

## **Essential Tennis Podcast #91**

Narrator : 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 Westerman: 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 somersetsportsperformance.com. Thank you very much for joining me today. And before we get to today's content on the Essential Tennis Podcast, I just want to remind you all about the two most valuable free parts of Essential Tennis and virtually everything is free right now.

In the future we will have some paid content, but in my opinion the two most valuable parts of the website are first of all, the Podcast Archives, where you guys can access all of the back episodes of the Essential Tennis Podcast and in there, there's over 50 hours of tennis instruction for free. On just about any topic you guys can possibly think about. So go check that out. Go to [essentialtennis.com/podcast](http://essentialtennis.com/podcast) and click on the archives and sign up it's free.

Secondly, I want to tell you guys about the forums where the most passionate tennis enthusiasts at [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com). Com go and meet and talk to each other about their games, their technique, their strategy, their competitive results-- it is just an awesome place for tennis enthusiasts to come and it's just a warm and friendly community. So definitely go check that out as well. Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music]

All right, let's get started with today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast. And our first question comes from Robert in Washington. Robert wrote to me and said, "I have a question about my USCA tournament play. I noticed that my tournament games are completely different from my regular games." And then he says those are ladder matches which I assume are just at his local tennis facility-- his local tennis club.

He continues and says, "I am much conservative in the USTA tournament games compared with my other games. In USTA tournaments usually I hit a lot of moon balls and lobs. My cross court shots are also soft. Although I won most of the matches. I hate the way that I won the matches. I do completely different things in my other matches-- a ladder match. And those matches I hit hard cross court and down the line shots. I can kill short balls. I guess it is more like a confidence issue. What is your suggestion in improving my USTA tournament matches?"

Robert that's a great question and this sort of topic is something that I've talked about with David G. on the Podcast before David Grumping who is a mental tennis expert. So I highly recommend that you go to the Essential Tennis Podcast archives and listen to all the episodes that he and I have done. I think we've done 5 episodes on mental tennis issues like this. Now that would be said. I'm happy to give you my thoughts here and how you can improve and I've got a

good outline for you to follow.

First of all, yes this is 100% a mental tennis issue. This has nothing to do with your technique based on how you're phrasing your question here and how you're describing the differences between your ladder matches and your USTA matches.

What you need to do here is build what David Grumping calls mental muscle and I'm going to keep on using that phrase, because I like it a lot. When you want to make your body stronger. When you want to build your physical muscle there's certain steps that you take. There's a certain formula that you follow and I'm going to give you a very similar formula to follow to build your mental muscle as well.

So I'm going to give you a 4 step process here to be able to build your mental muscle. First of all you need to target the area that needs to be strengthened and this is the same thing with your physical muscle, your physical strength as well as your mental muscle. You need to figure out what's weak and we've already done that. We have found out that for you, your confidence during more important matches or real matches, "USTA matches" where there's a little bit more importance-- it's an outside event. It is not a club match or a club event where you are comfortable and you're familiar. This is different. This is a little bit bigger stage and so we found out that when you get to this level of play, you lose your confidence in your game.

So we've already targeted exactly what needs to be strengthened. Just like in your physical muscle if you find out that your abdominals are not strong and they are little bit flabby. And so we've kind of targeted an area and we know what we need to work on. We found that out in your tennis game. In your mental tennis game.

Step number 2. Find the right exercise to actually fix the problem and this is important when you find out that your abs are lacking and your physical muscle. You don't want to go and then do bicep curls at the gym for half an hour. That's not going to help you out. So we want to target the problem specifically and on purpose. And so you need to go and play more USTA matches. You don't say how long you've been playing or how many USTA matches you've played, but we need to play more of these and target it.

Number 3. We need to have work out plan and we need to stick to it. This is very important. Now that we know what the problem is and now that we know where we can go to work on the problem. We need to have a specific plan of attack to be able to actually work on this problem and build your mental muscle. And so this is where when you go to the gym to work on your abs, you would actually have a list of exercises. Right here is what I am going to do today to target the area of my body that needs to be strengthened. I'm going to do X, Y and Z exercises to actually build it up. And so you need to figure out what parts of your game you need to do better, specifically in order to overcome the anxiety that you have or you're getting tentative during your USTA play. We need to target that.

So write now some goals for each match. Have a game plan. As an example, you need to write down a goal of hitting every easy forehand aggressively. When you get a weak forehand or backhand you say that in your ladder matches, you have no problem hitting that aggressively. What we need to be able to do that in your match play as well. So before your USTA match go write down several goals like

that. When you get a weak forehand, you will attack on it and then probably just as importantly is actually having a plan.

You need to stick to it and same thing when you're in a gym working on your physical body. Don't go for a week solid and really kill it and do a great job and then the next week kind of lose your concentration and start working on areas of your body that are already strong. That's not going to help you. You need to stick with what's weak and you've got to build that muscle up. That's step number 3.

Step number 4 is and again this is very, very indicative or very similar to what we would hear advice be on actually building your physical muscle and that is you need to repeat this again and again and again. You've got to build up your muscle over time and it's going to take time. This is how you condition both your body and your mind is by identifying what's weak. Finding the right exercise to fix the problem. Having some kind of work out plan and sticking to it and then once you have that plan and you're able to implement it, and we find out that it is working. You've got to stick with it until you actually achieve your goal. And if you find the problem which we have and you go out and start working on it, but you give it up after a little while, more than likely you're going to go back to being unconfident and tentative just like you were before Robert.

So it's very important that you stick with it and you actually commit to it and this is a big part of getting better at tennis. If you're listening to this Podcast I know that you want to improve and you're not going to do that by getting the information in this show and not doing anything with it or doing something with it and following my advice your first time out and then getting lazy and lackadaisical and losing your focus the second, third or fourth time and then just giving it up and saying, "Ah, well. I'm not really doing a great job at this anymore. " And let's move on to something different and this seems interesting. Let's try out working on this new part of my game. Stick with it guys and Robert that's the only way you are going to improve your mental muscle and get mentally tough during not only your club matches or your ladder matches, but during USTA matches as well.

So Robert in Washington hopefully that answers your question. I enjoy talking about my mental tennis type of topics like that. So thank you very much for writing in and feel free to write back if you have any follow up questions to that. [music] [music] [music] [music]

Next up on episode number 91 of the Essential Tennis Podcast is a question from Francisco. Francisco has a couple of questions about his serve. He wrote to me and said, "On my serve I actually serve top spin on my first serve and second serve. The thing is that when I serve my first serve top spin, I tend to not get it in, because I'm trying to be more aggressive. So shall I just go ahead and back off a little and make it in or should I try to be aggressive? I sometimes think that I should go ahead and take my chances with a flat first serve and then hit a top spin second serve. I don't know what to do really. I have lately been losing my first service game, because I am making too many double faults on my first service game, but then in my next service game I will do better, because I do not try to be so aggressive. "

Well, Francisco good question and I'm going to answer a couple of those questions briefly. And then really talk about what I feel is the main problem

here and yes I think a good combination is an aggressive first serve, whether it be flat or top spin or slice or however you like to hit your serve, but you should be pretty aggressive with your first one and then you want to be confident and consistent with your second serve obviously. So I think you've got the right idea here. You want to be aggressive with your first and then consistent with your second, but without being too tentative. Now you're talking about your problem here with your serve as if it has more to do with your first serve and I disagree with that. I think the real issue here is your second serve.

When you talk about being too aggressive with your first serve in your first service game by double faulting a lot. Well, that's not really a problem with your first serve. That's the problem with your second serve. Be as aggressive as you want in your first service game on the first serve, but we need to put the second serve in play. So I feel like what you really needs to work on here is being more consistent with your second serve without having to let up a ton and be really tentative and weak. So let's talk about the second serve and it sounds like you've got the right idea here in hitting top spin. And I'm going to lay out a couple of guidelines here basic second serve theory that I want everybody listening to understand and then I'm going to talk to you guys and you especially Francisco about how to diagnose your second serve technically and figure out what's wrong, so that you can actually fix it and work on it and make it more consistent and more confident.

So first up basic second serve theory. First of all a spin serve that curves into play particularly top spin, some slice in there as well is what we're going for it. And so you've got the right idea here Francisco. We want good spin on the serve to actually make the ball curve in the air and have it curve down into the box. So that we're not trying to hit directly at the box and barely clearing the shadow with the top of the net. So you've got the right idea. We want some spin here to make the ball curve. Now the spin is created by swinging upwards towards the ball and keeping your arm and hand relaxed to let the racket face become flat in contact. We're going to talk about this more in depth later on, but technically that's what we're looking for. And lastly it should be a confidence swinging. You're not going to make enough spin on your second serve to actually physically curve the ball unless you're relaxed and you're swinging at the ball confidently. This should not be a shot they were pushing into play. You should be making a good not necessarily aggressive, but confident accelerated swing towards the ball. So those are the basic things that we need to be successful and to be confident on the second serve. Now your double faulting too much Francisco. So here's the 3 main ways you're going to be missing that second serve and we're going to talk about how to fix it so that you can go out and work on your second serve and make it better. Make it more consistent.

So the first way that you could possibly miss your second serve is by missing it long, by having to go too far. And I didn't read to all of Francisco's question and another part of his question he talks about going out often. And he doesn't say it to the right or to the left or long, but I'm pretty sure that he's telling me that he is missing long a lot. So you really want to pay attention to this part Francisco, so that you can fix this part of your serve technically as far as your technique is concerned. And he asks if tossing too far into the court is going to cause the ball to go too far and no that's not what causes the ball to go too far in the serve Francisco? What causes a serve to go long and travel too far is your racket face been open at contact. Now by open, I'm

talking about angled whether it's a lot or just slightly. Angled up towards the ceiling or up towards the sky. At contact we want the racket face, the strings to be perpendicular to the court surface. We want there to be a 90 degree angle between the court and your strings as you make contact. That's very important. If your racket face, meaning tilted back towards the sky or towards the ceiling. And you make a good upwards swing towards the ball which you should be doing. The ball is going to waft up too high, it's going to angle too high and it's going to travel too far. Even if there is top spin on the shot. Even you have spin on the serve. It's going to go too far. So we're going to fix this by staying relax. By allowing the racket to swing up towards the ball loosely and allowing it too close.

We need the strings too close and meet the ball flat up at the top of your swing. If you're accelerating and the ball is going too far it means your face is too open and usually people are tight and tense and they are hitting the ball with an open racket face and you've got to relax and let your arm and let your hand swing freely. You've got to be relaxed. So when you missed long it mean your face is open.

Number 2 into the net. When people miss a serve into the net, it is from one of two problems. Either you did not swing upwards enough or your racket face is too closed. Usually it's the first one. Most amateur tennis players are not very good at making an upward swing towards the ball. In the back of your swing your racket should drop and then from there the racket should swing upward towards your toss, upwards the ball to get a lift on the ball to make sure it gets over the top of the net.

If you hit the net often you're probably swinging very straight towards the box and that's not how good players swing. Good players did not hit directly at the box. It's an upward swing towards the ball. So if you're hitting the net a lot, this is probably why? It also could be that your racket face is actually tilted down too much and it's too closed, but in my experience teaching and coaching club level players, amateur players, it's usually not from that. It's usually from not swinging the racket in the right direction. They are trying to hit too flat and too straight.

So the first way that you can miss is long. We talked about that. The face is too open. Second way is into the net. Third way is right or left. And this is the most simple out of the 3 or the easiest to correct. It means that your stings are facing the wrong way. And you need to adjust the racket face in contact b y turning your hand or your hand in your forearm to adjust the angle on the strings.

Now by combining an upward swing and a flat racket face at contact. You can curve or arch the ball over the top of the net and then down into the box again and you can do this confidently. You can accelerate at the ball confidently and actually make it curve. If any of these elements are out of whack-- if your face is too open or if it's too closed or if you are not swinging upward towards the ball to get it over the net or if you're strings are angled to the right or to the left. You're going to miss the serve. And the only way to get good at this is through repetition. You've got to get out, understand these different elements of the serve and then practice over and over and over.

Your second serve should be a shot that you can swing at confidently, but make 7, 8, 9, 10 times in a row without missing. So Francisco hopefully you

understand more clearly now exactly what you need to do with this swing. And hopefully you get out there and practice and you find out exactly what's causing your second serves to go out and you get more consistent. If you have any follow up questions on this feel free to let me know. [music] [music] [music]

And our last question today is also from Francisco. He wrote also in that same message and said, "The second question is that I have never had problems hitting my forehand, but then today I shanked two relatively easy returns of serve and I hit a really bad forehand into the net which was also easy. It ended up messing up my rhythm. I still won my match, but I lost my confidence in my forehand. When this happened I tried to move on and say to myself, "It's just one or two shots, but the areas kept on creeping them. What should I do? Was it lack of focus or keeping my eye on the ball? I don't know what happened. " That's good question Francisco. And this is a difficult topic.

And this is a difficult question to answer, because all of us in tennis all of us have a bad day here and there whether it be in our tennis game as a whole or having to do with the specific stroke. And I know what it's like to suddenly lose confidence in a shot that usually works very well for you. Two times in my competitive tennis career, once in high school and once in college. I completely lost the feel and confidence of my most confident shot typically which is my forehand ground stroke. It's the shot that usually I can hit confidently and aggressively from anywhere in the court and from just about any position and again once in high school and once in college for about 3 or 4 weeks each time.

For whatever reason I just completely lost the shot. I completely lost the stroke and my feel for the shot and it was terribly frustrating, because I've been used to taking that shot and hitting it very confidently and all of the sudden I just felt like I didn't know how to hit my forehand anymore and it was awful. So I know what you're talking about here as far as suddenly losing a shot and there's not always a good way to deal with it immediately.

Like I said when this happen to me I lost the feel for my forehand for like 3 or 4 weeks and it was just gone for a while and it took me a lot of practice and repetition to get my confidence back into the shot again. And so I've got

a. . there's basically two ways that you can fix this Francisco. You can either fix this by hitting your forehand a ton of times the way that you normally would.. Just get a ton of repetition, get a practice partner or a ball machine. Go out to the court and just rally for hours and hours and hours. And just get your feel and your confidence back. Who knows how long it's going to take? And hopefully by the time I've answered this on today's show, you've already got your feel back for it, but I want to answer this question for people listening who may not know how to fix this or how to go about fixing the losing shot that they are usually confident with. So that's the first and that's kind of the easiest way you could deal with this is to just go out and get a ton of repetition the way that you normally hit or the second way that we can work on this is by taking a few steps back and work your way up to full speed again. And start off easy and slow and work your way up towards whatever speed that you used to hit your forehand at. Whatever confidence level that you used to hit your forehand at and this takes more patience. I like that process better personally. Taking a few steps back and working your way up again, but not everybody has the same patience for this as I do. And when I teach somebody that is a good athlete and for whatever reason they just don't get a shot.

And I've worked with people very recently who came in and great athletes, good overall game, but they just get unconfident and squirmy about a certain shot. The forehands specifically I've dealt with students just recently like this. And in my opinion the best way to deal with this is to take a couple steps back, start up slow and work your way forward gradually. So here's a drill that I suggest that you do Francisco the next time this happens or if you're still struggling with this.

First of all, start on the service line and rally with a partner who has good control of the ball and this is something that in general and let your player are uncomfortable with often and just don't like to do and that's rallying from the service line slowly, use your forehand grip and rally inside the service boxes. So if the ball goes passed the service line, it is going too far. You need to be slow and relaxed. Continue to rally back and forth, back and forth at a slow pace until you get 20 in a row that land inside the service box and I would do this both down the line and cross court.

So if you are rallying with a partner who's right handed, you guys would start up hitting cross court using only the deuce side service boxes standing on the service line and rallying back and forth so that the ball ends inside only the deuce side service boxes again and again and again and again with a slow rally. Rally to those two boxes. Only those two boxes until you've gotten a rally of 20 in a row. Once you've done that go down the line and now your partner's going to be hitting backhands and again you're going to hitting forehand. And aim for just those two service boxes and again get 20 in a row.

Once you've done this, back up to halfway between the service line and the base line. And have your friend just feed easy shots to you. Don't rally this just have your friend feed you easy forehands you're standing between the service line and the base line and now I want you to make your target between the service line and the base line anywhere in that rectangle called no mans land and make 10 shots in a row to no man's land on the opposite side of the court.

So now you're making a little bit more aggressive swing, but you should still be loose and relax. We're not trying to hit this shot hard or fast and hit 10 forehands in a row between the service line in the base line. Once you've done this and you've shown that you can consistently control the ball and where it's going with your forehand a little bit deeper target. Once you've done that 10 times in a row, now go back all the way to the base line again and go ahead and start to rally. You can do this with the target at full speed from the base line.

Now there's 5 things I'm going to tell you that are going to determine whether or not this is actually useful to you Francisco and whether or not it's going to work out for you. First of all, be disciplined as you do these drills. Don't cheat and don't cut corners as you rally from the service line for example it's kind of be very tempting for you to maybe miss a shot that's just a couple inches wide or long and you count it and say, "That was close. " Keep going, keep in track or maybe one of you guys will hit the volley and the ball is going to go too far, but somebody who volley's instead of letting it bounce instead and you guys keep going. Just no, just do it. Do what I say. Rally 20 in a row to actually bounce inside the correct service box and don't cut corners on this. Just make sure that you do it correctly. Secondly, if you start to shank the ball again. If you start to hit the ball off your frame, find out exactly where it's hitting on your racket and make adjustments accordingly.

Don't over think it's too much, just adjust for your racket is, find the strings and continue to rally slow and relax. And that's my next one. Number 3 stay relaxed and calm, stay loose. You should be doing this in a relax manner. Your body should be loose no tension and just stay relaxed. Number 3.

Number 4 this could take a while be patient and stick with it. What I just described, the drills I described sound very simple and very easy if you're having confidence issues with your forehand it's very possible that completing those two simple rally's, those two simple control drills back and forth. It's very possible that could take you an hour. Be patient and just stick with it. Don't get frustrated. Easier said than done obviously, but take your time and stay relaxed and don't get frustrated. You're developing your feel and your control. This is number 5 and allow this to happen. It might feel uncomfortable or tight at first. it might not feel natural. Just trust me on this and do these drills and you're going to develop better feel and better control for your forehand. So start off very slow, work your way back steadily and by the time you get back to the base line and you've completed those first two drills hopefully you're more relaxed and you have a better feel for where you racket is, where the ball is. You're not shanking the ball anymore and you're able to kind of get back into your forehand.

So that's my suggestion on how to work through this Francisco and anybody else who's dealing with a specific stroke that they've lost confidence in and you want to build your confidence back up again. I would strongly suggest that you find, you create some kind of progression like this. Where you start up very easy, very simple, under control back and forth and slowly progress towards a more and more full or aggressive swing. This is the best way to do it in my opinion. You could also just try to bash your way through it and stay at the same speed that you always hit at and just try to find your feel again, but in my opinion that's probably not going to quite as effective.

You're not doing any thing different. You're just hoping to work through it and find your feel again which you probably will eventually. I'm not saying that it's impossible to find the stroke again. You'll going to find it eventually either way, but in doing the way that I'm suggesting you're working through it one step at a time and you're really being aware and you're really been conscious about what you're doing and I just feel like it's a much better way to approach it.

So Francisco hopefully that's helpful to you. Thanks very much for your great questions and good luck with your tennis game. Take care. [music] [music] [music] [music]

All right, to finish up today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast, I'd like to do a shout-out to the 5 most recent sign ups at the forums at essentialtennis.com. And these are our newest members who have come in and already started to post. It's always exciting to see new people. So Carol E. Renata, San Jay, Grasscourt and Flame You. Welcome to you guys. It's so great to have you guys aboard on the forums and already have you guys post in and becoming part of the family there at the Essential Tennis Forums. Hopefully you guys continue to post and we look forward to seeing more of you. All right, that does it for this week show. Thank you very much for tuning in. Wherever you are I really appreciate your support by downloading the show.



Let me know if you have any questions about your own tennis game. You can always e-mail me [ian@essentialtennis.com](mailto:ian@essentialtennis.com) and that does it for this week. Take care everybody and good luck with your tennis.  
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