

Essential Tennis Podcast #178

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.

We've got a great topic to talk about on today's show. We're going to be discussing losing a stroke, and if that's ever happened to you as it has with me a couple of times, you know how frustrating that can be. I'm going to talk about how to get out of that. And we're also going to talk about creating a more penetrating backhand slice.

Before we get to that, just a quick note about next week's show, I'm going to have Steve Beck on. He's a certified personal trainer. You may recognize that name from the videos I've been putting out recently. He and I have been putting out a bunch of free fitness videos showing you how you can become a stronger, faster tennis player around the court. And he's going to be my guest on next week's show. We're going to talk about fitness as it relates to tennis. How to become a better tennis player with fitness. And we're going to have an announcement as well, something really special coming up that he and I have been working on. So make sure to tune into that. With that let's get to today's topic. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright today's topic comes to us from Tenny in Sydney, Australia who is a 4.0 player. Tenny wrote to me and said, I've been playing social competition for a number of years. A few years ago I developed a very consistent and effective single handed backhand slice which had great bite off the court and stayed low. It was as you would describe an unconsciously competent shot, and I could control it consistently off high or low, wide or short, soft or hard shots, anything. I used the shot for a few years with great effect. However over the past couple of years I have forgotten how to hit that shot and now have only a weaker backhand slice, which seems to float high over the net, sit up after it bounces, and completely lacks court penetration. I'm desperate to get this shot back as it has left a gaping hole in my game. It was a vital part of my arsenal allowing me to compete with 4.5 and 5.0 level players. Dozens of hours with the practice basket has failed to improve it at all. My specific question is without seeing technique can you point out what are the key technical differences between the weak floaty high slice and the stronger biting heavy lower slice? Or generally is this loss of technique a common thing and if possible how does one avoid this from happening?

Okay, Tenny, great questions, and we're going to talk about both of those topics and in reverse order. I want to kick today's show off by first talking about that phenomenon of losing a stroke. And then we're going to talk specifically about the technique that is most important in being able to hit that more competitive more penetrating backhand slice.

I'm going to give you the two keys to being able to hit that better stronger slice and not have all your backhand slices float up like they have been. So let's start off by talking about losing a shot. And Tenny's question was, is it common? And my answer to that is absolutely. For those of you who have been playing 5 years or longer, I would bet that the majority of those has had this happen to some degree or another over the years. And it's happened to me several times, and in my experience it happens kind of in two different varieties.

The first type of stroke loss is kind of a random disappearance during a peak portion of play within your career. And that way of losing a stroke has happened to me two times. Both times by forehand, and both times in the middle of a team season. Firstly in my high school career and then again in college, I totally lost my forehand. It wasn't just that all of a sudden my forehand got weaker and wasn't as good. I totally lose it, all feel for it, and I went from it being my most confident shot and probably my biggest weapon to having to slice and block it back because I just totally lost the feel for it just like out of the blue. Like, I walked out one day after a good day previously and for whatever reason the stroke just left me. That's frustrating. Both times it took me about a month of repetition and fighting through that to finally be able to be confident and comfortable with it again.

So in my experience that's the first way somebody can lose a stroke is just totally losing the feel for it. And it really doesn't matter how good a player you are. This can happen to anybody, and we're going to talk about how to avoid it in a minute. The second way that somebody can lose a stroke, main way, is just kind of a general disappearance due to lack of practice. And this can happen to anybody. It might not even be lack of practice. I really should've added a third way. We're going to add a third way of how something like this can happen. General disappearance due to high level practice would be number two. This has happened to me as well with my backhand slice. It's gotten weak. It's gotten floaty, and that's been due to lack of practice at a level that has kept it a good shot. And so now that I'm not teaching full-time anymore, and I'm starting to play more often, my backhand used to be extremely reliable and I could do whatever I wanted with it. It was a very comfortable and confident shot, and I feel like I've forgotten how to hit it now. I have to spend a lot of time with it to get it back to where it used to be. So it's gone away just basically due to lack of competitive practice in my own backhand slice.

Let me on the fly here add a third reason, and I think this is probably the main reason why this has happened to Tenny, and that is due to bad habits creeping into your game. If you're not aware of it and you don't catch it early, before you know it your technique can change and maybe revert back to an old habit. Or just in general you can pick up a bad habit that will decrease the level of the resulting shots that you're able to hit with X, Y, or Z stroke.

So again quickly, reason number one, just random disappearance. That's happened to me twice. Reason number two, lack of high enough practice to keep it sharp. That's happened to me as well. And number three, just general kind of bad little habits creeping in there that over time erode the quality of your shot. I think that's probably what happened to Tenny.

So how do we avoid this How do we avoid it? I've got an outline here for both of the two main ones that I talked about before. I'm going to definitely talk about the third way as well. I'm going to be definitely talking about in detail. First let's talk about the general disappearance, and this is pretty straightforward. Really I can lump this in along with the bad habits creeping in. So when you don't practice for a certain period of time, and this is different for everybody. If you don't have high level practice relative to your own level of play, for X period of time you will -- it's just human nature.

Being a good tennis player is not like riding a bike. To a certain extent it is. Once you know how to just hit the ball in play, you're never really going to lose that completely. However, being able to play at maybe where Tenny is now, a 4.0 level, and maybe even being able to compete with a 4.5 or 5.0 player here and there on a good day, you only get to that level after learning lots of different muscle memory type techniques, things that really are complicated, and you drill those into your brain over a series of repetitions and over enough time that it becomes a habit. And it's only natural when you don't keep up, when you don't maintain those skills, it's only natural that they will start to digress. I can absolutely attest to that as I taught over the 7 years full-time, that happened to be big time. I'm having to play catch-up now that I'm starting to hit again.

And the amount of time that it takes for somebody to digress is different from player to player. Some players just really have more -- just take more to tennis more naturally than others so they can take a month off and come back and just really hit just as well as they did before. Other players in my experience can take off a week and come back and for the first hour just totally feel like a fish out of water. They have to really be regular at how often they hit otherwise their comfort level drops very quickly.

And so you have to keep up with it. That's the bottom line. The way that you avoid just general disappearance of a stroke due to lack of practice is you just have to -- you just have to keep up with it period. Now moving on to the more random disappearance,

that's really difficult. It could be due to a lot of different reasons, and most of those reasons are mental. Something happens and you just lose confidence, and it's really hard to pinpoint exactly what happened to cause that. Honestly to this day I really have no idea why my forehand left me those 2 times. I can't pick out a certain thought that I had or maybe pick out a certain technique that I did where all of a sudden I just lost my feel for the shot and it just went away and took me weeks to find it again to where I was able to hit topspin with confidence again.

Ultimately it was definitely some confidence issue. I mean, that probably sounds kind of obvious, but something happened to erode my confidence in the shot, and it seemed to happen all at once. I don't think that it was a gradual thing where all of a sudden I woke up and walked out to the court and was like, oh I just decided well I don't have confidence in my forehand. It just kind of hit totally out of left field. So that's very difficult to diagnose. However, the cure for both of the random disappearance and for the general disappearance due to lack of practice and the cure for probably what happened with Tenny with the bad habit creeping in, the cure for all 3 is the same. And it's a 3 step process.

Number one, identify the areas of your game that are slipping as it happens. And this is probably the hardest part for rec players, and you have to really be paying attention, and you have to really be purposeful about your game in order to do this effectively. If you make a habit out of just walking onto the court and floating through practice not paying attention. And the drills that you do, there's really not much purpose to them. In fact, maybe you don't do drills. You walk out and hit the ball around for 45 minutes and walk off, and you think that you're going to improve that way. Maybe you warm up for 5 or 10 minutes and then just go right into point play. There's not anything wrong with doing that once in a while by the way. That's perfectly fine. You should practice your competition strategy and tactics, your mental toughness during match play. That's all good, but as you work through that you need to be aware of what's happening. And that doesn't mean that you become preoccupied. This is something that rec players struggle with is they take that to an extreme. Every single stroke they're hyper aware of what they're doing. That's not what I'm talking about.

What I mean is that you're just mindful of patterns of what's happening in your game. So if over the course of 5 or 10 minutes you miss several forehands long and you don't miss any wide, but all of a sudden there becomes this little pattern of missing a certain shot in a certain place, you need to pay attention to that. Or maybe it's something where your technique is starting to slip a little bit and the quality of X Y or Z shot starts to slip a little bit. Just over a 5, 10, 15 minute period of time and the quality of a certain shot starts to drop, you need to pay attention to that. Or maybe your body is giving you some feedback. You finish hitting and taking a water break, and you realize that your forearm is starting to ache and that's never happened before. That's another cue that you need

to pay attention to. There's 3 just quick examples of things that if you're not paying attention to those type of things in your game and you're just going through the motions and hitting the ball, you're going to miss the indicators that something is about to go wrong with your game. And if you don't catch it as it's happening, then before you know it a month later you may completely lose a certain stroke. So you have to stay on top of it.

That's key number one to being able to avoid and cure ultimately the loss of a stroke is you have to identify little slips in your game, little areas of deficiency as they begin to happen before they turn into big problems. So that's number one. Number two, you have to diagnose why X Y or Z thing is happening. So why that forearm pain is happening. You have to diagnose correctly why that forehand all of a sudden has started floating long over the last 10, 15 minutes. Or diagnose why the level of your slice backhand for whatever reason wasn't as penetrating as it normally is. This is the hard part. Identifying the areas as they slip, that can be tricky, and that takes concentration and really purposefulness in your hitting. But diagnosing why those certain things are happening and what the reason is, that's the hard part, and it takes experience to be able to correctly identify and correctly diagnose problems.

To be totally honest, and I'm not in the tennis coaching or tennis pro giving lessons at a club gig anymore so I don't have anything to gain from this. But this is where the experience of a tennis pro can really pay off, and it's really worth the money. If you don't want to spend the money to go take a weekly lesson, then I can understand that. And you can still find great information online, and if you're focused you can still coach yourself with help from an expert on the internet. You can still become a great tennis player. Absolutely. I see it happen every day. But if you run into a specific problem like what Tenny was describing, having the eyes of an experienced tennis pro can really be priceless. Finding a good pro starts to get you into the position where you can walk onto the court, say listen this is the specific thing that's happening. This is the symptom of what's happening in my game. I'm really struggling with figuring out why, and within 5 or 10 minutes the pro can give you the reason. That's all important. If you can't identify the reason correctly, then we can't correctly work on it to actually make it better. And that's step number three. Once you've identified that there's a slip and once you have diagnosed what the problem is specifically, and that might be totally different for every single person even for the same stroke, then you have to go to the court and you have to repeat the problem area with the fix over and over again. Be aware of the fix and put in enough repetitions into the fix that you overwrite whatever bad habit was starting to occur.

Now this sounds really logical and simple and easy, but the nuts and bolts and really the diagnosis part of this is not easy. This is where rec players can get caught and totally stuck in their game, and they'll start improving or even revert. Sometimes a player's

whole game can drop down a level, and they just can't figure out the reason why, and that's the hard part. Hopefully that's helpful to you and having a kind of action plan. Work through those three steps. Listen, if you're listening to me right now. If you're hearing my voice right now and you've been struggling with a shot for months or struggling with a part of your game. Maybe it's not technique related for months. And you feel like you have nowhere to go and you've tried everything and nothing is working, you're probably stuck on the diagnosis part of it and you've misdiagnosed maybe over and over again. And you've tried different things but nothing is working. Feel free to let me know. I want to let you all know if you're a regular listener of my show, I'm totally open to giving you help. I really mean that. I might not have 45 minutes to sit down and write you a super long response, but I will definitely give you ideas. So you can always feel free to send me an email to lan@essentialtennis.com.

With that let's move onto the backhand slice technique now that we've worked through the losing a stroke section of the outline. Hopefully that's made sense to those of you listening. If you have any specific questions on that, definitely post them below this podcast at EssentialTennis.com/Podcast.

Let's talk about backhand slice technique. The resulting ball flight of any backhand slice, Tenny, is going to have to do with two main variables. The first one is the path of the racket. The path should have a U shape to it. As you make contact, you want the racket to drop downwards. Then the racket should come back up again around shoulder height, so the racket should start around shoulder height, come down slightly to meet the ball, racket will continue to drop at least a little bit as contact is made. And then the racket should come back up again to around shoulder height. So there's a U shape to it. Now the deeper the U is, the more float your shot is going to have to it.

The second variable at play here is the angle of your racket face. The more open your racket face is, meaning the more strings are angled towards the sky, the more float you're going to get on your backhand slice. The more closed your racket face is, the straighter of a shot you're going to get. By the way, these two variables play off of each other. An example of that would be when you -- let's say you have a deep U and the racket is really coming down towards the ball. Well if you think about it, with the net being in the way, a good 30, 40 feet away from where you're standing and the racket traveling downwards, we can't have the racket too closed. And the more the racket is dropping down, the more open we need the face to be otherwise the ball is going to go into the net. This is probably Tenny what's happened to you. The more your racket starts to drop and the more aggressively your racket is moving downwards towards the court, so the deeper U shape we start getting, the more the face has to open to account for that otherwise we'll start missing the shot into the net. It just won't make it over the net because we have that downward momentum of the racket.

And so the more the racket drops and the more open it is, the more backspin is going to be on the ball and the more of a floating sitting shot we're going to get. So the way that we fix that is by creating a more lateral swing path, a straighter swing path, a string path that's more parallel to the court. Now there should still be a U shape to it, but we want it to be more shallow than what you're doing right now. All other things being equal, we need to create a more shallow racket path with your racket, and we need to flatten the racket face so that it's not so open. If you change both of those main technique elements to your backhand slice, I guarantee you that you will start to see more of a penetrating shot.

We could get more detailed and talk more about the use of the shoulder, the use of the core, your stance, the direction of the racket path from right to left as well as out towards your target. I'm not going to get into those things. I want to talk to you in really simple terms. This is just the physics side of it. The more the racket goes down and the more the face is open, the more the ball is going to float. And that's what happened.

So somewhere along the line during your practice and competition Tenny, your racket started to drop down more. You started to have a more aggressive downward motion chop if you will. Chop would be an exaggerated way of doing it, but your racket somewhere along the way started dropping more. And to keep the ball out of the net your face started opening more, and so that's going to create a more floating shot. And when it hits the court on the other side, yeah it's just going to sit there. And that's not going to be very competitive against a 5.0 player. 5.0 player is going to tee off on that all day long. So that's pretty much it Tenny. We need a straighter swing path. We need a flatter racket face. Hopefully that's helpful to you.

And by the way, I have a video up at [EssentialTennis.com/Video](https://www.essentialtennis.com/video) or you can go to the YouTube channel, [YouTube.com/EssentialTennis](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...). And I did a 9 or 10 minute video breaking down backhand slice technique. You'll see an example of me demonstrating and also an example of a rec player who was having problems with his backhand slice so I was giving him advice. So you can get an idea there of the type of swing path that we're looking for. And if you have any further questions about this, definitely let me know either on the technique or on the losing a stroke part of it. Thank you very much for submitting your question. I appreciate it. Really good topic. And thanks very much for being a listener in Sydney, Australia. Let me know if I can help you further.

Alright. That does it for today's topic on episode #178 of the Essential Tennis podcast. I'd like to read a couple of comments that were left on last week's show at [EssentialTennis.com/Podcast](https://www.essentialtennis.com/podcast). And if you have any questions or comments about anything I talked about on today's episode, please go and leave those at [EssentialTennis.com/Podcast](https://www.essentialtennis.com/podcast). Just click on episode #178. Leave your thoughts. I'll do

my best to respond to you there, and I like to read one or two of those at the end of next week's show. So maybe I'll read your comments.

Before we get to last week's, I'd like to remind you all real quickly about the sponsor of this show. That is Tennis Express. Please check them out by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express. That'll shoot you right over to Tennis Express, one of the best online retailers for tennis gear and equipment, clothing, anything you could possibly need for tennis they have. When you go to EssentialTennis.com/Express, that'll put a little tracking code in your browser, and any purchases you make a small percentage of that comes back to Essential Tennis to help support the podcast and website. So big thank you to all of you that have been using that link to make your racket and string and shoes purchases. I really appreciate that a lot.

So I want to read real quickly here two comments that were left on last week's episode which was an interview with Brent Abel. First from Ed, one comment of his puzzled me though. I think you asked him about problems arising from amateurs trying to hit like pros, and he answered it in one word: "topspin". The implication being that us mortals shouldn't try to hit with so much topspin. Brent didn't really develop this thought, but I'm intrigued. I mean, I always have been taught that topspin is a good thing, and should be the foundation for all bread and butter rally strokes on both sides. Slice is nice, but more as a change-up stroke. Also, hitting with plenty of topspin seems pretty important when it comes to actually keeping the ball in, especially when the game is being played at speed. Anyway I didn't really understand Brent's rather cryptic comment and was wondering if you could elaborate on what he meant?

Sure, Ed, and yes I understand your confusion. Brent by the way was nice enough to come back and answer Ed's question himself. Basically he says, yes I overemphasized that or didn't really explain quite clearly enough what I meant. He didn't mean by that comment he thinks topspin is bad in and of itself, but rather that trying to emulate how much topspin the pros are generating these days is a bad idea for rec players. So from his perspective and mine as well, I'm totally in alignment with Brent as well. You should learn how to hit topspin and in general it's a very, very good and important thing to know how to do. As Ed said, especially when you start playing at higher speeds you need to know how to use it so that you can keep the ball more in play consistently. So Brent didn't mean to say that topspin is bad, but rather that trying to copy the pros and the kind of more extreme techniques that they use to generate huge amounts of topspin is a bad idea for the recreational player. So thanks for your question.

And then one more comment I want to read from Gary. On the topic of proper spacing, it seems to me that this is really another word for good footwork. I see that high level players always and always spit-step before any ball is hit to them and then generate massive baby steps like a jack rabbit to get into proper swing position.

Yes, Gary, and Gary went on and talked also about the identification and being able to see the ball correctly and depth perception. And that's the other part of it as well. I've done several shows on those topics of footwork and being able to identify the ball correctly so that you can get yourself in the right spot. And Gary you're absolutely correct. When we talk about spacing, we're talking about footwork and we're talking about identification of where the ball is going, what kind of spin, what kind of speed it has, etc. So you're dead on. Extremely important stuff as Brent and I were talking about in last week's show.

Thank you both for your comments. Thank you for listening, and we had several comments as well. Big thank you to everyone who listened and came back and gave feedback. If you have any questions or comments again about today's episode, go to EssentialTennis.com/podcast. Leave those, and I'm looking forward to seeing your feedback. So with that I'm going to wrap up today's show. Thank you very much for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.