

## Essential Tennis Podcast #184

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](http://EssentialTennis.com/Express).

Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the podcast. I really appreciate having you as a listener very much. Really good topic to get to today talking about managing unforced errors. How do you not get nervous and tight and frustrated when you make mistakes on the court? Really good stuff and good mental tennis topic that I'm looking forward to talking about. Real quickly before I get to that, I just want to say thank you to everybody that I met and talked to in Cincinnati last week when I was there filming the pros. Several of you came up and said hi to me. Really appreciate that. It was great catching up with all of you, and I got some awesome footage at the tournament. You can check that out by going to [essentialtennis.com/video](http://essentialtennis.com/video) or just go to [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com) and click on video.

I've already got a video posted of Nadal hitting backhands from a back perspective in full speed, and also he's getting drilled by his coach. And also a slow motion video of Federer hitting forehands. I'm going to have a lot more. Keep your eyes on the video page. There's going to be a lot of stuff coming out. Both just raw footage of the pros and also I'm going to be using that footage to create lesson showing you all examples using the pro footage. So looking forward to using that. With that let's get to business. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright, let's get to business here and get started on today's topic. I'm going to be kind of killing two birds with one stone here on today's show answering basically the exact same question from two different listeners. First of all, Megan in New Zealand, 4.0 player. She wrote and said how do you deal with and get over making mistakes, and how do you not be afraid of making mistakes? I constantly line up a great shot only to have this doubt enter my mind at the last minute, and I choke. Then we're going to have a secondary question from her later on in the show as well about how to play, how loose or how much risk. But our main topic today is going to be about this. Not worrying about unforced errors.

And the other person who brought up this topic was Jesse in the Philippines, also 4.0 player. Jesse wrote and said, one issue I'd like to hear about in your podcast is dealing with unforced errors. I'm a 4.0 player, but I often do make a lot of mistakes. I know that everyone makes errors, even professionals. But when I start making errors, I start conscious of my shots and start being afraid of making errors the more I make. Such that I start hitting to keep the ball in play or playing not to lose. Eventually I just choke the match away. What mental tips can you suggest to overcome getting too conscious of errors and just be able to have self confidence again and focus on my game during a match.

Alright. Jesse and Megan, really good topic here. There's been many mental toughness podcasts in the Essential Tennis podcast. By the way if you're a relatively new listener, you need to check those out. Go to [EssentialTennis.com/Podcast](https://www.essentialtennis.com/podcast) and on the right you'll see categories. Click on mental toughness and there will be a whole bunch of episodes. This is such an important topic in general. Even though we've done so many shows on it, I'm pretty sure we haven't done a show specifically on errors and making mistakes. I've got my outline here split up into three essential things that you need to either be afraid of or do during your match in order to help keep unforced errors from choking your game away because that absolutely can happen. It's definitely happened to me and it's happened to anyone that competed at tennis for any length of time. It can be a really smothering feeling because it takes you out of your game. That fearful feeling is just really crippling and frustrating to deal with.

So the first of three essentials to dealing with this is something that Jesse basically already brought up, but I just want to reiterate just for the benefit of everybody listening. And that is accept that errors are part of tennis. Jesse was completely correct. Everybody makes mistakes, even professional players. And yet it seems that so many tennis players across the entire spectrum of different levels from total beginner all the way on to the very best professional players in the world, it seems very often that tennis players have this attitude. They might not say it. If you go up and ask them, hey are you expecting to play today's match without making any errors? They would laugh and say of course I'm going to make mistakes. I'm human. It's part of the game. There's a reason that there's stats for screwing up, unforced errors and forced errors. I mean, they even have different types of ways to screw up. So it's obviously just part of the game.

And yet when you watch tennis players play, you'll very often see people that deep down inside seem to have an attitude that they shouldn't even screw up. Or maybe a certain type of shot. Maybe it's a real easy sitter or a weak short overhead that they're in good position for, or a high putaway volley. Easy shots. When they screw up and miss, they react so negatively that it almost seems like they expected they weren't going to make any mistakes that day. And that's something that you need to get over. I'm not

saying that you should welcome mistakes and be fine with them. You want to avoid making errors. That's important. You should strive to make as few mistakes as possible. So I'm not saying you should be I guess cavalier about it and not care, but on the other hand you don't want to let it affect you emotionally so much that you start getting nervous and tonight, like what both Megan and Jesse were talking about. So essential number one is just understand that's part of the game.

This is actually a great life lesson and part of the reason why I love teaching is that there are so many parallels between competing at tennis and just life in general. And this is one of them. Anytime you put yourself out there, there's going to be mistakes. I mean, you're going to make errors. There's going to be things that don't quite just go your way, and really what separates the really successful people both in life and in tennis is how you react to those mistakes. Do you make adjustments and calmly improve yourself and that part of yourself and move forward and be more successful than before? Or do you pout, get angry, get upset, blame somebody else, make excuses, or maybe you get really tentative. Again, still talking about life and tennis. When you make mistakes in life, do you immediately decide I'm never doing that again. I don't want to make that mistake. So you forgo something that could be really positive because you're so afraid of continuing to make mistakes.

Yeah, I'm getting deep here, but you guys get the idea. This is just a really important thing to understand both about life and about tennis. Alright, now, that brings us to essential #2 in handling errors. Control your reaction as much as possible when you make mistakes. And I've got 3 different things quickly I want to talk about having to do with that. Basically having to do with different types of responses. There's basically 3 different types of responses you can have when making a mistake.

Number one, here's the best possible response you can have is positive reinforcement of some kind. In other words, you go for a shot, line it up, make your swing, and you just miss. It was totally your bad, an unforced error. If at all possible, give yourself some kind of positive affirmation. That can be something like, well I know I made this mistake with technique. So you can say to yourself, alright next time I'm going to do this technique instead. Maybe you went for the wrong shot. Maybe you went a drop shot just in a wrong part of the point. You were off-balance, behind the baseline, and you tried a drop shot. So you missed and make the unforced error. Instead of getting angry at yourself, just give yourself something positive. Say, next time I will play a high defensive shot deep in the middle of the court. That's just a positive statement. Next time I will do this. As opposed to a negative statement. Give yourself something positive and totally put it out of your mind. Move onto the next point.

You can say something like, hey that was the right play. Good try. Maybe you got an easy overhead, and your opponent is out of position on the outside. You take a nice

confident aggressive swing towards the deuce side, and you put it into the net. So it was the right play, but you just missed the shot. Just say, alright. Good attempt. Good try. That was the right play. I'm going to do the exact same thing next time.

I kind of combined 2 and 1 there. My third one was maybe you go for a passing shot and your opponent is at the net. You go for a big passing shot down the line, and you miss it by just a couple inches wide. Another positive thing you can tell yourself is, oh man I just missed that. That was the right shot. I'm going to definitely do that next time. I had the opening there. Next time I have that shot lined up, I'm going to take that same chance because I know I can make that shot.

So those are all positive reaffirmations you can give yourself, and if at all possible that's really the best way to react to making a mistake. Give yourself something positive to think about and then just move on.

Second way that you can react to an unforced error, and this is in danger of getting negative. It can totally natural to get a little bit negative after making a mistake. That's not all bad. It's okay to not be happy about making a mistake. Do your best to just take a deep breath and let it go. Realize that if you allow yourself to get negative, you're going to give up a lot. Your emotional state and your concentration are probably going to suffer. You're probably going to give more hope to your opponent that they have you right where they want you, and what they are doing is working. So just realize all the different negatives that there are to getting angry and to getting emotionally negative, and just take a deep breath and let it go. Again, move onto the next point. What's done is done. Just leave it be, and just refocus and get back to neutral again and get back to the next point.

Another one that I personally like using is smile and laugh it off when you make a mistake. You're out there to have fun, so kind of have fun with it. Joke with yourself a little bit. Ah, that was the easiest shot ever. It was kind of silly for me to miss that. I just smile and go, ah that was kind of a dumb mistake. Just laugh about it and move on and just bed one with it. You know, kind of have fun with the fact that you're out there competing. You know what, you had an opportunity to put that shot away. Yeah, sure, maybe you missed it. But just realize, hey this is a lot of fun. I'm out here competing, playing a sport that I really enjoy. Just smile and move onto the next point. That's kind of your second way of dealing with this if you're about to get angry or negative, take a deep breath, smile, laugh it off, move on.

Thirdly, and this is kind of the option that you should try to avoid, but it's not always possible. If you have to led some steam off because you just really got upset or frustrated, it's going to happen sometimes, then just make sure you make it quick. Immediately get back to neutral as quickly as possible. Refocus for the next point, and

just remind yourself that point is done, finished. Yeah, maybe you made a dumb mistake but that's okay. You need to get ready for the next one. You're going to make dumb mistakes. Remind yourself of that and just let it go.

So there's essential #2, control your reaction as much as possible. And thirdly, and this is probably the most important, and this third essential really speaks directly to the topic or the reaction of getting nervous and tight and choking. This is really important, a little sports psychology here. It's really important that you focus on the process of your competition and not the results. So here's a few examples of process related elements that you could focus on, your strategy. So the way, the specific way that you're trying to beat your opponent. Making tactical adjustments, so kind of keeping tabs n your opponent and keeping tabs on what's happening within the match, what's working and what's not, and then making adjustments accordingly would be a good example of a process, part of the process, of making tennis that you could focus on. Keeping tabs on what your opponent's strengths and weaknesses are. Often times we have an idea of what our opponent is good at and bad at going into a match, but that might change and evolve over the course of a match. And so this is really closely connected to making tactical adjustments, but it's different. You have to play close attention to what your opponent is doing, what they are being successful with, what they are not being successful with kind of as opposed to what you're doing that's being successful and not successful.

You kind of want to make adjustments based on both of those things. That's another example of part of the process. Then fourth example, having a target for every shot. And I mean a specific target, a point on the other side of the court that you are literally trying to hit with each and every shot. So there's just four quick examples of different parts of the process of playing tennis. And those are all things that go into the process of playing. It's part of the -- it's just part of what you're trying to do to win. Those are all good things to focus on. I'm going to get to why in a second. Now, two examples of results based things that you could focus on are thinking about missing the shot. That's a result. That's something that's -- I'm getting ahead of myself. But thinking about missing the shot. I think both Jesse and Megan mentioned this specifically. Lining up for a shot and instead of thinking about the process, which is I know that their backhand is weaker so I'm going to setup for this inside out forehand and go back cross court. I'm going to hit inside out over to their backhand side. Or maybe the target.

Alright, I know I'm going to aim here because it fits in with my gameplan, with my tactics and strategy. So I'm going to aim four feet inside each line. You're not literally thinking these words, but you're visually or consciously picking out that spot. I'm not going to say visually because you don't literally want to be looking at the other side of the court. You should be focusing on the ball, but kind of in your mind's eye you want to pick out that spot just as an example of having a target and literally just aim for that

spot. As opposed to thinking about missing the shot. You guys see the difference? There's a big difference. There's kind of the same thing, but there's the results way based thinking about it which just focuses on the what if, if you miss, as opposed to giving your mind very specific and tangible to focus on. And that takes away all those other distractions that get you tight and nervous.

Another results based example would be worrying about losing. That's a big one, right? How many -- everybody. I mean everybody. Every tennis player has played a match where it's like, it could be at any point in the match. It could be the first game of the match, and you're playing against somebody who maybe you know this person well. You've never lost to them. You know that you're stronger than you are, but you just have this little worry. What if this time I lose to this person? Then several games later, maybe all of a sudden they're playing great. Better than they've ever played against you before. And this thought keeps getting bigger and bigger in your mind. It keeps coming up over and over. What if I lose? What if I lose? And before you know it, you're playing tentative and tight, and this is what people refer to as choking.

Or maybe you are playing great, and you're beating somebody that you've never -- you're beating somebody that you've never beaten before. You've won the first set. You're up in the second set, and then the same kind of thought. But this is a totally different situation. What if I lose? I'm in a total control. Now what if I lose? That is terrible. That's a terrible thought to have go through your mind. You know what? It's going to go through your mind, but you need to try to push those thoughts out of your head and refocus on the process. Just real quickly, I'm going to talk about why. Focusing on the process means that you're occupying your mind with what actually matters, the tactics, the strategy, focusing on what's actually working, what's not working, your opponent's strengths and weaknesses, having a target for every shot. Those are all positive specific tangible things that if you focus on them, your chances of playing confident relaxed tennis are much much greater.

On the other hand if you focus on the results, you're being caught up with hypothetical emotional things. These are thoughts that will get you too tight and nervous and totally change the quality of your play. I mean, the stuff that will really choke off your potential to play good and solid tennis. So it's really important that you focus on the process.

I was watching the golf US Open at Congressional Country Club this past July, and Rory McIlroy who won the tournament after the second round had a massive lead on the rest of the field. I think he was up by something like 10 or 12 strokes. Big lead. And he had actually been in a major and in that same position previously and totally threw his lead away. He was in a position where he should've never lost, and on the last day just melted down and had a terrible round and totally threw away his chance to win his first major tournament.

So of course after his second round and with his big lead, with two more rounds to play, the question that everybody was asking of course was what are you going to do? I mean, remember this other tournament where you totally blew your lead and threw it away? This is the same situation. What are you going to do differently this time? Can you imagine being asked that question over and over again while you're still within the tournament that you're playing? He was given every possible opportunity to let those emotions come into his head and start focusing on the results. Oh, crap. What if I lose again?

I was watching a postround interview, and he was asked that question. And he said to that person, I'm just going to focus on the process. That's literally what he said. I'm going to focus on the process and play smart golf. I'm going to pick smart targets and just going to focus on the process of just playing two more good rounds, just two more solid rounds. And I was impressed by this guy, 22 year old. Not very old. Just starting off with his professional career. That just really impressed me. It's not very often that you see professional athletes I guess that smart about the mental side of the game.

Okay so that's essential #3 to keep from letting unforced errors really get you nervous and tight. The third one is really what's going to keep you from getting nervous the most. But #1 and #2 are equally as important, accept that errors are part of the game, and control your reaction as much as possible.

Lastly, I just want to say that it's a continual process to stay focused on the right things. Don't feel badly if maybe after hearing this process you go out and do a great job of focusing on the process and the first set, and then your focus and concentration starts to dwindle a little bit. By the end of the match, you're getting nervous and tight and starting to think about the results. This takes practice. It takes time to get good at it. Just like technique does. So don't feel badly about that, but keep on top of it. It'll definitely be worth your while to focus on it.

Okay, and now lastly I just have a secondary question closely related from Megan here in New Zealand. This question is kind of linked. I'm just wondering about the level of risk assessment you should have in a match. Like, how freely you should play and how big the risks are that you should be taking. Where do you draw the line between confident versatile play and just plain reckless.

Okay, I'll give you the answer to that real quickly, Megan. It depends on the match situation and also on who you're playing, but ideally you want to play freely and loose and relaxed but without taking big risks. So just taking part of your question there and using that as the definition. In an ideal situation, you want to play freely and not take any big risks. You don't want to take risks unless it's absolutely necessary. You want to manage your unforced errors and be smart. But on the other side of the coin, be

confident and loose and relaxed. There's no need to go for hero shots most of the time. This is easier said than done. Very often recreational players are only loose when they're just going all out. You have to kind of find the kind of intermediate speed where you're not playing tentative and tight and scared. You're not playing not to lose, but you're also not just going all out and just crushing every single ball. It's inbetween, a speed that's confident and relaxed but without risking and making a whole bunch of mistakes.

Now as I said a second ago, it depends on who you're playing. If you're playing against an opponent who is clearly stronger than you are, then you want to play freely and relaxed but also take risks accordingly. The stronger they are, then the most risks are necessary in order to have a chance to beat them outright. You could always just revert to just playing purely defense and hoping that they screw up enough to beat you. I'm sorry, hope that they screw up enough that you win, but I mean, to be honest with you that's not the attitude you want to have over the long haul. Eventually you want to be able to beat those people that are better than you. Not let them lose to you, right? If you want to keep improving your game.

So at some point, you're going to have to raise the level of your game, take a few risks, and if it's somebody much better than you, you might have to take a lot of risks. That's going to result in one of two outcomes. Either it'll pay off and you'll be timing your strokes well enough and have a good enough day that you make enough of those risky shots that you actually win. Or it could be that when you raise the level of your game and you go for more risks, you do make more errors and you end up losing the match anyway.

But truthfully for me, I would rather go down swinging and giving myself a shot to maybe beating this person who I know is better than me than play tentatively and have them impose their will upon me and just take over the match and beat me. Just a bit of personality in there. I'm not saying it's not a good idea to just play just steady consistent tennis and hope that they screw up. That can be successful, but again the reason why I personally prefer that you would play confidently and go for the shots that are necessary to win, I like that better because over the longhaul that's going to help you improve the level of your play. Eventually you're going to need those extra weapons. You're going to need that little bit of offense in order to continue beating better and better players as you continue advancing in your game.

Now, again, it depends on the situation. So at first I talked about ideal. Play freely but without taking big risks. Against somebody stronger than you, again play freely and loose but take risks accordingly based on exactly how good they are. And then the third situation I have here is on and off day. On and off day. There's going to be days we all have this. This is just again part of life. This is part of tennis. You will have some off



days, and when that happens don't be a dummy and go for the high risk shots over and over again at least. I mean, accept the fact that you're having a bit of an off day and just play smart consistent high percentage tennis.

It's really important to be self aware and know what kind of day you're having. If you're having a good day or even an average day and playing somebody better than you, I'm an advocate of raising your risk level a little bit and just go for shots that are needed to win. If you're playing somebody better and you know you're having an off day and those high risk shots are just not falling in play at all, then give yourself some chance of winning and dial it back and hope that they make mistakes. That's not the ideal way, but you have to be a realist sometimes.

Alright. That's the end of my outline. Thank you so much Megan and Jesse for submitting your questions. Really good topics. Thank you both for being listeners, Megan in New Zealand and Jesse in the Philippines. I always think it's so cool to have international listeners. Thank you guys for being listeners of the show. Hopefully my answers were helpful. If you need any further help, definitely let me know. You can always shoot me an email at [ian@essentialtennis.com](mailto:ian@essentialtennis.com).

Alright, that's it for episode #184 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Just want to read a quick comment from episode #183 which was all about serve and volley. Hope I'm pronouncing this correctly. This comment came from Assenuma who said, wonderful episode. I realized that I make all three of the most common errors when serving and volleying, not the same points but making all three. I'm now watching Monfils serve-and-volleying and return-and-volleying against Djokovic with great success. I'm very impressed to see that.

I agree. I watched that match on replay because I heard that Monfils was serving and volleying and coming into the net a lot, and that always makes me excited that a pro is using that tactic. It's too bad that he chickened out in the latter portion of the match and started going back to baseline rallies with Djokovic, which obviously Djokovic is the best player in the world on the baseline at the moment. It was a really entertaining match. I'd love to see Monfils just charge in there, well not charge in. It's not that he was reckless about it. He was very smart about when he moved forward and played a lot of really high quality volleys.

So yeah if you have any questions or comments, suggestions, whatever, about today's episode #184 about unforced errors, definitely let me know by going to [EssentialTennis.com/Podcast](http://EssentialTennis.com/Podcast). Click on #184 and leave your comments below the episode, and I'll read and reply to as many as possible. I'll try to get to all of them. With that, thank you all very much for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.