically. You've already identified the big key areas. You've basically outlined what I'm going to be talking about today, and to quote you, number one was awareness of how your opponent is preparing to hit. That's key number one, and I'm going to be expanding on that. Number two was how they hit the ball, specifically the technique that they use is a big key in being able to react correctly to these shots. Thirdly, how one executes their footwork and gets set to hit the ball.

That's the 1-2-3 step right there. We identified the process we need to go through to deal with this type of shot. What I'm going to do is go through those steps and expand on them to make sure that you fully understand exactly how you're supposed to be doing all three of those things. Hopefully that gives you the information that you need to better deal with this type of player.

So let's start off with awareness. That's number one. Awareness of how your opponent is preparing to hit the ball. The very time that a wacky crazy shot throws you off from any certain opponent, you need to start watching for it intensely. There's certain things that you can pick up on, certain physical cues and technique cues from your opponent that will tell you when that type of shot is coming.

You know the old saying: fool me once shame on you, feel me twice shame on me. It's perfectly fine to get fooled or thrown off by a certain shot from an opponent a couple of times, once or twice in a match. But once they start going to the well over and over again, you need to start making adjustments and more importantly initially just paying attention so that you can start seeing when those types of shots are coming so that you can make an adjustment and react better to that type of shot.

So a lot of you at this point are saying, well that's great Ian. Obviously I'd love to know what to watch for to be more aware, but what is that exactly? There's three things, the path of the racket, the angle of the racket face, and the speed of the racket, the speed that the racket is moving. The combination of those three elements will tell you if you're watching for it what type of spin is on the ball, and maybe even more importantly how much spin is on the ball.

That brings me to the second part of my explanation here, that is how they hit. Step number one is being more aware. And step number two is knowing kind of more accurately what specific types of technique do to the ball and what it's going to cause the ball to do in the air and as it bounces. That's really the most important part is this next section, how they hit the ball.

It's excellent that you are starting to pick up on specific technique cues, Dwight. You may remember in Dwight's question he specifically referenced a certain technique. He'd often hit his forehands the same way with a forehand volley type grip with his palm facing towards the net, swinging downwards and across his body from his right shoulder towards his knees.

So there's a specific technique, and we're going to talk about exactly what type of reaction that you need to have to that type of technique, Dwight, but in general you're doing a great job Dwight guiding yourself through this because you talked about two out of three. You talked about the racket path. You talked about the angle of the racket face when you told me that his palm is facing toward the net. And you just didn't talk about the speed of his racket.

So basically the way you tell what type of spin is on the ball is the ball will curve and then bounce the opposite of the direction that the racket moves. Let me repeat that. The ball will curve and bounce in the opposite direction of what the racket moves in. So I have two examples here. If the racket downwards and towards the left, and when I say towards the left I'm talking about from your vantage point as the player. So from your vantage point on your side of the court, you're looking towards your opponent and you see his or her racket move downwards and towards the left. So it's toward their right from their perspective, but we're going to be talking about the player on your own side of the court watching your opponent.

If the racket moves downwards and towards the left, the ball will curve to the right in the air and then bounce to the right and also check up, meaning it's going to bounce and kind of sit or stay where it bounces, or maybe even bounce backwards a little bit. And the reason for that is the two directions the racket was moving. When the racket moves downwards passed the ball as it makes contact with the ball, that imparts backspin. That's slice. And the more backspin is on the ball, the more the ball will check up or maybe even bounce backwards. Again, depending on how much spin. We'll talk about how to read how much spin in just a second.

And then the second part of it was the fact that the racket moved to the left. When the racket of your opponent moves passed the ball, across the back of the ball to the left, the ball from your perspective is going to curve to the right and bounce to the right when the ball makes contact with the court on your side. Here I'll just go to my second example. That's example number one.

Second example, you see his racket move straight across the ball to the right. So not much downward racket path. Not much upward racket path. The racket more or less just moves straight across the ball to the right. Then the ball is going to curve to the left as it goes through the air and bounce straight to the left. And straight to the left is kind of

a relative term. I don't know if it's literally go 90 degrees to the left, but it's going to go to the left. It's not going to check up nearly as much. Maybe it will a little bit, but not nearly as much as when there was also a significant downward path to the racket.

That's basically how you read it is you flip flop the direction that the opponent's racket is moving, and the ball is going to move in the opposite direction when it bounces on your side of the court. So downward path means backspin. The ball is going to bounce back away from you as it hits the court to the right, the ball is going to curve and bounce to the left. And to the left, the ball is going to curve and bounce to the right.

So that's really important is being able to understand the direction the racket is moving and therefore the direction the ball is going to move and the direction the ball is going to bounce.

Now to those of you who may not have been aware of this at first, this might sound like a lot to think about. This is something that you need to watch for and then eventually just let it be a reaction, a natural reaction, to what you see the racket of your opponent doing. This isn't something that you should have to throughout the rest of your tennis career think about and figure out. You're standing there. You see the racket move, and you're like, okay so their racket just moved downwards a little bit to the right. So that means that there's backspin and sidespin. By the time you've gotten to that point, the ball is already bounced on your side of the court. Obviously that defeated the purpose. We're not going to be ready to react to the ball.

So I just want to point out that ultimately our goal is to automatically react to this information, but at first you may have to be conscious of it just to remind yourself what certain directions mean as far as what the ball is going to do. But it all starts with just knowing this first, and I could not possibly count the number of times that I personally have put a bunch of nasty sidespin or backspin on a ball just to get a miss with a student or a member where I might be teaching, and they get setup like the ball is going to bounce neutrally, like it has no spin on it. They don't read it at all, the fact that I put spin on the ball. All of you know exactly what I'm talking about. They setup. They get ready to hit the ball just like they normally would. The ball bounces in some crazy direction, and they just about fall over trying to get a racket on it because they didn't read the spin at all. And it all starts with watching the direction of the racket.

Okay, so that's the first part, and really the most important part is the path of the racket. Now let's talk about the racket face. That's the second part. When the racket face is facing upwards, when it's really open and/or really just facing towards the target but contact is being made kind of directly in front of your opponent as opposed to making contact on the side. That's a big indicator that there's going to be a lot of spin on the ball. And that combined with the path of the racket, you need to have both.

I'm not going to get into anymore detail on that. That's not really as important, but something else to watch for. The more open the racket face is, the more potential your opponent will have to make a lot of spin to make really heavy spin that will really alter the path of the ball when it bounces on your side of the court.

And then lastly, this one is important, how fast the racket is moving as it makes contact with the ball compared to how slowly the ball is moving after it leaves the racket. This is really important. If the racket moves really quickly passed the ball but the ball comes off the racket moving not fast at all, or maybe even really slowly, then you know that there's a lot of spin on the ball. The faster the racket moves and the slower the ball moves in terms of its speed moving towards your side of the court, the more spin is on the ball. All of that momentum that was on the racket had to be transferred into something. Momentum isn't just lost. It gets transferred into the ball.

And so when the racket moves fast but the ball does not, then all of that momentum was transferred into rotation on the ball, as opposed to speed. So if the racket moves fast, usually we're used to the racket moving fast and the ball moves fast. But if the racket moves fast passed the ball instead of through the ball, then that will translate into a lot of spin. And so watch for the speed.

Again, all these things, they kind of play off each other. If the racket moves down into the side passed the ball, the racket face is really open facing up towards the sky, and the racket moved very quickly, very fast, but the ball just kind of floats up off the racket slowly and kind of lazy. There is a lot of junk on that ball.

This is again something that recreational players don't read, and going back to messing with clients or messing with members, a lot of times if I was to hit several dirty spins shots in a row, they'll start to pickup on the fact that my racket is moving kind of different, and they'll see you spun that one. But they will not -- this is the next step is picking up on, okay great you know that there's spin, but how much spin? And a lot of times I'll further spin the ball, more spin than the first one, and they'll see that one and make an adjustment, but they don't read how much spin. So they'll do a little better but still get thrown off because there's more spin than the first one. Really important stuff.

So that's the how, Dwight, the how they hit it and what to look for and what it means. And hopefully this discussion isn't boring to those of you listening. I'm really going into detail here, but I mean I'm really going into detail because I really feel that it's important. Right around your level, Dwight, 3.5ish, is -- if I was to spin and do a crazy spin shot against a 4.5 or a 5.0 player, it wouldn't be effective. It might be depending on their position, but if I just hit it to them with a whole mess of spin, they don't care because they read it, they adjust, and it's no big deal because they know what's coming.

A 3.5 player or certainly below 3.5, they are very often completely blind to what's happening to the ball. They're not paying attention at all to the technique or the speed of the racket or the angle of the racket face. And so they're made to look silly against this type of player, just like Dwight was describing, because they don't know what's coming. So it's really important to understand this stuff.

Lastly, footwork. We talked about awareness, reading that it's coming. We talked about how the shot is hit and what that means specifically for the ball. And let's talk about footwork. That's the last key. After you see it's coming and after you read what's on the ball, you have to execute your footwork. It obviously doesn't matter how well you read the shot if you can't move your feet and put yourself in the right spot.

This is going to be really simple. I simply want to point out once you read the shot, really the more steps you take the better. The more you can fine tune your position, and that means small quick steps and continuous. Don't take two or three quick steps and be like, okay I got it and then plant your feet and get flat footed and stand there waiting for the ball.

Stay on the balls of your feet. Keep taking small adjustment steps so that when the ball bounces, if you have to adjust a little bit, it wasn't exactly what you thought. Even if you got 80% right and for the most part you knew what was coming, but it just wasn't perfectly read, then you're activated already. You're on the ball of your feet taking maybe a couple quick little steps, and you can go ahead and move right into making an adjustment and being as comfortable as possible.

And that's really all I'm going to say about that, about footwork. Lots of steps, quicksteps, small steps, and keep moving so that you can get in the best position possible. And Dwight that's pretty much it. I mean, that's all the information that you could possibly have really to be honest with you to deal with this. The final step is simply to see it enough times to gain the experience to know what's coming, and then just making the adjustment with your feet. It's obviously really easy to just say that, but as you've heard in my description a second ago, there's a lot to this, and there's a lot of things that play off each other that you have to be aware of in order to accurately be in the right spot.

So pay attention to your opponent's tendencies, read them as best as you can, keep your feet moving, and that's the best advice I can really give you. So good luck continuing to deal with this frustrating opponent. Hopefully my advice here was helpful to you and everybody else listening. If you need any further help or advice, definitely let me know. And you can do that by simply leaving a comment to this episode. This is episode number 173. Just go to [EssentialTennis.com/Podcast](https://EssentialTennis.com/Podcast), click on episode 173, and leave any comments or questions right below this episode.

Dwight, good luck. Let me know how it goes, and thanks very much for being a listener. I appreciate it. Alright, that does it for episode 173 of the Essential Tennis podcast. I've got a really good question to answer from last week's show, and before I get to that, I just want to remind you all about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast. That is Tennis Express, the online retailer that has pretty much anything you could want when it comes to tennis. Please go check them out, and you can do that by going to [EssentialTennis.com/Express](https://EssentialTennis.com/Express). When you go that link, you'll automatically be redirected to Tennis Express, and there will be a little tracking code thrown in there so that any purchases you make, a small percentage of that comes back to help support the Essential Tennis podcast.

Thank you all so much that have been making purchases through that link. I really appreciate it. That helps pay the bills here at [EssentialTennis.com](https://EssentialTennis.com).

Now, last week's show number 172 was all about the drop volley, and Ray wrote in a question. He wrote, it would be nice to know how far to take the racket back and also how far you should volley through for a drop shot or a drop volley. You make it sound as if you should open the racket face, loosen the hand, and the ball is going to go over the net by itself. Well, Ray, that's exactly right. And again, I'm talking about the drop volley. A drop shot is different because the ball is bouncing on your side of the net, which absorbs a lot of its momentum, and also since it's bouncing we're basically by default a lot farther away from the net, and we're not taking the ball right off of our racket.

So on a drop shot, there are a lot of variables depending on where you are on the court and how fast the ball is moving, how short you're trying to hit the ball, with how much spin, etc. There will be a back swing and there will be a follow through. As you make contact, the racket will move through the point of contact. But on a drop volley, very often the way that you described it, Ray, is actually very often the case where you literally will put the racket behind the ball, open the racket face, loosen your grip, and just let the ball bounce off.

It's really that simple very often. And again there's variables at play. I'm not going to go through every single possibility combination, but again it depends on your depth, how low the ball is when you make contact, how fast the ball is moving, how short of a drop volley is that you're trying to hit, all of those different factors come into play as far as exactly what technique you're going to use. But the way that one of my fellow teachers used to describe this when teaching at Congressional, my last full-time teaching job, because listen first of all this is very important. Everybody hear me.

Recreational players almost always error on the side of being too firm and too stiff with their grip when it comes to volleys, drop shots, drop volleys, basically anything that has an element of touch or softness to it, recreational players 98% of the time are too firm.



Almost never have I seen a recreational player that overdid it and by nature was just too soft. That's really important to understand.

And so one of my coworkers, a really experienced teacher, used to show this through a little example. He would have everybody gather around. He would put his racket just down on the court. He would take a ball up at shoulder height, put it over his racket down on the court, and just let it go. And the ball would fall down to the racket, bounce on the strings, and then what happens? The ball bounces back up again, doesn't it? It comes off the racket. In fact, it'll come up off the court like at 80% of the height that you've initially dropped it from.

And so when you think about that, you just take that and transfer it horizontally instead of vertically, and you imagine yourself just holding the racket. Now of course the court didn't give at all. So that would be an example of being really firm right at contact. In the example I talked about where my co-worker would just drop the ball, that's just the ball dropping. If your opponent is driving the ball at you from the opposite baseline and has enough momentum to get all the way to you in the air, think about all that momentum. And if your hand and wrist and forearm and shoulder were just as tight to brace the racket just like the court surface did, the ball is going to travel back at like 80% just if you hold the racket there firmly.

Now there are other factors that go into play here, like how open or closed your racket is, etc. But you get the idea. If you just hold the racket there, the strings propel the ball back. So Ray and everybody else listening, this is really important to understand. To hit a drop volley, you actually don't even want to just hold the racket there firmly. You want to be soft and loose so that the racket actually repels back from the point of contact and absorbs pace from the ball so that it doesn't travel all the 80% way back. That's just an arbitrary percentage, but you get the idea. I don't know if it's exactly 80%. You get the point.

You don't want the ball to travel most of the way back to your opponent. We're hitting a drop volley. We want it to die much shorter than that. And so you want to not be firm with it. You want to just be soft and very often no follow through is needed at all. If you just open the racket and let the ball bounce off, it'll go over. Now if you hit your frame, it's not going to go over. If your racket is closed, it's not open, then the ball is not going to go over.

So you have to make sure you're doing those parts correctly, but yeah it's really a lot easier than you guys think. And recreational players tend to make this type of shot and all touch type shots way more difficult than they have to. So I encourage you guys get out there with a ball machine or somebody that can feed consistently to you and just experiment with this. You'll be surprised. If you just make good contact, open the racket,

and just leave the racket there, you'll be surprised at how good of a drop volley you can hit without doing anything at all with the racket besides that.

Alright, Ray, good question. And if you have any questions about today's episode, which was about dealing with spin, go to [EssentialTennis.com/Podcast](https://EssentialTennis.com/Podcast), click on episode 173. Leave your comments and questions. I'll do my best to respond to them right there, and I very often will read and respond at the end of the next week's episode as well. So that's it for this week. Thanks very much for listening. If you're listening to my voice right now, I really appreciate your support. Hopefully today's show was helpful to you. I guess that's it. Until next week, take care and good luck with your tennis.