

Essential Tennis Podcast #181

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. I really hope that it's going to be helpful to you, and I think that it will be for a large majority of people because it's about a topic that is very, very common. It really doesn't matter what your level is. It doesn't make any difference. It can always be difficult to play somebody who is not as good as a player as you are. And that might seem counter-intuitive, but for whatever reason it can very often be hard and awkward to put away a player that you just know is good as you are. And that can be really frustrating. So without further a due, let's get right into that topic. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright. Had a really good question to talk about in today's podcast, and it comes to us from Eric in Pennsylvania, and he is a 4.5 player. I know that many of you listening are going to be able to identify very quickly with what his struggles are here. He wrote to me and said, I would really appreciate some tips both psychology and mechanics of playing against weaker opponents. I'm a 4.5 level player, and in my league I compete against players with a wide range of abilities, weaker than me, evenly matched, and stronger. I get really frustrated because I end up having better matches and probably overall a better match percentage against the stronger players. Of course I don't always win these matches, but I feel like I play better and do better against stronger as opposed to weaker players. It feels like my main problems against weaker opponents are mechanical as opposed to psychological, but maybe I'm wrong. When my opponent hits with more power, depth, and topspin, my own ground strokes are stronger. It feels like my muscle memory just takes over and my strokes are more fluid and easy. But when shots land well short of the baseline and sit up with very little topspin, my own ground strokes become less accurate and less fluid. With more time to prepare for my shots, I get confused as to what to do with the racket during my backswing, and my strokes often go long. I don't want to just chip these shots back with backspin because then I don't know where to go after I return my shot. I can't run to the net every time. So what tactics and strategies should I work on against weaker players? How can I develop stronger shots when I'm not working with a lot of depth and power from my opponents?

How should I change the mechanics of my strokes and my psychology in these matches?

Okay, well Eric, that's a really good question. This can be extremely frustrating because it's kind of counter intuitive, right? It seems like the easier of a shot I get from my opponent, then clearly an easier of a time I should have in trying to come up with some kind of confident offensive reply and be able to pressure my opponent when they give me a weak easy shot. I want you to know that you're not alone in this, and this is a really common problem that players have. It's a big distinguishing factor between where you are now and moving up a level. If you can't very confidently take a weak shot and really hit a solid reply, then you're always going to have a hard time playing up a level from where you are now. It's not uncommon by the way to feel more confident when you're receiving more pace and more spin.

So I'm breaking my outline into two main sections. We're going to talk about the psychological part, and we're going to talk about the physical part of it as well. I want to go ahead and just start off by saying Eric I don't think all of these things I'm going to talk about are what your problem is, but they apply to many players listening. And so I want to make sure that I put out some good information here that's going to be for a lot of other players possibly besides yourself. So please keep that in mind as I talk about this. Not that I don't think some of your problems aren't psychological with this. I think they are, and I think they fall under two main categories that I'm going to talk about when it comes to the psychology of playing players that are weaker than you.

The number one mistake that I think players make when playing somebody like this is they don't respect this type of opponent, and they basically underestimate their opponent and their opponent's abilities simply because they don't play the way that they think better players should play. Tennis players, they kind of have a pre-fabricated player in their mind where okay this -- for a player to be better than me, they're going to look like this physically. They're going to swing like this technically. They're going to have X Y or Z weapons. They're going to have this looking game. And very often when we go out on the court and somebody doesn't swing like what we were expecting and they don't move like we were expecting, and maybe they don't physically look the way that we were expecting for a better player to look and play, then we automatically don't respect that person in terms of their tennis ability. It's really important to understand that doesn't mean they can't beat you anyway. Just because they don't fit your cookie-cutter type of player that we -- the perfect looking athlete with fluid strokes and accelerates the racket really aggressively. You see that player and think, oh they're a better player than me. Then you see the guy that's maybe a little bit older than you, maybe a little bit more overweight than you are, maybe uses technique that's not very smooth and fluid, doesn't hit with a lot of power and spin. And you think oh great, I'm going to have an easy day today. It's not a 100% correlation between those things. In fact it's very often

the opposite that we have more trouble against the latter type of player and less trouble against the former.

So don't fall into that trap of underestimating your opponent, and you really need to respect everybody that you play, respect their skills no matter how they look. And something I wrote down here in my notes is it's interesting watching the pros be interviewed pre-match. Even guys like Federer and maybe even especially players like Federer and Nadal. They're walking onto the court first round of the US Open playing somebody that's maybe ranked like 70 in the world, 80 in the world, which is still a great player but compared to somebody in the top 10 -- I mean, we all know sitting at home this is not going to be a close match. We're all thinking that. And yet during the quick 30 second pre-match interview, Federer and Nadal are saying, this person is really playing great right now. They've got some big weapons. It's going to be a really good match today, and I just hope I play well so I come out on top, right? You know exactly what I'm talking about. And then they go out and win like 2,2, and 1, or something like that.

Well, it's important to find out that it's not just BS when Nadal or Federer say something like that. Even though they're walking out onto the court with somebody who on paper is very clearly inferior, it doesn't matter. These players still have skills, and again it's not the same, but you have to almost equally treat everybody with respect because you never know when that person is going to have a great day. Or you never know when their skills might just happen to match up perfectly with your weaknesses. You just don't know.

So walk out on the court no matter what the outwardly things like look, respect that player. When it turns out that, oh man I'm having to really fight here just to stay in the match, you don't get upset and you don't get nervous and tight, and you don't lose your ability to perform well.

And then one more under the heading of respect all opponents, and again Eric this might not be necessarily what you're struggling with. In fact, nothing in your question led me to believe that, but this is a really big part of it for a lot of players. And so it's really important for me that I go through this. One more little example here under the respect all opponents psychology part of it. There are no illegitimate tennis tactics, unless they are illegal. Assuming that we're staying within the rules, there are no illegitimate tactics even though some of them might be annoying to you. Maybe your opponent just uses a whole bunch of spin, and that's like their primary weapon. Maybe your opponent has no weapons at all in terms of offense, and they just push the ball back into play over and over again with no pace and no spin. Maybe your opponent has really poor, in our opinion, really poor technique. Maybe they like switch hands and hit some shots left handed, and it just doesn't look pretty. It doesn't matter. It doesn't mean that they still can't beat you, and those players are just as much competitors as are the players that

are a level above you. You need to get over it, stop focusing on those outward things, and just do what it takes to win. Don't be distracted by stuff like this. So that all fell under the heading of psychological, and this is I think the number one mistake players make playing against someone who is weaker. That is they don't respect all opponents the same way, and that leads to emotional problems. Later on once you start getting annoyed and upset and angry, technical problems.

Number two, and this is the last part of the psychological part. The number two biggest psychological mistake players make is they play down to their level. And you could kind of argue that this is a physical or a technique type of mistake as well, but it really is psychological. Basically what this comes down to is if you are truly the stronger player in terms of having the ability to hit with more offense, having the ability to create more racket head speed, more spin, then you need to dictate play. Do not allow an inferior to get comfortable and get into a rhythm with you baseline to baseline just rallying back and forth. And you're like, oh I know they don't have a lot of offense so I'm just going to relax a bit here and play it safe and not really pressure them too much. I'm going to win eventually because I'm better than they are, right? Well, before you know it, you're trading shots back and forth that your opponent is totally comfortable with. And you're basically playing down to their level. And you're just playing a neutral rally ball back and forth.

Then when the time does come to attack because it's just a really obvious opportunity, before you know it you're getting tight and tentative, and you're scared to pull the trigger and actually accelerate the racket because you just spent the last 10 or 15 shots slowing down your swing more than what you're used to or more than what you typically would against somebody who is at your level or maybe stronger than you. And you get sucked into this pattern of -- or maybe you pull the trigger and it's tight and oh man that just didn't feel good at all, and you make an unforced error. And then it spirals out of control, right? And then the next time you get that short weak shot, you're even more tight because you're thinking oh I missed the last one. I hope this one isn't worse. And you get tighter and tighter, and before you know it you're playing an hour and a half of shots that are totally played down to your opponent's level. And they are comfortable and run you back and forth, and all of a sudden they're in control. And you've just totally lost your rhythm and game and your ability to attack.

This is incredibly frustrating. This might even be the number one psychological mistake. They're both mistakes, and I'm sure that most of you listening to me have had this happen to you at some point. I know it's happened to me. And it's just really frustrating. The bottom line is you have to play your game and not theirs. And if you allow them to get comfortable, then don't get surprised if you lose. And don't blame them.

Listen, this circles back to the respect part of it, don't finish the match and say no wonder I played like crap. They didn't give me anything to work with and just gave me this junk over and over again. So, yeah, I played terrible. It's their fault. No, it's not their fault. It's your fault, and don't disrespect your opponent that way. If they found a way to beat you regardless of the tactics, then they were better than you that day.

Well next we're going to talk about the physical things that we need to change to be more successful against this type of player. Before we get to that, just a quick reminder about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast, and that is Tennis Express. One of the biggest and best online retailers for tennis gear and equipment out there on the internet. Really great customer service, and they offer free shipping for orders over \$75. And to thank them for supporting myself and for supporting EssentialTennis.com please go check them out and do that by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express. And you'll be rerouted automatically over to Tennis Express. And that just puts a little tracking code into your browser so that if you do make any purchases, a small percentage comes back to help support the Essential Tennis podcast. So big thank you to Tennis Express for supporting me, and equally big thank you to all of you that have been checking them out and making purchases through that link. That really helps out in helping the bills around here. I really appreciate that.

Okay, now let's move onto the physical things to keep in mind in this frustrating scenario playing somebody who is weaker than you but still struggling. And I've got again two different main sections here. Number one, you must train yourself to learn how to create pace and spin from nothing. So even if you are fed a ball that literally checks up. It's got some backspin, and it just checks up and just sits and bounces straight up and sits there right in the center of the court. If you don't have the ability to create pace and create spin from that shot, then you're always going to have a hard time against the player who is half a level or a full level below you. And this is really just a hallmark of a high level player is somebody who is able to do this. Can you take a ball that's just sitting there with no pace of it's own and confidently make pace yourself? So how can we develop this? Well, the short answer, and we're going to talk about the technique in a minute, but the short answer is through practice and repetition.

I wish there was a more exciting answer, but that's it. Without putting in the time and putting in the repetition, there's just no other way to ingrain the muscle memory necessary to walk out onto the court when it really counts, and you know it counts, so there's that the added element of anxiety, and still be able to do it. There's no other way to build confidence in yourself that you can do it if you don't really believe that you can make that shot even when you're totally generating the pace and spin completely by yourself -- if there's any level doubt back there in your mind that you could possibly miss this shot even though it's really easy, you will start getting physically tight and nervous.

Now one more thing under the header of training yourself to create pace and spin. This is the difference in skill between losing and absolutely crushing this opponent. Just this one skill, being able to take a ball with no pace and no spin and create your own pace and spin is the difference between constantly struggling against a player who is a level below you and consistently crushing the same player who is a level below you. If you don't have the ability to do this, like I just described, it doesn't take much doubt to fall into being tentative and falling into that spiral, that negative spiraling down.

On the other hand, if you do possess the physical ability and mental confidence to be able to do this, then that's really the ticket. I mean, that's your key to being able to take somebody who is a level below you and just put them away convincingly and dictate every point. I mean, without this skill, you will always have at least a little bit of a hard time against somebody who in your opinion isn't as good as you. Without offense, you can't stay on top of them tactically. You can't keep them down strategically if you can't consistently create some kind of offense to put pressure and ultimately beat them. That's the whole idea.

So lastly let's talk about the actual technique of how to do this, and there's three different parts to this. Number one, you need to have a strong acceleration across your entire kinetic chain. And if you've been listening to this podcast, you've heard the use of the term kinetic chain many times. That basically just refers to the transfer of energy through your body, out your body, into the racket, and eventually into the ball. And there's a certain kind of order of operations that should be occurring. Basically most of the time kinetic chain means that you're transferring energy from your legs, up through your core and torso, and then out your shoulder through your arm, to your hand and the racket, and out to the ball. Smooth accelerated motion using all of those body parts together and in the correct order will create plenty of racket head speed, plenty of power, and plenty of spin. If you don't use your whole kinetic chain very well, and I'm not going to get into specific ways that could happen but you have to use your whole body together correctly using good technique. And that will give you the racket head speed that we're looking for.

And when you have the racket head speed, then you're able to create pace and able to create spin. Without that, well you're right back where you started. And you're right back essentially at the level of the person that you're playing against. And that's exactly what you don't want. So that's number one. You have to use your whole body correctly and efficiently, strong use of the kinetic chain will give you the potential to be able to accelerate the racket enough so that we can create an offensive shot.

So once we are using the body correctly and get that racket head speed, we have to have to good racket technique as well. The racket head needs to be moving correctly in order to hit an effective shot. And the basics of that is or are a low to high swing. We

need topspin. If you want to consistently attack, and for a lot of people that's an oxymoron, consistently attack. You can consistently attack if you have topspin. Without topspin, things become much more more difficult. Topspin makes the ball curve back down toward the court again, so if you're able to use it effectively then you can hit the ball with more offense. You can hit the ball with more pace and harder and still be able to keep it in play.

By the way as you do that you can aim the ball higher over the net and still keep it in play because of that curve, because of the spin. So being able to hit with topspin in conjunction with using the kinetic chain correctly and strongly, those are really important keys technically to be able to beat this type of player over and over again.

Then thirdly, and again all of these things work together, and when they do work together in harmony then you will see your full potential, you need to be loose and relaxed. When your body is physically tight, using the kinetic chain correctly becomes very difficult because the body just doesn't move smoothly when it's tense. I mean, that's just common sense, right? And yet so many recreational players try to hit the ball with a great deal of physical tension. When you do that, it takes a lot more work to accelerate the racket. Even if you do expend that extra energy, it very often chokes off your technique. And the actual technique of your swing decreases, and it's not as good technically of the swing.

Now it's not impossible to still hit a good shot that way, but you're just going to have to work a lot harder for it. So ideally you want to have the good use of your kinetic chain. You want to have a low to high swing pretty consistently to make the topspin to hit offensively and stay consistent. And you want to be loose and relaxed. If you do all those things and you do what I talked about before, the practice and repetition, then you can start to hit these types of shots consistently enough that you can have the confidence that when you go out and play this type of player you can be successful and hit this shot. You own this shot from the middle of the court where you have to generate your own pace, your own spin, and you'll have the confidence that you can do it over and over again.

You know what, there's no better feelings in the world. There's no better feeling than playing somebody who is just marginally weaker than you are but just not quite up to your level of play. And really just dominate and take over the match and dictate play and play confidently. There is no better feeling than that.

On the flipside of the coin, there's no worse feeling than playing somebody who is significantly weaker than you not having these skills and struggling through the match. We've all come through matches like that and won just by a little bit and been so frustrated.

So really good question, Eric, and to be honest I'm happy with this outline I put together. I think it hits the important parts really well. I hope it's helpful, and I hope you enjoyed listening. And if you have any comments or questions, if anything didn't make sense or if you have some suggestions or anything, come over to EssentialTennis.com and let me know. This is episode #181. Click on that and leave your thoughts and comments. I'd love to hear from you.

So with that, going to wrap things up. Eric, thanks again for the question. If I can be of any further help, definitely let me know. Best of luck.

Alright, that does it for episode #181 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Man, time has really flown by. I can't believe we're at #181 already closing in on 200th episode of the show. Big thank you to everybody that listened to my voice today, and I really do hope that it was helpful. Again, please drop by the site and leave any comments or questions that you may have. I will always do my best to reply and answer all of those. So with that, thank you very much for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.