

Essential Tennis Podcast #87

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 Westerman is here to make you a better player. And now here's Ian!

Ian : Hi, and welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast. You're 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.

Today on the show I'm going to be doing my classic Q and A type format. I'm going to be answering questions having to do with fitness and how to work out correctly for your tennis game. We're also gonna be talking about picking a playing style and kind of choosing between being accurate and consistent and being more aggressive. And if we have time, we're also gonna get to a question asking about what are the pros and cons to an open versus a closed stance. What are they best for? And which pros use which of those different stances? So, lets see which of those we can get to today.

Real quickly before we get to today's show, I want to talk to you guys about essential tennis live. If you like the podcast and how it's interactive-- I answer questions, I have guests on the show, I even have listeners on the show from time to time. You'll really love essential tennis live which is a live radio type call-in show. And It's every Thursday evening at 8:30pm, eastern standard time. My co-host in that is Ron Miller. And he and I talked back and forth about different tennis topics and people call-in live and also participate in the chat-room and it's really a lot of fun.

So, you can listen live or you can listen to it as a podcast. Check it out by going to essentialtennis.com/live.

Alright, with that, lets get down to business. Sit back. Relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music]

Alright, let's get started on today's episode of the essential tennis podcast, and today's show is going to be awesome. I'm really looking forward to talking about these different topics that I've received. And our first to come from Juna. He wrote to me and said, "I'm an eighteen year old young man from Finland, and I'm addicted to tennis. I have two major questions I'd like to ask you considering playing styles as well as tennis fitness.

And we're going to go to his question about fitness first. Let me read to you what Juna asked me. He says " currently I go to the gym and do some exercises at home regularly throughout the week. The only problem is that I don't know if I am doing the right things. I'm mainly working on my legs and core muscles, but somehow feel like I might be doing wrong exercises. I don't do much cardio because I do some foot work drills and play four to five hours of tennis each day. I don't know if I'm doing something wrong here. If you think if i should be working on my cardio then I'll make sure to work on it. And if you think that i have to work on my cardio, then what kind of cardio exercise should i do? What kind of fitness practice should I do to improve my performance on the tennis court? Links are highly appreciated. "

Juna, good question and by the way, you are exactly the type of person I'm looking for. When I started this website, in this podcast, I wanted people who were absolutely crazy about tennis and you say you are and based on the amount of time that you are putting in and the amount of effort that you are dedicating to your tennis game, I can tell that you're not joking. Playing 45 hours of tennis each week and working out on the side is an incredible amount of work. And I'm really happy to have you as a listener. Thank you very much for taking the time to ask me these questions.

Now, when we're talking about tennis and training your body for it. It's important to take a step back and understand the type of fitness that we need to be good tennis players. And first of all, understand and realize that tennis points on average and this varies a lot, depending on the level of play that we're talking about and also varies depending on the style of play. If you have a maybe retriever, or maybe an aggressive baseline player, maybe a serve and volleyer.

These are all factors that could change this stat but most tennis points are only lasting somewhere between three and five hits back and forth.

[05:00]

Now obviously if you've got two pusher, type retriever type players on either side of the net, points are going to last a lot longer. But on average that's probably about right.

It's definitely not common to have an average of more than 5 hits per point when you watch a two set match.

So, three to five hits on average-- let's just use that as an average across the board. Might be a little bit different to you but it is gonna to be somewhere around that.

Now with those three to five hit we're talking about quick, intense spurts of activity. We're talking about a lot of intensity, real quickly for a short period of time and then you get a rest. You're gonna take somewhere between twenty, maybe thirty seconds between points depending on your pace of play. And then you have to go out and do it again. I was looking through my copy of Mental Tennis by Vic Braiden, and he talked about a match between Agassi and somebody else. I can't remember the other player. I was just trying to find the exact players and the exact numbers. But he was talking about a match that he timed between Agassi and another player. And it was one break in each set. Agassi won. I think the score was something like 6-4.. 6-4 etc.

And the match time, the total match time was I think around an hour and a half or an hour and forty five minutes--something along those lines. And the amount of time that these two actually spent with ball being hit back and forth, in other words in live points. The amount of time that this two spent actually hitting the ball back and forth was only six or seven minutes of solid, you know, it's live points.

Alright, the point is happening right now, we're hitting the ball back and forth. I'm pretty sure that it's in the single digits of minutes. I think it was six or seven minutes. And i need to try to find that actual stat so I can remember it exactly. But people are surprised to actually consider that. Even though all of us play a lot of tennis. Things happen very quickly.

So, my point is, when you think about this-- only three to five hits per points and really over a two hour match, we're only talking about ten or maybe fifteen minutes at the most of actual point play and the rest is resting. Cardio or Aerobic exercise doesn't train your muscles well for this. In fact it's kind of the opposite. Cardio or aerobic work-outs train your muscles for long periods of time. It's endurance training for your muscles. And that's not what we want to train our bodies for if you are a tennis player.

And aerobic or cardio work outs are as oppose to an anaerobic. An anaerobic workout is a workout that is short periods of time. Very intense work for your muscles and you're training your muscles to be more explosive and more intense-- you're training those quick twitch muscles which respond very fast and get your body moving quickly. And so, if you are a tennis player, especially if you're a serious tennis player, if you take your game seriously. And Juna, it certainly sounds that you do based on the amount of time and effort that you're putting into your game. I would . I'm not gonna say to stay away from aerobic work outs or cardio work outs. It's not that a cardio work out is gonna be bad for your body-- that's certainly not the case.

I'm not here to tell you guys to not go running or jogging. And e specially if you have some weight to lose and you want to be a better tennis player, then go do some cardio. That will be great for your body. If you're already in decent shape, if you're already in pretty good shape and you're looking for an edge, you're looking for that extra edge. Then you're going to want to do anaerobic type work outs. And an example of an anaerobic exercise would be things like sprints, line drills, cone drills, agility ladder drills. Things that focus on quick explosive movement. Quick explosive foot work. And also lifting weights would be another example of an anaerobic work out.

Something where you're doing less. You are maxing out your muscles with a dozen repetitions or less. And so you're building strength and your building power and quickness in your muscles and you're not building long term endurance. Which is not really what we're looking for, for most of us when it comes to tennis.

Now Juna asked for links. And I'm gonna do that Juna. What I'm gonna do is post, for every podcast in the forums at essentialtennis. Com I post a new topic in the podcast section of the forums. I'm gonna post several links to different exercises that I'm talking about Juna. And I would highly recommend that you do weight lifting for your core, your legs, your shoulders, your back.

[10:00]

You want to get those areas of your body as strong as possible so that you can create power. So, that. They're used to going for a quick really intense spurts over a short period of time and they are used to recovering quickly and then doing it again.

What I'm gonna do is post a bunch of links to exercises that I feel would be good for your tennis game, whether it be quickness and foot work or whether it be weight lifting and actually training your muscles in the weight room to be stronger.

So go to the forum at essentialtennis.com. Click on podcast and then click on my post for podcast 87. And Juna, I'm gonna post a bunch of links there to different exercises that I think are going to be beneficial to you.

But the bottom line is that if you guys want to be as good as possible on the court, you're gonna want to do anaerobic type of work outs and anaerobic type exercises and not so much aerobic/cardio.

And again it's not that aerobic or cardio work outs are not good for you but it's really not targeting the types of muscles, or the type of muscle conditioning that's gonna be the most conducive for your tennis game. So Juna, hopefully this makes sense to you. Feel free to post on the forums if you have any follow up questions on this topic. [music] [music]

Next up from Juna in Finland. He writes and says, "I have trouble deciding what kind of mental set should I have when I play tennis. I want to play good tennis and make my opponent do the running. When I want to make my opponent run I tend to over hit on the ball and I sacrifice margin of error as replacement for power. My balls tend to travel lower but faster. When I play this sort of tennis I can't seem to be able to play aggressively and patiently but I try to be aggressive with every ball.

This is not how I would want to play tennis however. I would like to play the sort of tennis where I hit the ball with good margin for error and deep to my opponents and making him or her run. I'd also like to mix my opponents game by adding a few slices here and there to get a short ball that I could attack on.

So my question is: " what kind of mental set would I need to have to play this kind of tennis. Should I focus on keeping pressure on my opponents quirks. Should I just get the ball back and play or should I focus on moving my opponent all the time in a way that I have good margin for error. "

Juna that's an excellent question. And this is a topic that I have covered briefly on the podcast before. And basically, Juna is asking about playing style and trying to pick out the best

strategy or type of play that he should be using in order to be successful. And in the long run, Juna, you kinda answered your own question there but I'll get in to my outline here.

But basically, the problem that you are describing is exactly why I start off every student that I have with top spin technique on his or her ground strokes. It doesn't matter if they're just taking a lesson for the very first time or whether they've been playing for many many years.

I immediately have my students start to make an upward swing towards their ground strokes on both their forehand and backhand side. And if they come to me with a slice maybe they predominantly hit a slice on their back hand side. It's not that we're gonna work on a slice and make it better but, my long term goal for all of my students is to be able to hit eventually with consistent and confident top spin.

And the reason for this is as you were describing in your question is I want my students to be able to have margin for error even while they're attacking. And if you know how to hit top spin correctly you're able to do this. People who hit flat or slice will eventually hit a wall in their improvement. And the reason for that is, when you hit flat, when you hit kinda more directly towards your target and you're hitting straighter and without any spin, you can only hit the ball so hard before it starts going out.

And as you were describing in your question Juna, as you start to try to attack, you hit the ball harder. However you have to aim lower over the net. That's because if, let's say that you hit a.. just as a random example. . Let's say that you hit a fifty mile per hour ground stroke from the middle of the baseline and you hit it three feet over the top of the net. And the ball ends three feet inside the baseline.

[15:00]

If you take that same shot and try to hit it seventy miles an hour and three feet over the top of the net with the same amount of rotation on the ball. Let's say it was flat on both cases. The would travel farther. And you can only hit the ball so fast before it starts going out. So, to compensate for this, most amateur level tennis players will simply aim lower.

That's another part of the equation of distance when you hit a tennis shot-- is how high over the net is the ball traveling. So, you hit the ball seventy miles an hour, maybe this person

would aim one foot over the net instead of three and then again the ball might land three feet inside the baseline and so you're safe again.

But the problem with that is, as you try to hit harder and harder and as you aim lower and lower over the top of the net, your margin for error decreases. And so you're gonna start making more errors because you're aiming lower and lower as you try to hit the ball aggressively.

And so, people end up having a dilemma, the same dilemma that you're having now. Should I hit the ball hard and give myself less margin for error, which means that you're probably gonna miss more. You're gonna give away more points. On the other side of the coin, you are pressuring your opponent more so there's kind of pros and cons there. Or should you just stay consistent, give yourself high margin for error but you're not really going to challenge your opponent much.

And this is the corner that people work themselves into. When they don't learn how to hit top spin at all over their tennis career. And so they kinda have an either or.. . They can either be aggressive or they can be consistent. Well Juna, I don't want you to have to choose between those two things. I don't want you to have to choose between being aggressive and challenging your opponents and choosing between that and being consistent and keeping the ball in play.

I want you to be able to have both. And the only way you can do that is with a good top spin swing. And that's going to give you the margin for error that you need to be able to hit the ball aggressively and consistently because the top spin on the ball makes it curve down into the court. So in order to do that, you have to learn how to swing vertically, more upwards.

The lower your racket drops below the height of the point-of-contact. If you're making contact at waist height, in order to make top spin the ball.. The racket at some point has to drop below your waist. The lower below your waist your racket drops, and the steeper of an angle that your racket moves upwards towards the point-of-contact, the more potential you have for top spin.

To make the ball rotate end over end towards the other side of the courts, you have to make an upward swing. So, you have to drop the racket lower and swing upwards steeper and faster. Now ultimately this is more work than just hitting a drive. Just hitting straight through the ball towards your target. But again you get this higher margin for error because the top spin on the ball makes the ball curve down into the court.

Now Juna, you don't say in your questions how long you've been playing or what level player you are and feel free to write back and let me know. But if you've just been playing for a couple of years now, this is a very common wall for people to hit. Very very common.

This is why so often people complain about people pushers, people who play very defensively and just get the ball back in play because they don't have the ability to attack and hit a pusher off of the court and do it consistently as soon as they take that weak shot from the pusher and try to attack and hit it hard, they start making all types of errors.

So, then they slow down and they try to outlast the pusher which is a mistake as well because that's what the pusher does everyday. It's just get the ball back in play safely. And so it drives people crazy.

And in order for you to move past this and be able to hit the ball aggressively and safely, you have to learn how to hit top spin on either side. So, write back to me Juna, and tell me how long you've been playing and around what level you're playing at currently and hopefully we can get you to move more towards the top spin swing or at least have the ability to hit with more top spin on both sides, so that you can maintain a little bit higher margin for error as you start to attack more with your ground strokes.

Juna I would also want you to do some homework by going to podcast archives, on essential tennis. Com and download podcast number 39. In podcast 39 I discuss in a little bit more detail the actual technique of how to do this and very similar topic. But I want you to listen to that show as well and then write me back. Let me know what you think and we can get you started towards more of a top spin swing.

[20:00]

Juna, thank you very much for you questions both on fitness and on what style of tennis to play and no I don't want you to pick either one or the other. I want you to be consistent and be able to attack at the same time. And hopefully my answer made it clear to you how you're going to have to do that and what you need to do in order to achieve that. Thanks very much Juna. Take care. [music] [music] [music] Alright. Our next question comes to us from Ben in Salt Lake City, Utah and Ben wrote to me and asked just a request to discuss pros and cons of each type of stance during a future Podcast. If there are good examples of professionals that always helps me to identify the strokes. Thanks.

Sure. And we're gonna talk about four different stances here Ben. And they can basically be grouped into two main categories. And we're going to talk about each of the four though quickly. And the four main types of stances are open stance, a square or neutral stance, a closed stance and also semi-open stance.

Lets go ahead and describe each of those four stances so that you guys understand the difference between them and so that you know which one you have. An open stance is the stance where your feet are lined up parallel to the baseline. You can tell what stance you have based on a line that would be drawn from one foot to the other. So, if your feet are lined up on the court in such a way then if you drew a line from one to the other, an open stance would have that line be parallel to the baseline or parallel to the net. That's an open stance.

Next up is the square stance and the square or neutral stance is one where you are 90 degrees to the baseline or 90 degrees to the net. So, if you're a right handed player and setting up in a square stance for your forehand you would be turned to the right. You would be facing to the right side of the court. Your left foot would be out towards the net and your right foot would be back towards the backcourt and if you drew a line from your right foot to your left foot. It would be approximately 90 degrees or a right angle, a square angle to the baseline. That's why it's called the square stance. Also called the neutral stance.

So, it's 90 degrees to the baseline or 90 degrees to the net. Now a closed stance would be past a neutral or square stance. Your left foot will actually break that line between your right and left foot in a square stance. Your left foot would actually go past that line more towards the right side of the court and now you're actually closed over, meaning the front of your body is actually now facing towards the back of the court a little bit assuming we're just relaxed with the upper body and having a turn along with your stance.

The back of your body would actually be facing a little bit towards the net if you stand in a closed stance on the baseline facing towards a right handed players forehand. Now, a semi-open stance is between a square stance and an open stance. An open stance is completely parallel to the baseline, a square stance or neutral stance is 90 degrees to the baseline and again we're talking about the line being drawn between your two feet. A semi-open stance would be half-way between an open and the square stance. So, the line that we would be drawing from one foot to the next would be somewhere around 45 degrees or so to the baseline.

So, those are your four basic stances and just because I say 90 degrees or parallel or 45 degrees or whatever, doesn't mean that it has to be exactly that. When you watch tennis on

TV or you watch tennis at the park or whatever. You'll see all kinds of different angles between the two feet as they relate to the baseline or as they relate to the net. It doesn't mean they are right or wrong. There's just all kinds of different set ups that you can use within these general basic guidelines. Now, as far as pros and cons are concerned, we're gonna talk about the open stance and semi-open stance combined because they are very similar.

The pros for an open or semi-open stance are that, first of all, you have quicker recovery time and that's because you're loading up your weight on your outside foot. Your outside foot for a right handed player moving out for a forehand is the right foot. And as a player moves out to the right to hit an open stance forehand, they load their weight up on the right foot to hit in that open stance and they unload off the right foot back over towards the left and this creates a natural recovery .

[25:00]

It naturally transfers the players momentum back towards the middle of the court. So, you have a quicker recovery time. You also have more free core rotation. When you're in a closed stance, it's often times difficult to allow your body to rotate back towards the net and use your core for acceleration or power.

So, an open stance or semi-open stance leaves your stance open which means that after you turn your core back to the right to hit an open stance forehand. It's very easy to unwind your upper body in your core back towards your target, because your stance is kind of naturally leading your body to rotate in that direction in the first place.

Now, the cons are that moving forwards while hitting is not really possible in an open stance. You could do it, but it's a little bit more awkward than with a closed stance. Also amateur players often times have trouble driving the ball from an open or semi- open stance. Those are the cons.

Now, lets talk about closed or square stance. And the pros of a square stance or a closed stance is that you kind of have an automatic body turn built in. When a tennis pro asks you to turn to the side to hit a forehand and you go to a square stance or a closed stance, your core automatically rotates with your stance. Unless you're really doing something goofy.

And this is why for years and years and years every teaching pro on the planet told you that immediately turn to the side, because they wanted you to get your core rotated to the side so that you can use it to hit the ball to rotate back and then forth.

So, that rotation back with your body to get your body turned and loaded up to hit the ball. It's kind of automatically built in to a square stance or to a closed stance. You can also easily move forwards through contact as you would do in an approach shot or maybe off a weak short ball you're wanting to move forward and hit at the same time. A square stance/neutral stance or closed stance typically makes it a little bit easier to move forwards through the point of contact. More so the square stance than closed stance, but it depends on forehand or backhand.

We won't get into the specifics of details right now though. Now, the cons for a close stance or square stance is that it's kind of inhibited, meaning moving back towards the center of the court. When you step all the way across, let's say on a forehand with your left foot all the way across your body and hit a forehand that keeps your momentum moving out to the right.

Unless you pivot your right foot around and catch yourself. It's really difficult to stop your momentum and then move back over to the left again to get back to the middle of the court. It's possible to do. Again as I said pivoting your right foot around catching yourself and then pushing off, but these are all extra movements when compared to an open stance. So, it's a little bit inhibiting as far as moving back towards the center of the court.

Also hitting cross court is often times difficult with a closed stance, because when you close your left foot over passed your right foot and you close your body over, that tends to kind of trap your body from opening up enough to hit the ball across court. I'm talking about a right handed players forehand while you're moving out to the right. And open stance gives you a little bit more freedom to rotate forwards again which means that it's often times easier to direct the ball cross court. So, those are the, and this is very general Ben. I'm not gonna go into huge amounts of detail here. But those are, that's the good place to start. And those are good general guidelines for what the different types of stances are good for.

Now, as far as specific examples with the pros, virtually every pro uses all of these stances at some point or other depending on the stroke that they're hitting and depending on the situation.

It's impossible to take one pro and say, Rafael Nadal always hits an open stance on his forehand. That's not true. He'll use an open stance very often, yes that's definitely the truth.

When he's moving out to his left to hit a forehand, he'll almost always use open stance in order to recover quickly. When you see him kind of line up and try to drill the ball and hit more aggressively, you'll see him hit more of a semi-open stance and when he's moving forwards into an approach shot, you'll often see him use a square stance or a neutral stance. Over on his backhand side, you'll see him use open stance or semi-open stance once in a while when he's really stretched out wide. You'll also see him step over and hit with more of a neutral or square stance and I can't think of a specific example, where I specifically noticed that was a closed stance. But I can virtually guarantee you, that he also hits with a closed stance on his two handed backhand as well.

[30:00]

Going over to Roger Federer, when he hits a backhand slice, he'll almost exclusively hit with a closed stance. However, in watching some slow motion video of him earlier today, he'll often set-up with an open or semi-open stance for his top-spin backhand return, which is really cool.

It's something that I don't really have the ability to do or, I at least haven't been trained for, or tried hitting a semi-open stance on my top spin one-handed backhand and that's really a cool shot and that's something I'd like to work on.

Anyway, when you go and watch different players, depending on the set-up that they're using, meaning, what type of position are they in, whether it's offensive or defensive, whether they're trying to hit a slice or top spin or drive, whether they're moving forwards or to the side or back, you will see them use all of these stances, depending on the specific situations, and that's what's cool about tennis.

You see these awesome athletes out there who are using a wide variety of skills, a wide variety of different types of strokes, and use them all effectively. Now, I'm going to post something for you as well on the forum. I'm going to post a video, that fuzzy little balls did.. I think quite some time ago, it's a relatively old video but it's talking about different stances and it gives... They show an example of Roddick, hitting with an open stance, they show [inaudible] hitting with a neutral or square stance. They show Roddick, hitting in a semi-open stance, and they show Lee hitting with a closed stance.

So, four different stances. He demonstrates all four using the pros and so you can see pros hit with all four of them on that video. I'm gonna post that video along with the other ones for Juna in the Podcast 87 post in the podcast forum at essentialtennis.com.

So, Ben, hopefully, it gives you a good idea of the generalities of each of these stances, what they are exactly, what their pros and cons are. If you have any further questions, please feel free to post them in the forums under that topic, and thanks very much for taking the time to write. [music] [music] [music]

All right. That will do it for this episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast, and before we wrap things up, I want to do two shout outs here and both of them to people who are putting in some time on the site for me, helping try to set-up an ET clinic, an Essential Tennis clinic.

The first clinic I did was in Baltimore, a couple of months ago, 12 people came out to participate there. We had a great time and I'm trying to set-up some other one as well, and I'm doing that with the help of several listeners, which I really, really appreciate. So, I wanna give them a shout out.

The first one is to Angie, who attended the first ET clinic and she's doing some work, trying to find me a place in Palm Springs, California to hopefully do a clinic this December. So, Angie thank you for putting in that time and hopefully that goes through and I'll be announcing soon whether or not that clinic is actually going to be taking place. And secondly, Steven, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is working on setting-up some courts there, some indoor courts. Since it's rather cold there at the moment, and will be for a couple of months, but he's working on getting some courts for us to use up in Minnesota to do a clinic there as well.

So, Steven, thank you for your time and hopefully that materializes as well, and we do a clinic both in California and in Minnesota within the next couple of months. So, thank you both for the time that you put in in. I really appreciate it a lot. And hopefully we can get those clinics rocking.

All right. Thanks very much for joining me this week everybody. Take care and good luck with your tennis! [music] [silence]