

Essential Tennis Podcast #188

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. Two great topics today from listeners. Number one is creating forehand shazam. We'll see what that's all about. And we'll also be talking about when to drop shot and when not to drop shot as far as tactics and strategy are concerned. Before we get to those two topics, real quickly I have an announcement about next week's show. I'm going to have a really special guest on next week's episode of the podcast, and that is Todd Martin. Todd has an ATP high rank of #4 in the world. Just awesome American tennis player. Had a great career and has recently been coaching as well. In fact he worked with Djokovic for a period of time. I think that was about a year ago or so. Maybe a year and a half ago. Anyway he has been gracious enough to be a guest on the show, and I'm looking forward to interviewing him.

If you have any interview questions that you would like to submit for me to possibly

ask him, please do that by sending me an email at Ian@EssentialTennis.com. Looking forward to that. Let's get down to business for today's show. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright. Let's get to our first question for today's episode of the podcast. Really looking forward to recording this show. Should be good stuff. And our first question comes to us from Jay in Richmond, Virginia. He's a 3.5 player. He wrote to me and said I'm athletic but have to really concentrate to keep a long smooth swing path. The problem I have is that I recently played while facing the buttcap of the racket towards the net and letting my wrist bend and bring the racket around and shazam lots of headspeed, and I hardly moved my arm or body. Any tips on how to best incorporate this into the forehand swing? Note that I hit topspin on my forehand side generally with a semi-Western grip. Thanks in advance.

Alright, so let's talk about achieving that forehand shazam as Jay is putting it, and what you're experiencing Jay is something that is really important technique-wise, and you are referencing a previous podcast where I was talking about length of swing and how it's so important to ground strokes and serves as well. And it does compare very closely to golf technique. If you go and sit at a golf driving range and just look down the row and watch everybody's swing, you'll see a wide range of different swing technique, and a large percentage of them are very tight and short and tense. And they don't release -- that's what you experienced here Jay was the release of the racket head.

It may have been for the first time in your life that you really experienced first range of

motion with the racket, and that gives so much potential for power and for spin. When you give yourself that extra length of swing, you have that much more room to be able to accelerate the racket. And also when you don't release the racket head and let it turn over, and that's what we're talking about here when we talk about the butt cap -- the very bottom of the racket pointing towards your target. That only happens when you allow the racket to turn around, to turn over, to release. And most tennis players and golfers literally hold onto their swing. They hold their swing back because of tension or just poor technique in general.

Now before I answer your question specifically about how we can incorporate the shazam into your forehand swing, just two quick things. First of all, this turning over the racket, the release of the racket creating this extra racket head speed -- it's not the wrist. This is a really big misconception both on ground strokes and on serves as well. On both forehand ground strokes and on serves, you should be pronating. It's very possible that you heard that term before. If you've listened to my podcast for a while, you've heard it. If you've done research online about tennis technique, you've heard about tennis pronation.

Pronation is the rotation of your forearm. Not your wrist. Your wrist flexes up and down and also kind of hinges side to side. Like if you're using a hammer to hit a nail, but when you hit a forehand or a serve and you want the racket head to release, that rotation is mostly due to your forearm releasing. Again that's called pronation, and it's again the same thing as a golf swing. That's the only way to really allow the club head or the racket head, whichever one you're trying to swing, to release fully. Even if you are releasing correctly and you're pronating and nice and relaxed and allowing the racket

to turn over, you mentioned something in your question Jay that concerns me. You said lots of racket head speed and I hardly moved my arm or body. Please don't continue to do that.

To get the best results, you should be releasing the racket through pronation by being relaxed, allowing the racket to turn over, and finish with the butt cap pointing towards your target. But the goal should be to use that release within the framework of a full kinetic chain usage. You want to use your entire body. That means, legs, hips, core, chest, shoulders, arm, forearm, hand, wrist. All that should be working together in unity and in the correct order. That's really what the kinetic chain refers to is not only the usage of your entire body but using your entire body in the correct order. And this turning over the racket, which again is the pronation of the forearm, should be one of

the very last things to occur. Generally on a good tennis swing you want the power, the effort, the energy to be coming from the ground up. So you want to transfer energy from your legs to your hips to your core and then as you rotate out through your arm and through your hand to the racket and to the ball.

And the forearm, hand, and wrist whatever is happening there kind of from the elbow down should be one of the very last pieces of the chain. It should be the tip of a bull whip that's being cracked. That's the last part. So if that's the only part that you're focusing on, this is my concern here when I heard that you're barely using your arm or your body, if you discover how important this is and then start emphasizing just that and you start losing some of the other good parts of your technique like core rotation and general kinetic chain stuff, then over time your results are going to diminish. They're

going to decrease I guarantee it. This is a really important part of your technique, but please don't think that it's the end all be all of hitting a good forehand. It should be used in conjunction with using the rest of your body as well. Just wanted to be clear on that.

And to answer your question specifically -- really the best way to incorporate this is through conscious repetition. That can be during a practice session with a ball machine. It can be spending time on a court with a basket of balls and just dropping balls to your self. It can be hitting against a back board. It can be hitting against somebody feeding to you. It could be hitting in a cooperative rally with a partner back and forth.

Your ultimate goal is to make it unconscious and automatic so that it just naturally becomes a new part of your forehand and you no longer have to think about it. So how many repetitions does that take? Well, it's different for everyone, but I guarantee you that this is the only way that you're really going to make it an automatic part of your swing is through conscious repetition over and over and over again. We're creating new muscle memory. So we're going to rewrite your old tight follow through with this new more relaxed longer swing path follow through on your forehand side, and that takes time. It could take you several weeks of practice. It could take several months of practice. I don't know. I can't tell you because I don't know you first of all. I've never worked with you so I have no idea how quickly you tend to pick up technique stuff like this. It's different for everybody, and different techniques are different for everybody as well.

So hopefully that makes sense Jay. Great job figuring this out. I hope you continue to see great results from this. Thanks very much for being a listener and for submitting

your question. I appreciate that as always. And if you have anymore questions about this, definitely feel free to let me know. Good luck.

Let's get to our second topic today. This one comes to us from Ed. Also referring here to a previous podcast about drop shots. Ed wrote and said great to hear the drop shot being discussed. Apart from how to hit it which was addressed in the podcast, it would be great to have your thoughts about when to hit it. How the drop shot can fit into an overall game strategy. I know from bitter experience that the drop shot should only be played when I am inside the baseline and my opponent is behind the baseline. But behind that I would really love to hear your thoughts about how and when the shot should be used in various game situations.

When I watch the pros on TV, I often hear the commenters say that player X made a poor shot selection in hitting a dropper, and it strikes me that players often use this shot as a kind of desperation measure when they have run out of ideas. That certainly applies to me.

Yeah Ed, it seems to be a pet peeve of tennis commentators on TV when the drop shot is hit and it doesn't work out that for whatever reason that just seems to be every announcer seems to think that's the worst thing in the world. It's not always the end of the world if you try a drop shot and you miss it or maybe your opponent gets to it easily and wins the point. But there are times when it was just a very clear kind of bail out shot. A lot of times they'll refer to it as where -- well I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit here.

I have an outline here with two different sections. First one is when not to hit a drop shot, and I thought I'd come at this a little bit backwards and start off with times to not hit a dropshot because I think it's important to understand when it's not a good idea. I have six different times that you don't want to drop shot. Number one is when you are deep in the court. Ed pointed this out along with number one. But number one is when you yourself are deep in the court. If you're not inside the baseline by a little bit, it's not that it's an impossible shot to hit, but it just becomes very, very difficult to pull off effectively. It's hard because you're further away. The whole effectiveness in a drop shot is to hit it softly and hit it in a spot that your opponent can't get to.

Number two is when your opponent isn't off balance. So if your opponent is in the middle of the baseline already in a ready position and watching you intently as you setup for your shot, then a drop shot is probably not the best play. Number three is when your opponent has awesome speed and loves chasing down shots in general. Certain types of players have a game style that drop shotting them almost plays into their strength. It's kind of their wheel house to make them scramble and run around and try to run for a ball. Some players like that. I am kind of one of those players. I actually love getting drop shotted. I enjoy the physical challenge of trying to run down a ball that is really far away, and I love trying to prove my opponent wrong.

So if you have an opponent that in general loves running down balls and their gamestyle is such that they're really solid around the net and they like playing that little touchy feely type stuff -- even if they are out of position, it's probably not a good idea to

drop shot that type of player. So reason number three to not drop shot somebody would be that.

Number four, when your touch isn't great and you're not just very good at hitting drop shots, some players just don't have any business hitting drop shots. And they might be successful a percentage of the time, but if that's not your game style, if you're a big offensive player, a baseline and that's your real strength, then just don't use it unless you're absolutely positive that every other part tactically is weighed in your favor. Their position, they don't like running for balls, they're out of position, you're in good position. You want everything else to be stacked in your favor if you're just not good at having good touch and good feeling and really dropping it nice and short.

Number five is when you're tired and you just want to end the point. These last two, number five and six are the reasons why commentators usually get down on professional players. Sometimes you'll be in the middle of a long point and you'll just feel like you can't go any further. Maybe you can run around corner to corner. You're just getting to the point where I just can't do this anymore. I've got to end the point right now. A bail out shot is a terrible reason to drop shot, and sometimes you see pros hit a drop shot for that reason, and that's when commentators get down on them.

Number six reason to not drop shot is when you're impatient and you just want to end the point. A lot of times this will occur when maybe somebody is attacking and their opponent is defending and just getting everything back. Player A is throwing the kitchen sink at player B and still hasn't won the point. It's like, well, that's all I got. I might as well just throw a drop shot in there. It's kind of a mental check out shot. It's not that it

tactically made any sense. It just is like, well I haven't hit this yet. So a player will throw the drop shot in there. You'll see the pros do this from time to time. Certain players will try it more often. Djokovic used to try it a lot. I haven't seen him do this in a while. He's gotten so much more mentally tough recently. But this is something he used to try a lot. Andy Murray also will do this at weird times and get ostracized by the commentators. So this is another reason to not drop shot.

Quick review when not to drop shot. When you are in deep in the court and your opponent isn't in poor position. When your opponent has awesome speed or loves chasing down balls or they're just good up and around the net. When your touch isn't that great or you just don't hit that great of a drop shot. When you're tired and just want the point to end, and when you're impatient and want the point to end. So those are all reasons why you don't want to drop shot.

As far as on the positive side of things, I'm just going to say you want to look for opportunities that make tactical sense. Preferably you want to look for a combination of tactical advantages. I just put down two quick examples of that. This kind of bounces off. It's the opposite of when not to hit a drop shot. So here's two examples of combinations that you want to look for. You want to make sure you have the upper hand when you try the drop shot otherwise it turns into a liability very quickly. A possible combination would be your opponent is deep in the court and you're short in the court. This is basically the one that Ed pointed out. This is the most obvious one. Your opponent is maybe on the previous shot you hit a really nice and deep and it pushed them back behind the baseline. And you improved your own position by taking several

steps inside the baseline. Maybe they had a short reply, and they're still recovering from way back behind the baseline. That's a great time to use a drop shot if you can hit it effectively.

Another example would be if your opponent isn't very fast, and you have great hands. Your opponent may even be in great position and balance in the middle of the baseline, but if they're not very fast or their anticipation is not very good, or maybe even to throw another variable in there -- maybe they're bad at hitting shots around the net. So even if your dropshot isn't great, maybe you don't have really sweet hands -- just pulling them into the net is going to lead to an advantage on your side of things. So just think critically in terms of tactical advantage. If you can have two ways of having an advantage on the point as a result of hitting a dropshot, then it's probably a good time to do it. If there's just one, it better be a big tactical advantage.

Last thing I'll say Ed is work on the shot so it's competent before using it in a match. It's a delicate shot. It's a shot that not a lot of players are very good at to be honest with you. And even on the pro-side of things, you don't see a whole lot of pros that use the drop shot a lot and are effective at it. At the pro level it's really tough because everybody has very good anticipation and in extremely good shape, very fast, so it becomes very tricky to use it effectively. At the recreational level if you can practice it and become good at technically doing it and also be smart about when to use it tactically, then it can technically work in your favor. It's a really fun shot to hit when it does work out well.

So Ed hopefully that all makes sense. Please let me know if you have any further

questions on that. Thank you very much for listening. Appreciate having you as a listener and let me know if I can help any further. Take care.

Alright. That does it for episode #188 of the Essential Podcast. Thank you so much for listening. I really appreciate it as always. If you have any questions for Todd Martin, please get those into me. I'm doing the interview this coming Wednesday the 21st. If it's before Wednesday and you have a question suggestion, please send that to Ian@EssentialTennis.com. And at this point I'd like to read quickly two comments and questions from last week's episode #187. These were posted at EssentialTennis.com/

Podcast. First of all I want to thank Dr Fred who very often leaves long responses to the podcasts. Left another one last week. Good stuff as always Dr Fred. I wanted to read and respond real quickly to two comments or questions.

By the way last week's show was about two different things. Not missing easy volleys and also creating big angles with your ground strokes by making more top spin. First comment was from Soren.

He says great show as usual. About the overactive racket in taking easy volleys, I think you really nailed the technical solution to this, but looking at my own occasional problems with the sitters, I see also a mental bit that wasn't commented on in the show. Sometimes, when I see an easy ball approaching, I get confused by having too many targets, especially in doubles. The closest player, a sharp angle, a drop-volley, and so on. Being at the net there truly are several targets. Too often, however, this makes me do a last split-second change of mind of the worst kind, and this induces an overactive

motion with the racquet. If I notice this, my personal solution is simple: for the rest of that game, I only aim at the best target available – the feet of my closest opponent. Never mind if he manages to dig that ball up, I'm still taking control over my mind and racquet. Usually it just takes a few shots to get back in the groove.

Yeah. That is a really interesting kind of angle to it. Soren is the mental toughness side of it and being able to make a quick decision about which target is best tactically and strategically and just stick with it. Everybody listening to my voice right now knows what it's like to make a last second change in target and just totally flug the shot, whether it be shanking it or missing the spot and making an unforced error. It ends up being a weak shot because you change your mind at the last second and instead of putting the ball away, it ends up being totally ineffective because you just got distracted, and that's really what this comes down to is concentration and just not being distracted by all the options you have this. This takes discipline Soren. I think your solution is very very smart. I really do. After you make this mistake, just remind yourself consciously, okay maybe you had 3 options but this one was the best option the majority of the time. This was the highest percentage spot, the most likely chance for me to win the point without making an unforced error, and I think you're correct by the way. Most of the time in doubles that ends up being the closest to you at their feet and hit nice and firmly. I totally agree with your thoughts here. Thanks for posting those thoughts. It's another angle that you're right I didn't talk about in the show.

Okay, another one from Ed in Nairobi. Ed wrote and said my question – and I think Dr Fred -- again talking about Dr Fred, his big comment or his thoughts rather in the comment -- might just have given an answer – is how one should be adjusting the ratio

of vertical and forward drive in my swing. This is what we talked about last week was controlling the forward part of the swing versus the upward part of the swing to get the right amount of spin versus drive to create a big angle. I get the point about how to practice, but what are the technique fundamentals? I hit with a fair amount of topspin anyway, but I find that when I try to add even more topspin by doing a more vertical swing I start to make mistakes. What I think is going on is that I am trying to flick the racket upwards using my elbow and maybe my wrist. The result is flipping the racket on the follow through, loss of control on ball height and depth, and more than a few embarrassing shanks. I would love to hear your thoughts about how I should address this. Is it a matter of maybe shortening my swing? Or as Dr Fred suggested, keeping the swing the same but using the legs and core more while keeping the actual swing-path in relation to my trunk the same?

Okay. Ed really good question. Using more of your core and legs can help create more spin. There's no doubt about that, and I agree with that point that Dr Fred was making. Now if you're looking for significantly more topspin than what you're creating now, then keeping the swingpath in relation to your trunk the same is never going to really get you any big results. If you're looking for a lot more spin than what you're creating now, then you're going to have to change the actual swing path in some form or fashion if you really want a lot more spin. It sounds like you're already making a good amount of spin anyway so that's great. If you want to make a lot more spin, the angle of attack just has to change, and I did talk about this in the last episode. I mentioned that this is where the windshield wiper type follow through really starts to come into play. If you're trying to make a very vertical swing, then having the racket come up and around in a circular

path is very often the best way to do this.

Now when you do this and you come at the ball very vertically, it does make it more difficult to control what's happening. It is more difficult, and that's a big reason why I'm not a fan of the windshield wiper follow through on the forehand for most players. I don't think it's necessary for most players, and it's not something that I teach to most of my students because it's just not necessary for most people to create more topspin than they are creating now. If you try really kind of flicking the racket and coming up really vertically and you miss deep, then you have to close the angle of the racket face more to keep it from going too far. And that's when you're going to start making a lot of spin when you really flick the racket up and around at the ball really sharply and you close the racket face. The combination of those two things will create a lot of topspin, and just kind of shanking it in general, yeah, when you come up at the ball really vertically you increase the chances that you're going to hit your frame. It's just kind of your -- it's a natural part of attacking at the ball that way, and it's kind of a liability that you take on when you try to hit a really heavy topspin shot.

So hopefully that makes sense. It comes down to that circular windshield wiper type path. That's really the best way to get a super vertical motion at the ball. Reverse follow through is also another way that you can come up at the ball very vertically. As far as controlling the depth and miss-hitting once in a while, expect that until you practice it enough times to get more consistent at it. Expect more errors at first because it is a higher difficult shot to try to hit for sure.

Alright, so Ed, Soren, Dr Fred also. Thank you guys very much for leaving your thoughts and comments. I really appreciate it very much. One more in here. Bob also left his comments. Thank you guys. If you have any thoughts and comments on today's episode #188, definitely let me know. You can leave those by going to essentialtennis.com/podcast. Thank you very much for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.