

Essential Tennis Podcast #83

[music] 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 : Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. Your place for free, expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by summersetsportsperformance.com. Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the Podcast.

I'm going to be answering several listener questions that are going to range in topic quite a bit. We're going to be talking about topics such as, making adjustments and strategy during match play. Using power or placement to beat your opponents. Serving into the sun and also if we have time playing against a higher ranked player.

Well if you've appreciated the free instruction and input that you've received from the Essential Tennis Podcast, I would really appreciate you helping me spread the word. I would really appreciate it if you would talk to any friends, teammates or hitting partners that you may have who are also passionate about tennis, just like you are. Just like I am.

And if you know people who are trying to improve their game and who are working hard to increase their skill level, please let them know about this show. It would mean a lot to me if you could just tell them about it and have them check it out. Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, let's get started with the show. And our first question comes to us from Chris F. in Beaverton, Oregon. And Chris is a 4.5 level player. Let me kick off this question of his which is excellent. I'm really looking forward to talking about this. I had originally different plans on how to tackle this topic and I was planning on having a guest but that didn't really pan out.

I'm still really looking forward to talking about it and I'm really going to go in-depth on this because I think it's extremely important. And just kicking this off and starting to think about it and talk about it here, I can tell I'm probably not going to get to some of our other questions today.

But this is a very very important topic for all of you listening regardless of your level-- whether you are just starting off or whether you are an advanced player, like Chris is, and I want to begin by congratulating you Chris--being a 4.5 level player very often, players at your level kind of get complacent. They become satisfied and they are fine.

Obviously you've worked hard to get where you are, it's really not possible to be a 4 or 5 level player without really putting in some good efforts. For those of you who are listening internationally, our rating system in the US spans from 1 to 7 and basically if you're a 6 or a 7 level player, you're professional and you're making all of your income by playing tennis competitively.

A 5.0 level player is below that obviously. 5.0 and 5.5 is basically like a high level college competitive player, division I or maybe upper division II. Or very upper division III for college here in the US. And, I remember seeing the percentage breakdown but something like 3% or 4% of tennis players in the US fall within 5.0 or above.

So it's a very small percentage. I think 4.5 and above is something like 7% or 8% are 4.5 level and above. So just to give you guys some perspective who aren't familiar with the MTRP rating system if you're not in the US or you just aren't familiar with it in general. So Chris is definitely a higher level player and Chris I want to congratulate you on still looking for ways to improve your game and I hope that someday you are able to make it to 5.0 and compete at that level as well.

But great job listening to this show, and seeking out good information to hopefully continue to improve. And here is Chris's question which he contributed to me. He wrote to me and said: 'personally I find that a match can turn on making adjustments; just recently my partner and I were blown off the court 6-1 in the first set. And after making deliberate adjustments, came back to win the second set 6-1.

[05:00]

So they lost the first set 6-1; won the second set 6-1--which is obviously a huge swing in momentum back and forth. Then he says: 'Recognizing what's going on and making adjustments accordingly was the key. It wasn't a matter of skills. It was a matter of how those skills were applied strategically. Can you please talk about this?'

Ian: Well Chris, that's an excellent question and an excellent topic. This is something that a lot of players really need to work on-- and really need to be more aware of in their tennis play. I think that

a lot of times tennis enthusiasts--and those of you who are listening to this show right now are definitely probably some of the most passionate tennis players anywhere. [laughter]

I mean, you guys have really shown some initiative by finding this show, and by listening to it on a regular basis, you're obviously really into tennis. And a lot of times players like that get so wrapped up in technique, and stroke s, and being to advance their... How they swing at the ball. And so often I think strategy is kind of left to the wayside .

And we've talked a lot about mental tennis here on the Essential Tennis podcast. That's another extremely important topic besides just knowing how to swing at the ball. Strategy probably isn't discussed enough here, so I'm glad we get to talk about this.

Well Chris, thank you for the question, and I've got my top 3 things that get in the way of players making adjustments, and also I have for myself Top 3 things that you need to do if you want to be able to adjust well. If you want to be able to make changes to your strategy to able to win more matches. As Chris correctly said: It's not so much about skills; it's how you implement your skills. It's how you put them into your match, and how you use them strategically .

So my Top 3 Things here on 'What gets in the way of players making adjustments?'

Number 1: Focusing too much on their own technique. And I mentioned this just a second ago--I think it's probably the #1 thing that gets in the way of recreational players playing smart tennis. When you get out on the competition court--on a competitive court--and you're going to play against somebody in a competitive match , you need to put technique aside. You need to stop thinking about how to swing , and start thinking about how to use your technique to actually defeat your opponent.

If all of your focus is just on yourself and how you are swinging the racket, you can only concentrate on one thing at a time. It's just a mental biological fact. Yes, you know, as humans we can multitask and do multiple things at once, but we can only really give mental focus, or concentration, to one thing at a time.

So if you're over on your side of the court s and you're trying to remember all the different swing thoughts --which is a phrase commonly used in golf --meaning, thinking about specific technique things that you need to do to accomplish certain swings . Maybe you're trying to add more top spin

to your forehand, so you're thinking about dropping your racket farther; swinging upwards faster; maybe being more relaxed .

And then over on our backhand side, you're trying to work on your slice , and your racket hand is too open. You've got all these things going on in your head for every swing . You're not going to be paying attention to what 's going on on the other side of the courts. And you're going to lose-- you're going to miss out on a lot of information, because you're so preoccupied with what's going on on your own half of the court. So once you step out there, great. It's good that you're working on your technique. It's great that you're trying to improve your strokes .

But once you step out to actually compete, you need to put that away. You're no longer working on your strokes. You're now using your strokes that hopefully you've learned and you've grooved in enough . You're now using them to try and defeat your opponent. So stop focusing on your technique. When you go out there to play. That's #1.

Second of my top 3 things that get in the way of players making adjustments, Number 2 is just not paying attention in general. [laughter] And this is different from focusing on your own technique. Let's say you've put away all those swing thoughts that you had. You're no longer thinking about your technique specifically--but that doesn't necessarily mean that you are paying attention to your opponent. I can't tell you guys how many times I've had a lesson with a students and at some point in some lesson we have, w e go out and we play some points.

[10:00]

Maybe some volley points. I work with a lot of people who play doubles. Maybe we play a bass line game up to 7 or 10. I can't tell you how many times I've worked with a student and gone through several lessons before they realize that I 'm left-handed. And I'm not joking! [laughter]

I could play multiple games with them and--I get a sense for this , and we'll come up and ask them: 'Listen, which side is my forehand on anyway?' They haven't even realized yet which hand I'm using to hit a forehand!

Now that's kind of an extreme example , and that's not everybody, but that happens. I see this ! I see this very often in competitive doubles, where--after a doubles match --myself or another pro will ask: 'So, did you notice that this player was left-handed?' After they were complaining that their serve was all goofy.

Anyway, you guys need to pay attention to what's going on around you. We're going to talk more about this later . But you have to be aware; you need to be focused ; and you need to look at what's going on on the other side of the courts. You can't just be in your own little world , and--focusing on the ball is all well and good. And clearly, we need to pay attention to what's going on on our own half of the court. We got to get to the ball ! But you need to pay attention to what's going on on the other side of the court. That's Number 2.

Number 3: Having only one style of play, gets in the way of players making good adjustments. You have to practice more than one way of playing a point. If all you can do is just hit the ball hard-- and this is something I see pretty commonly. If you're good at hitting the ball aggressively, but that's all you have, you're going to be very one-dimensional.

And when it comes time --even if you are paying attention, and you're looking at what's going on on the side of the courts--even if you're not focusing on your technique, and you're really putting your mental muscle in the right place, and you're paying attention to what you should be paying attention to . If you only have one style of play, and you don't have secondary or third or fourth game plans that you can go too, then it doesn't even really matter how well you're paying attention, because you're going to be stuck ! I'm going to get to that more in the next section as well.

So those are the top 3 things that are going to get in your way of making adjustments in a competitive match. Focusing too much on your own technique; not paying attention to what 's going on on the other side of the court; and thirdly, having only one style of play, and not having a B, C, D or E game-plan that you can fall back on. So those are the top things that get in the way of players making adjustments.

Let's now talk about what you should be doing in order to adjust like a pro. Or be able to adjust like a good player. And these are things that you guys should be doing. First of all, you need to be closely aware of your opponent's strategies and tendencies, and their technique as well. There's a lot of things going on on the other side of the courts . This was one of things that players don't look at. Now I'm going to talk to you guys about what you should be looking for.

Look to see what their strategy is. It could be that they're not terribly smart either. Maybe they're just kind of swinging at the ball and not really any rhyme or reason to what they're doing. Other players are going to have very clear patterns. And if you pay attention, you'll be able to see what they're trying to do with the ball. Maybe they're trying to hit to your backhand side most of the time.

Maybe they like to come to the net, and they prefer typically to approach down the line. These are strategical things that you should be noticing and looking for so that you can base your own strategy on that. If you're not paying attention and you're not noticing this, then, you know, you're kind of lost. You don't really have a starting point as far as how to play this opponent.

Also, there are tendencies. And this may or not be different from strategies, but it is different from strategy. Strategy is how they're trying to implement their techniques, and usually there will be some kind of pattern to that. A tendency is different. Let's say that you're attacking and coming forwards to the net. A tendency would be for them to maybe try to pass you on the very first shot, but then very quickly after that, they're quick to throw up a lob. So that's a tendency that they might have. As opposed to a strategy that's something they're trying to do to you; and that's a pattern.

But really both strategies and tendencies are patterns that you need to look for. Things that they tend to prefer. Things that--like I said, there's a pattern. [laughter] I probably don't need to explain that any further-- you guys get the idea. [empty]

[15:00]

Look for their techniques and you guys, after playing for a certain number of years or even months, you start to get a good sense of what good technique is and what bad technique is. And you should be able to start to pick out what a good stroke, looks like or what a poor stroke looks like.

Watch your opponent. If they have a poor backhand or a poor forehand or a poor volleys or a poor overhead-- this is good information. These are things you guys need to be looking for and you can base whole strategies just based on what the worst technique is that they have.

And just really pummel their weakness as myself and David Grumby like to say, the mental expert that I like to have here on the show. So pay attention to their techniques as well.

So that's all under the heading of just paying attention and being aware. Be aware of their strategies, be aware of their tendencies, be aware of their technique. These are all things that you guys need to know about and need to pay attention too so you can put together a good solid strategy that will win you points. That's all under #1 on how to adjust.

#2 practice hitting many shots in many different directions and practice doing it consistently . And this is what you guys need to do off the competition courts. When you guys are on the practice courts, and you are practicing your stroke, practice a wide range of shots.

And listen, if there needs to be a good solid foundation of just hitting forehands cross-court and being able to do that consistently. Practice hitting down the line as well. Practice hitting short balls. Practice hitting deep balls. Practice hitting deep volleys and drop volleys-- short volleys. Practice hitting half-volleys. You need to be able to practice all of these different types of shots and practice hitting them to different locations.

Do this on purpose and do it with a certain goal in mind. This is all so you can make adjustments with your strategy and you have the technique to back it up. If you guys pay close attention to your opponents tendencies, their strategy, their technique , but you don't have the technique or the strokes, to be able to actually put together a strategy on your side of the courts, then you're kind of stuck. And it kind of goes back to having only one style of play.

If you don't have other ways of hitting the ball or if you don't have the ability to hit the ball in different directions so that you can direct the ball to your opponents weaker spot , then you're going to be a little bit out of luck. And you might have to go with maybe a stroke or a direction that you're not really comfortable with and a lot of times that will result in unforced errors. So make sure that you practice on purpose a lot of different types of shots and directions -- don't be one dimensional.

And last thing here on this topic-- how to adjust-- or what you need to be good at in order to adjust . When you are competing, make sure that you keep changing your strategy until you find a winning plan and you need to be able to have many different ways to play a point , whether it be coming to the net or staying back or attacking the deuce side or attacking the ad side , or serving and volleying or whatever. You need to have those different skills that we just talked about.

Once you have those skills and you get into a competitive situation, keep changing it up until you find something that works. Don't stick with a losing game-plan. Secondly and probably equally as important-- don't get off a winning game plan . So first of all, make sure that you keep changing a losing game plan. If you're getting beat, you need to keep making adjustments and keep trying different things until you find something that makes your opponent uncomfortable.

Once you do find that, stick with it and I don't care how boring it is. I don't care if you're opponent knows your strategy. I don't care if they tell you on a change-over, 'wow you're just hitting

everything to my backhand aren't you?' Don't change it up as long as it's working. A lot of times I see players or teams come up with ... They play a great point and they put together a good sequence of shots ... It worked and they uncovered something that was effective. Then on the very next point, they tried something completely different because they feel like if they don't keep changing it up, their opponent's will get comfortable and start to win.

And that might be possible, but make them do that. Make them adjust. Don't keep adjusting yourself if you find something that works. You need to make sure that you stick with a winning game-plan and just abuse it.

[20:00]

Once you find something that works, just completely abuse your opponent with it and continue to do it over and over and over until the point that maybe they make an adjustment themselves. If they never make an adjustment, you continue to pound whatever you are doing and do it again and again and again until the match is over. If they do make an adjustment, and they make a good enough adjustment that they actually kind of turn the tables on you, and now they are maybe using that strategy against you and they are being effective at it. Well then that's the time to change again and adjust your strategy.

So there should be a constant switching back and forth between both players to try to find the upperhand. If neither player is paying attention and neither one has secondary game plans or different ways of hitting strokes, then it can become very boring to watch and maybe even boring to play because both players know what the outcome is going to be.

So, Chris, hopefully that gives you some good ideas and everybody else listening, all my other listeners, hopefully that gives you a good idea of what you should be looking for and what you should be avoiding to be a better strategical player and I'll recap these again real quickly.

Top three things that get in the way of players making adjustments, these are your top three things to avoid.

Don't focus on your own technique. Make sure you are paying attention to what's going on on the other side of the court, and make sure that you don't only have one style of play. And the top three things to make sure you do, be aware of your opponents strategy, their technique and also their tendencies.

Make sure that when you do practice your strokes, practice a wide variety of things and directions-- wide variety of strokes and wide variety of targets. And make sure that you do it consistently, not just one to each spot. Make sure you can hit a bunch in a row and lastly things that you need to do to adjust like a good player .

Make sure that you keep adjusting until you find something that works and then stick with the winning game plan. Don't get off the winning game plan. So, Chris, thank you very much for the great question. That was really an excellent topic and something that I can definitely talk more about but that's a good basic overview on basically strategy in general.

This is how you should be playing guys. If you go out there and just hit the ball and you're not being aware of what's going on and there is no purpose behind how you are hitting the ball, you are not going to be very effective. You're going to be effective to some degree or the other depending on who you are playing against. So if you want to be able to win more often, these are the things you should be thinking about. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, let's go ahead and move on to our next question and I've got two questions I've got here that I'm going to answer from Richard, who is located in Northern Ireland. Richard, I'm pretty sure that you are my first listener that I've heard from in Ireland . Really great to hear from you and thanks very much for your questions. I'm always excited to hear from people in new places-- it's cool to hear that the Podcast is reaching a lot of different parts of the world.

So, Richard, has two questions here and I like both of them a lot. The first one is short and sweet. 'Which in your opinion is better, power or placement?'

That's an excellent question Richard and just to be short and quick about it. If I had to pick only one, if I had to choose between either hitting the ball hard but with very little control or hitting the ball with less power, maybe even slowly, but having very good placement, I would have to pick placement. In my opinion, that's more important.

However, that being said, why would you want to choose only one? Why wouldn't you rather have both -- clearly nobody is going to say 'I'd rather only have one or the other. Obviously having both is better but basically what I want to get at here Richard, is you need to start developing your game so you are able to do both. And Richard rates himself at a 3.5 level player which is just about average

and to be able to make your way up to higher levels, Richard, you're going to have to start developing some weapons.

When beginners first start out-- when you first begin playing tennis, your first priority needs to be to place the ball. It needs to be control-- to be able to control what is going on with your body, with your swing, and with the ball. You have to be able to develop some consistency first.

[25:00]

Every tennis player, every good tennis player needs to have a good solid base of consistency before you start trying to hit the ball hard. However, once you've achieved that, you have to be able to start developing some weapons or else you are going to get stuck. And this is why most tennis players are between a level 3.0 and 4.0, is because they don't put in the time or the effort or the focus needed to start developing weapons that they can hit consistently.

There is a lot of players out there that can hit the ball very hard, they are good athletes but they don't necessarily have the technique or the swing mechanics to be able to keep it in play consistently. So if I had to only pick one of those Richard, I would say I'd rather have placement because that's really more important, keeping the ball in play, being consistent, however I definitely would not have gotten where I did competitively with tennis if I didn't also have the ability to hit the ball hard and to hit the ball with power.

So for you to develop to a 4.0 level of play, or a 4.5, certainly a 5.0, you have to start developing some power as well. There is really just no way around it. Players at a 4.5 or a 5.0 level, move extremely well, they are extremely efficient and they have weapons. They have the ability to put the ball away and they have the ability to do it consistently.

If all you can do is just be consistent, that can be challenging to a player like that to a certain degree. But you are only going to get so far with your tennis game if you don't have both.

So let's go to Richard's second question, and that is 'Hi Ian, I'm in a bit of a dilemma. I'm the kind of person who loves to hit the ball hard with lots of pace, however, while hitting the ball like this, it's hard for me to control the length of my shot. Most of the time they will just barely go to the net and not get very much length, either that or they land close to the line or go just long. Should I slow my shots down and sacrifice power for more consistency and length instead of constantly trying to go for winners with power?'

So now we really see why Richard was asking his first question, which is better power or placement. And again, if you only could choose one Richard, I'd like you to have placement. So if your swing technique is not going to improve at all, I'd rather you slow down and control the ball.

However, let me talk to you about technique a little bit here. What you are describing -- Richard is describing basically the choice between barely making it over the top of the net and usually having the ball go kinda short, or hitting a little bit higher over the net and having it be barely inside the court or be out .

So he's kind of stuck between having a shorter, weaker shot, or if he hits it a little bit higher, risking that it's going to go out pretty often. What you are describing there Richard, is a classic description of a ground stroke hit with no top spin. A ground stroke that's hit flat.

And there is a reason why the pros are able to hit so hard but still maintain consistency and that's because they hit with a lot of top spin . Hitting with top spin gives you a higher margin for error and it does that because the ball , you can start to curve or arch the ball . Curve it down into the court. Top spin makes the ball spin and curve downwards so you are able to swing aggressively. You are able to aim high over the net and make it a safe shot and the top spin brings the ball back downwards into the court .

If on the other hand, you don't have any top spin, and you hit the ball aggressively, if the ball is just a little bit too high, it just continues to go forwards and forwards and forwards and you'll miss ; it'll go out once you get to a certain speed.

So, the only way to keep the ball in play at that point is to aim low over the net and this is a very risky thing to do. It's difficult to do consistently and this is the reason why woman's professional tennis is less consistent. In woman's tennis, there are more mistakes, there are more errors ratio-wise between errors and winners. The points are shorter typically because they hit flatter and harder, and harder meaning not necessarily the speed of their shots, but they are trying to drive the ball directly at their target very often.

The male players on the professional tour hit with a lot more top spin, on average, it's not to say that they don't flatten it out and drive the ball to be able to put it away. But they all hit with much more top spin on your typical average rally ball hit back and forth.

And so, very commonly the points in male players are longer and even though they are hitting faster, they are hitting with more consistency because the ball is curving a little bit more. As with anything, there are exceptions to this but on average, when I'm talking about is correct.

[30:00]

So what you need to do Richard, if you want to be able to hit with power and consistency, is you have to start to develop more top spin. Top spin is created by swinging upwards as opposed to forwards. Right now, it sounds like you are hitting the ball very flat and very straight. To really make it to the next level and be able to hit aggressively but maintain a high level of consistency, your racket path has to start being more upwards and not sure much forwards. The key to hitting with power and consistency at the same time is going to be that top spin--assuming we're talking about ground strokes.

So Richard, that was a quick explanation and a quick overview. I could certainly talk more about the technique of hitting with top spin but that's my answer to your question. If you'd like any more explanation or if any other listeners would like more explanation of what I'm talking about, please feel free to let me know.

Thanks very much for your questions Richard and again great to hear from you in Northern Ireland.

Take care. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, that brings this episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast-- episode #83 to a close.

Thanks very much again to both Chris and Richard for their excellent questions. And I've got a couple others here lined up that I'm going to get to in the near future. So please be patient if you've asked me a question recently.

Before we wrap up, I want to let you guys know that I'm going to be starting up again Essential Tennis Live. I'm going to be doing the show on a new night. It's going to be this Thursday and this Thursday is the 17th and the show time is going to be 8:30pm. So 8:30 in the evening eastern standard time.

I'm going to be having a new co-host and our first show here is going to be going over the US Open. So make sure to join us this Thursday at 8:30pm for a lot of fun talking about professional tennis .

In the future, we'll be talking about technique and mental game, strategy, equipment-- everything. So check us out this Thursday.

If you need a link to the show page, just go to essentialtennis.com and click on ET Live in the menu bar. Alright, that does it for this week. Everybody enjoy the men's final which is going to be this afternoon I guess at 4pm. It's been a great US Open and come talk with me about it this Thursday.

Have a great week everybody, take care and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]