

Essential Tennis Podcast #187

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. Really looking forward to getting to two new listener questions today. The first one is going to have to do with creating more topspin in order to more successfully hit big angles from the baseline to pull your opponent off the court, and we're going to talk about the technique of that and how to do that best. And then secondly we are going to talk about making more volleys and specifically easy volleys and missing those, consistency problems. Also we're going to talk about how to specifically avoid miss-hitting volleys. A lot of people have a chronic problem with miss-hitting their volleys, and I'm going to give you all a three step sequence of things to follow in order to clean that up and get rid of that problem. With that let's go ahead and get to those topics. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright. Let's get to today's first topic, and it comes to us from Carla in Germany. She's

a 3.0 player. Carla, thanks very much for being a listener in Germany and writing. I appreciate it. She wrote and said, I have a question about the topspin forehand. If I stand a little in front of the baseline and try to hit a stroke to create angles and move the ball inside out to the sideline, the ball very often goes out. I think it is because I don't put enough topspin on the ball, my swing is too slow or too straight. Do you have any tips on how I can accelerate the racket for more topspin? Maybe with exercises at home. As an example of that, a rubber band or with the racket. Or do you think something is wrong with my stroke itself. Maybe too much power. Carla.

Okay. Carla. Good question, and you're on the right track here. Let me start off my answer by first of all saying that you need to be careful when attempting these angles. Angles are great. I love using angles myself, and I definitely teach angles to my students especially at the net. With volleys, angles are really underutilized by recreational players. But from the baseline as well, they're very useful to open up the court. It's important to realize that the more of an angle you attempt, the less amount of room that you have for error. The more of an angle you go for, whether you're at the baseline or at the net, the more angle you go for the less court you have to work with. The amount of space you have physically becomes smaller. So you have to be careful the more of an angle you go for.

That means when you're up at the net, the way that you want to be more careful is by being a little bit softer. Gripping the racket a little bit looser so that you don't push the ball too far. Unless it's a high volley in which case you can be a little bit more offensive. When you're on the baseline, you're right on track Carla. You want to use a little bit more topspin, and you're really smart to be asking about that because the topspin is

what pulls the ball back down to the court again. And the more topspin we hit, the more the ball dips back down. The more the ball dips down, the more of an angle we can go for without missing the ball wide.

So that's number one. The next part I want to talk about is how technically or how physically topspin is actually created. There's two things that have to be present in order to make topspin. This is just setup the ideas that I have for you Carla as far as drills. For me as a teacher it's always important for me that my students understand how something works. Other teaches they don't really care that their student understands the how as long as they just do it correctly. In my experience I feel like if my students understand what's actually happening in reality, then they're going to be more successful and it's going to be easier for them to figure things out and do things correctly and then help themselves in the future when I might not be there by their side to help them out.

So to create topspin, you need two things. You need a flat racket face at contact, which means the strings are touching the very back of the ball. We are not hitting the top of the ball or else the ball will go down and would go into the net. Unless we are very close and the ball is high over the top of the net. But Carla's question had to do with shots just inside the baseline. So we want to make contact with a flat racket. Number two, we need a vertical racket path. The racket should be traveling upwards as you make contact. That means the racket at some point before you make contact needs to be below the point of contact. And then the racket should accelerate upwards and finish somewhere above contact. So there needs to be a vertical upward path of the racket as contact is made with the racket face flat behind the ball.

Now the way that you control how much spin is on the ball is by changing two variables.

How steep of an angle the racket is accelerating upwards -- so if you can imagine a line graph and you have your X and Y axis. The more straight up and down, the more vertical a line is, and that line represents the path of your racket -- the more vertical that path is as you make contact, the more potential you have to make topspin. And the more topspin you're going to create. The flatter and straighter the overall path of the racket is as you make contact with the ball, the more drive or power you're going to make and the less spin you're going to make. So the ball will go forwards faster on a straighter swing path, but it won't spin as much. So you're not going to have that same margin for error. So that's number one. The way that we can control how much spin is

on the ball is the angle that the racket is moving. How steep the angle is of your vertical racket path.

And then the second part is how fast the racket moves along that path. So if you have a very vertical path and the racket is moving very fast, you will make a lot of spin assuming the racket face is also flat. We need that as well. The mistake that people make, and this is probably the most important part for you to listen to Carla and everybody listening as well. Here's the mistake that people make when they go for more topspin, they accelerate the racket faster. They think, oh on my last shot I made some topspin. So I've got the general right idea. The racket was traveling vertical at least a little bit. So that's good.

And then on the next shot they try to hit with more spin. Maybe to hit an angle like what

Carla is talking about. Or to hit a dipping shot. And they try for more spin by accelerating the racket faster. But the angle of attack, the direction of the racket, the path that the racket is traveling along is the same as the previous shot but they just make it faster. So they will make more spin. There's going to be more rotations per minute, but unfortunately when you do that you'll also increase the speed that the ball is traveling as well. So you'll not only increase the spin, but you'll increase the power too. So when you increase both, the ball will travel farther. So you can't just keep the racket path the same and accelerate the racket and expect the ball to have more spin. It will have more spin, but you're also going to create more drive which is going to counteract that spin and the ball will go just about the same distance as the previous shot. Maybe even further.

So hopefully that makes sense. When you're going for a big angle shot like this, accelerating faster for spin is good but you also have to change how vertical your racket path is. That's really a big key here. If you don't change the racket head speed and the path of the racket to make it more vertical, then you're going to miss wide. The ball will go too far. So how do we work on this? This is really what Carla's question really came down to. I've got two different drills for you Carla.

The first one you can do against a wall, and the second you can do on the court. They're kind of the same drill but in different settings I guess. The one against the wall I recommend that you just stand 10 or 15 feet away from the wall and drop a ball in front of you, and we are going to hit slow and soft forehand shots. Our goal here is to watch the ball and listen and feel and create the most amount of spin with the least amount of drive possible. So to do that, we want the racket to really only be moving vertical as we make contact. We might have a 90-10 split. In other words, if we were to create a ratio

of how much the racket is moving upwards, how much momentum is moving =vertically compared to how much the racket is moving forwards, we want like a 90-10 split. 90% of the racket's energy is going up. Only 10% is moving forwards.

Again, flat racket face so that when we make contact -- again, we're not doing this fast. We're not trying to hit the ball hard. Slow just to get a feel of the direction of the racket. Just to get a feel of what this is like to make contact moving predominantly upwards with the racket -- this is something that most players don't have a feel for. They just kind of have one ratio of whatever it is. Maybe it's 50/50. 50% drive, 50% spin. So that makes 50% of the racket's energy is moving forward. 50% of it is coming upwards. And that's how they hit every single ball. So if they want to hit a little bit more of an angle, they have to slow down to keep it from going too far. If you can learn how to change and have different paths of swing plane, then you can learn how to effectively change the ratio of spin to drive. Hopefully I'm making sense.

So again, 10-15 feet away from the wall. Slow swing. We're not even making a full swing here. Drop the ball in front of you and start with the racket low and just come straight up. Meet the ball. Just come up slow directly past it just moving vertically, and you're going to be watching the ball closely to see how much spin is on the ball.

So we're just getting a feel for just coming vertical. The other way to practice this is to get a basket of balls or a bunch of balls, stand on the side T on one side of a tennis court -- that's where the service line meets the single sideline. And then aim cross court for the opposite side T. And we're trying for the same type of shot. 90% vertical, 10% forward. Again, not fast. We're not trying to accelerate the racket. We're just getting a

feel for what it's like to hit a sharp angle cross-court slowly with a very vertical racket path so that we're creating lots of topspin and not very much drive. When you're all the way back on the baseline, we're going to want a little different ratio than that. Maybe we want 80/20 or 70/30 because clearly we want the ball to go forwards. But the whole point here is to get a feel for coming upwards very sharply very vertically and creating that heavy spin necessary to hit a nice sharp angle and still keep it safe.

And then just one more thing I want to throw in there Carla. This is really where a windshield wiper type follow through can really be useful to come up sharply towards the ball and then have the racket come around and turn over very quickly. That's really a technique that's very useful for hitting a dipping heavy topspin shot, like what we're talking about here to be able to create a big angle.

So Carla that's it. Hopefully that's helpful to you and I want to thank you very much for being a listener of the show. Thanks for writing. I appreciate it. If you have any questions, please let me know. Best of luck.

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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.

With that, let's get to our second question today which comes to us from Darren in Toronto. I love getting questions from people in other countries. Darren, thanks for being a listener. He's a 4.5 player and wrote to me and said, most areas of my game are solidly at a 4.5 level except for my volleys. I have good technique, but I miss-hit my forehand volley a lot. Especially on easy floating balls that are coming towards me. I also hit the top of the net court a lot on my backhand side. I have a feeling that these symptoms are being caused by the racket head speed being too quick. Perhaps I'm forcing it too much. Do you think this could be the case? Do you think it would be easier to have a slow relaxed swing? Will I still be able to get as much pace?

Darren, good question. I'm going to break up my answer into basically two different topics that you have going here. The first one being miss-hitting the volleys and the second one being missing those easy ones, hitting the net court, etc. Two really common issues that recreational players have. The miss-hits on volleys is kind of one of my favorite things to teach because it's one of those things that is so simple and yet so many recreational players get this wrong. It's kind of a chronic problem. So often it's the same place. Usually for recreational players when they have a chronic problem of miss-hitting volleys or half volleys, shots around the net, usually the ball is hitting the same place on the racket over and over again.

I'll give a three step plan here that you can follow to fix this and to hopefully just get rid of it and not have to -- I mean you're going to miss-hit some shots, right? No matter how good you are. That's just how it goes. We want to minimize these as much as possible. Step number one is to identify where you're miss-hitting the shot, and this takes conscious concentration on what's going on. It would be best to do this in a practice setting Darren. So maybe you're a ground stroke to volley rally. Really that would be best. A ground stroke to volley rally just down the middle of the court cooperative rally and just have some kind of target on the other side. And have your partner hit to your forehand side if that's the side that you miss-hit most often.

Your job is to be conscious and aware of what it feels like, what it sounds like, and what happens to the racket when the ball meets your racket. If you're paying attention, you will be able to tell where the ball is hitting on your racket when you do miss-hit these shots. If you're going out to meet the ball with a forehand volley and the ball hits towards the top edge of the frame where it hits off the top edge of the frame, your frame will twist back in your hand. The racket will twist and turn, and the racket face will open to face up towards the sky. If you hit the bottom edge of the racket, the racket will twist and turn down closing your palm to face down towards the court.

If it's the very tip of the racket or the inside of the racket down towards the handle, those are a little bit trickier to figure out but they're still a very different feel to both of those. And again sound is important as well. Makes a very different sound when you miss-hit the ball. So be very aware, be very conscious of what's going on, and again for most

people it's very repeatable.

So within 4 of 5 miss-hit shots, however that long that takes, you should see a pattern.

And I wouldn't be surprised if it's actually the same place all 4 or 5 times. It's very common. So that's step one, identify where you're miss-hitting.

Step two is to adjust where you're making contact with the ball on your racket and exaggerate it. This is an important step, and it might seem silly but trust me. Exaggerate the adjustment several times and do the opposite mistake. So for example if you've identified that 5 times in a row the ball hit the top edge of your racket as a hit you a forehand volley, then for 5 more times hit the bottom edge of your racket on purpose. This is important. Very often players get into ruts. They get into habits and they're totally unaware of this pattern of mis-hitting on a certain part of a racket over and over again. They're not even aware of it. So to break them from that habit and get them to do something different and recalibrate, I will ask them to make the opposite mistake. Okay, now hit the other side of the racket face.

Step 3 is then to re-aim for the middle of the racket and try to hit the cleanest prettiest feeling volley you can from there on out. If you fall into a pattern again, if you hit 3 or 4 or 5 volleys again in a certain spot, say alright that's it I'm done making that mistake. Again, I'm going to make the opposite mistake a couple of times. This helps players recalibrate their coordination and their awareness of where the racket is in relationship to the ball. Very often players get stuck putting the racket in the wrong place so it causes a lot of mistakes over and over again.

So that's my three step cure for miss-hitting volleys Darren. By the way if those of you listening have chronic problems miss-hitting shots, it doesn't matter what it is. Forehand, serve, backhand, volleys, whatever, you can use this same 3 step sequence to be able to help break yourself from that pattern and ultimately be able to recalibrate and start finding the strings on a regular basis again.

The last thing I'll say is if your miss-hits are random, and again usually this isn't the case, but if it happens that you miss-hit 4 or 6 shots and they're all in totally different places on the racket face, then that brings me to the second part of my answer. The second part of your question was how do I avoid missing those easy shots? Well, repeated misses on easy volleys are almost always due to an overactive racket head. Meaning that the racket is moving around a lot.

This is in my experience by far the #1 technique mistake that people make on their volleys. If you want to be accurate and consistent on your volleys, then your racket head and your racket face should be moving back and forth very minimally. Even on offensive volleys.

Now the easier of a volley you have, the closer you are to the net and the higher the ball is, the higher you're making contact, the more movement you can get away with. But in my experience across the board recreational players tend to move their racket head around and the racket face around much too much. So that just introduces all kinds of different ways to screw up and miss. And that's exactly what we don't want. Especially on a shot like volleys, which are very delicate shots. They're placement shots. So if your

racket head is moving around, you're going to make unforced errors.

To remedy this, we want to power the shot as it were -- most volleys are not power shots -- but what power we do transfer into the ball we want to come predominantly from your core, your shoulders, your core rotating, and your legs driving through the ball towards your target. Not your hand, your wrist, and your arm swinging the racket head back and forth through the ball. That in my opinion is the #1 technique mistake that recreational players make. They use their hand, wrist, and arm to hit the ball instead of using their core, their shoulders, and their legs to drive the racket through the ball and towards their target.

To answer your question Darren about generating pace, well if I'm correct that this is what's happening for you, then the short answer is no. When you stop swinging the racket head around and whipping the racket around through the ball, you're not going to get as much pace as when you use your core, your legs, your shoulder to drive through the ball. But with enough practice, you'll get better at it. Your timing will improve. You'll get more efficient at using those big parts of your body. The first thing that's going to happen is your consistency is going to go way up. Over time you'll learn to be firm and offensive with it. It's never going to be as much power or pace as when you whip the racket around, but with practice it will be enough.

And again if it's easy enough, you can get away with a little bit of that swinging, but you want to minimize that because it leads to so many mistakes. Darren, hopefully that's

helpful for you both in the area of miss-hitting your volleys and also missing on those

easy ones. Hopefully that all makes sense. If you have any further questions, please feel free to let me know. Thanks very much for being a listener in Toronto. I appreciate it.

Alright that does it for episode #187 of the Essential Tennis podcast. If you're listening to my voice right now, I just want to say thank you very much for being a listener, for taking the time to listen to this episode. I really appreciate it, and I truly hope that it's been helpful to you and given you some ideas on how you can improve your own game. It's always been the whole point of the podcast. Just want to remind you to leave your thoughts and comments at EssentialTennis.com/Podcast. If you have any questions about today's topics, please leave them there. I try my best to reply to all of those. Next week I'll read a couple at the end. With that, I'm going to sign off. Thanks very much for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.