

Essential Tennis Podcast #98

Narrator : Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you love tennis and wants to improve your game. This podcast is for you. Whether it's technique, strategy, equipment or the mental game. Tennis Profesional 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. This episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by somersetsportsperformance. Com. Thank you very much for joining me today and before we gets started with our instructional questions I just want to tell you guys about a new feature at essentialtennis. Com and that is is transcripts of the podcast shows. So this show that you're listening to right now you'll be able to taking as text in several different ways. Each podcast is put up as a blog post.

So you'll see that transcribed text for each podcast on the actual blog there and you can go to that by going to essentialtennis. Com. Put the mouse cursor over at podcast as a dropdown menu and click on transcripts. And once you're there you can translate the transcript into any language. So if you are listening to the Essential Tennis Podcast outside of the United States and you'd like to read the show and any language of your choice you can do that. There's a little dropdown menu on the right it says select language and you can read each show on whatever language you like.

You can also download each transcript for free and if you have a kindle or other E reader you can download the kindle format. You can download the transcript in PDF format as well and I think we are going to be putting up a word document file also. So lots of new ways to learn from the Essential Tennis Podcast besides just listening to it now. If you are a reader and would like to read the show you can now do that as well. So check it out. Again just go to essentialtennis. Com and under the podcast heading select transcripts.

Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis intructions. [music] [music] [music] [music] Let's get started with episode #98 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. And I'm only going to answering 2 questions on today's show and that is, because I'm really going to be going into a lot of depth on both of my answers.

Both of the questions have to do with very important aspects or parts of your tennis game and I'm really going to go into detail on both today. So I hope you guys have your thinking caps on and hopefully you guys are taking some notes here, because it was going to be a lot of information. Again, I'm really going to go on depth on both of these questions. The first one has to do with attacking on the weak and this has been a topic that I've talked about before on the show, but I'm happy to go over it again and each time I explain a topic like this. I'm able to do a little bit better of it the next time.

So I'm always happy to revisit some topics like this especially when they are so important. Now this question comes to us from George in Romania. He's unsure of his level. And here's his question. He says, 'What is often happening to my game is that I'm missing the easy shots. When the ball comes to me in the service box in slowly. For example, when my opponent serve for the second time. I'm hitting the ball over the base line or into the net. When I notice is that I get to the ball very quickly and then I have some dead time waiting for the ball and I lost my focus on it.

Also I think I hit it too hard like I do from the base line. I'm more than happy to receive a base line ball with speed than slow one into the service box. The percentage is higher for me for the first type of shot. Should in to be a vice versa. Thanks. George. ' Well, George I agree with you. It probably should be the reverse and this is a very, very common issue for players that around the 3. 0 or 3. 5 level as rated by our NTRP rating system here in the United States. And basically and average level

of player right around the 3.5 level. And this is definitely one of the biggest differences between a 3.5 player and 4.5 player is the ability to create your own phase and hit the ball aggressively and do that consistently. Anybody who walks out on to the tennis court with a tennis racket.

Any decent athlete can receive a shot and hit it hard. Regardless of where they are in the court. Whether it's close or it's an easy shot or too difficult shot. I mean we can all figure out how to swing the racket quickly and actually hit the ball hard. That's not a problem, but doing it consistently and doing it consistently on an easy shot, but we have a lot of time to think about it and really one of the biggest things here when I say easy shot and what George is talking about is the shot where we have to create phase and spin ourselves and George mentioning his question that he's very comfortable back at the base line when the ball is coming at him with phase there's already speed and the reason why that's easy typically or easier typically for a lower level player is, because there's already momentum on the ball and it's a less work for us to hit the ball back solidly and so we don't have to create the speed or the phase on the ball ourselves with the good technical swing.

We can use technique that's not quite as solid, but still hit a good solid shot back, because there's already momentum on the ball and we're just transferring it back. So this is very common problem among 3.0 to 3.5 players and it's really the root reason why this level player has it's a hard time with the pusher. The player who doesn't really have any weapons, but just hits the ball back in place and play weekly again and again. And doesn't really miss.

And so this really I encourage you George to listen to the show about beating a pusher. I don't have the number of the podcast in front of me here, but if you got to the podcast archives and do a search page for pusher. Listen to that show, because this is basically the same topic. So let's talk about exactly how to overcome this problem and George talks about making 1 of 2 mistakes. Again this is very, very common. This is basically a carbon copy of so many different questions that I get that are basically sounded around the same issue.

And George describes either missing the ball on or into the net whenever he gets this short weak that is trying to attack on. So in order to hit this ball solidly and aggressively and George you've got the right idea here. You don't want to light off on this and hit it weak for the sake of keeping in and play. Now if that's the only way you can keep in and play then by all means it is weak. I don't want you to make a lot of errors and give away free points, but for the sake of advancing your game and becoming a better tennis player. You do need to learn how to attack on this short weak shots and do it consistently. So I'm going to be talking about how to do this.

And really you need to 2 skills in order to consistently hit this weak ball aggressively. And be able to do it again and again. 2 main skills. The first 1 is good positioning and that means putting your body in the right place in relationship to the ball so that it's comfortable to hit. And I would recommend that making contact with this shot somewhere between waist height and shoulder height. We don't want it any lower than waist height, because that means we're really going to have to be hitting up to lift the ball over the net much more than we want to. We do want to attack on this shot and lower the ball drops the low waist heights the more and more difficult it is to actually attack, because we're having a kind of curve the ball.

We can't really hit it hard or else it starts going too far out. Unless you really put a lot of top spin the ball to curve it back and play. So George make sure that you're making contact at an appropriate height and that would be somewhere between waist and shoulder heights. Anywhere in there is fine. We don't want to make contact to both shoulder height either, because it becomes very difficult at that point to hit the ball with good technical form with good technique.

Once the ball gets up above shoulder height. So that's the positioning part. If you find that the shot is so weak. You're having to stand there and wait for the ball to bounce come back up in to the air

and then come back down again into your strike zone where it's comfortable to hit. That's fine. You can either wait for it and be patient let it come back down or you could also take the ball and the racket as well and make contact as the ball's coming off to the court. That's a great way to attack by still hitting the ball on your strike zone by doing so earlier which means you're not going to have to wait around for it to drop back down to your strike zone again first of all and second of all you actually take time away from your opponent which is a great thing.

So considered taking the ball on the racket and making contact with it as it comes up off to the court surface as oppose to letting it go all the way up and then come all the way down again to make contact at your strike zone where it's comfortable. So that's the good positioning part of it. The second, skill that you need to be able to hit this consistently and aggressively is good technique. And more than likely this is where you're failing and this is where your most average players fail when they try to attack on a short ball and I'm going to talk. I want to say briefly, but it might not to be briefly. I'm going to try to talk briefly about what good technique means exactly for this shot.

And there's 2 main elements that have to be kept under control and 2 main elements that have to be done correctly if you're going to make this shot George. First of all, we need an upward swing instead of the so much to the forward one. And George you ask in your question if you should be slowing down and you feel like you're hitting the ball too hard and you say, 'like I do on the base line.' You should be making a ground stroke swing at this shot. What you don't want to do and get tight and tentative and scared to hit this shot. And just start pushing it over.

Now again as I've mentioned a couple of minutes ago this would probably be, well, it would be better than missing all of them for sure. I don't want you to give away points and give away matches, because you missed this shot every time. So I'm not advocating that you just go for it no matter what and continue to miss the shot. However, when it comes time to practice this shot make sure that you're making a good upward swing. The reason for that is we need some top spin on this shot. We've got to have it and the reason for this is we're closer to the net and as you say we don't have as much room to work with The court is shorter.

We're working with the short court, because we're well inside the base line to hit this shot. So we can't hit it like we do from the base line and as far as the trajectory and the height and the speed goes we're not able to hit it just like on the base line, because we don't have as much room to work with. However, we do want to make a full ground strokes swing like we do from the base line. We're just kind of change the trajectory of our shot and add some more top spin that keep it and play. So as far as the length of our swing it's going to remain the same, but the differences are first of all, the path of the racket and again we need to make more of an upwards swing as oppose to a forward swing. It's not impossible to hit the ball from this position hard and flat and straight and put it and play, but it's very difficult.

Again, because we don't have a lot of court to work. When you attack on this shot and hit it flat and straight. There's a very, very narrow window to hit through to actually make the ball stay and play. If you hit it just a little bit high and a little bit above that window then it ends up going too far and if you hit just a little bit low then you end up hitting the net. And that's what sounds like happening here for you. You describe missing it both long and into the net over and over again. And the reason is you're hitting the ball too flat.

You're trying to hit the ball right at your target and that's not impossible to do, but it's very difficult, because there's a very narrow margin for error. So we need to swing upward instead of forward and put top spin on the ball so that we get a curve and it's away with the racket to keep the ball and play. This is very, very important. Now a lot of you are probably saying, 'Well, Ian I've constantly missed these shots along so if I swing upward more it's just going to go farther. I'm going to be missed by even more, aren't I?' Yes, that's true unless you make one more adjustment and that's the second part of

the good technique that I'm talking about here.

The first part is swaying upwards. That's step #1 to hitting the shot correctly. Step #2 is having a flat racket face at contact. And depending on how close you are to the net. You may even want to have the racket face close, close would mean that surface of the strings your racket face is actually facing down towards the court a little bit. In reality, it's usually going to be right around perpendicular or flat.

So your racket strings most of the time should be facing perpendicular to the court surface. Now again, if you're really attacking on the shot and it's really a short shot and you don't have a lot of court to work with, you may have to close it even more than that to get the racket face facing a little bit towards the court surface, but it's not much. It's not like a 45 degree angle or anything like that. In reality probably like around 5 degrees at the most. And the combination of your upward swing and the close racket face is going to do 2 things. It's going to make top spin to curve the ball and spin it down into the court and secondly, it's gonna keep the trajectory from being so high that it makes the ball flow on every time.

So we've got the curve and the ball and the trajectory that's appropriate to keep it and play and between those 2 parts of your swing. We're going to be able to keep the ball and play regardless of where you're standing on the court. It doesn't matter if you're on the base line or in no man's land or on the service line or even in front of their service line.

We should be able to make a full ground strokes swing, upward swing, top spin swing at the ball and still keep it and play by adjusting the angle of the racket face. And that's pretty much it. It's those 2 elements that are going to keep the ball and play George. So if you missed short into the net either your racket face was too close or you swing the racket too straight to forward. You didn't lift the ball over the net. The ball still needs to be lifted over the net. Unless you're really close in the ball is quite high and if you miss along I can pretty much guarantee you that your racket face was too open as either that which will cause about a float and go too far or your racket face was correct and you swing too straight and we didn't spin the ball enough. It was too flat and so the trajectory was fine, but there was no curve in the ball to bring it back down into the court. So it's going to come down to those 2 elements of your technique and again the good positioning. Well, so there you go. And I'm proud of myself for ever get in through that whole thing with one take without having the staff and recollect my thoughts, but that's pretty much it George to be able to attack on these weak shots. It's all about the positioning and the good technique. If you have any follow up questions to this or anybody else listening. If you have any comments or further questions about how you do this. Please let me know, because this is a very important and you need to become comfortable doing this with the short weak shots in order to consistently put the ball away when you have your opportunities. And you're never going to be a 4.0 or a 4.5 or definitely not a 5.0 player unless you learn how to do that with the weak short shot. [music] [music] [music] [music]

Alright, let's go getting started with our 2nd question. It came to us from Masa in Bloomington Indiana. He is a 3.5 player and wrote to me and said, 'Hi, I'm a college student who just started to play tennis a year ago. I love playing tennis singles with my friends since about 2 months ago. I started to get the basic feel for the serve. I listen to podcast here and also watch ATP pros video and learn about wrist pronation during the serve when I've applied it to my serve I had slicing it and was never able to hit a flat serve properly. I used the continental grip. I've tried to resolve this problem by serving with an Eastern forehand grip, but failed miserably by losing control completely.

I also couldn't hit the proper kick serve or slice serve with much spin. Changing to an Eastern backhand grip helps me hit more spin, but it was with the last power. Please help me resolve this problem about pronation. The flat serve attempts to go end. However, lack speed to cover the first serve. The second serves do not go in and missed the service box by going along.

' Well, Masa that's a good question and this is probably one of the most misunderstood and again probably the biggest technical part of the game that is done incorrectly by amateur players and I'm going into detail here talking about how to pronate correctly and also talk about what is not. So this is a very complicated set questions and I'm going to do my best to explain here in about 10 or 12 minutes.

First of all, pronation is rotation of the shoulder in forearm. It's not the wrist and pronation is the rotation of your palm from inside to outside, not up and down. Here's what I mean by that. If you're sitting in front of you and you put your hands right in front of you so that they are perpendicular to the ground and your palms are facing each other right in front of you as you're sitting. If you take your right hand or actually both palms and turn them so that they are facing down towards the ground. That's pronation. If you turn them inwards again to face each other to be parallel again or face each other your palms face each other that's call supination.

If you turn them down into the outside. That is pronation and you should be able to make a full 180 degree turn from your palms facing each other to your palms facing away from each other and having a backs of your palms facing each other. And that would be full pronation of both hands if you rotate both your palms from facing each other to facing 180 degrees away from each other. So that the backs of your palms are facing each other. That is pronation.

And if you watch yourself do that Masa and anybody else out there who's doing it you'll know your wrists did not move. You're are a hence that moves your hands up and down, but not in a circular rotation from the inside to outside. Pronation is done by using your shoulder in your forearm to rotate your arm as a whole. It is not done by using your wrist. This is a really huge misconception out there in tennis community. Pronation is not done through use of the wrist if pronation was the wrist its not.

Just by definition it's not the wrist, but if you try to use your wrist to achieve the racket hit speed necessary to hit a hundred mile an hour serve you would have terrible, terrible wrist problems and to be honest with you a lot of injuries are occurring that way, but players trying to use the wrist too much to actually accelerate the racket. This is a very small part of your body and not nearly strong as your shoulder or your forearm and so that's it. That's the first things first there. Pronation is not using the wrist and you said that in your question.

I just had to clear that up. Now using a continental grip is great and it's good that you're starting to experiment with it and hopefully you haven't put that away completely, but when you use a continental grip and angles the racket phase so if you're right handed and you're on the base line and you just reach your palm and the racket up towards your point of contact. The strings of the racket will face to the left as the racket moves up towards the ball and this is how it should be, because of this if you take a continental grip and just swing directly at the ball you will impart slice and when people try a continental grip for the first time, this is what always happens.

They've miss to the left or maybe they make the serve, but there's a big curve from right to left and they spin the ball and if that happens Masa or anybody else listening when you try a continental grip first the first time and the ball spins in curves to the left if you're right handed. Then your doing it correctly and that's what should happen the first time that you try a continental grip. The ball should curve to the left. If you're a left handed then it's the opposite the ball will curve off to the right. Now in order to hit a flat serve you have to pronate your forearm and shoulder in order to straighten the strings. So that they become flash or square behind the ball.

Again with the continental grip if you just naturally swing the racket towards the ball your string will be angle to the left. And that's will puts that spin in the curve on the ball if you want to hit a flat serve and you want to hit the ball with no spin and you want to hit it straight at your target then the strings need to be turned and facing forward as you make contact and that's for the pronation comes in to

play. Pronation rotates the racket. The angle of the racket strings so that when you make contact the strings are flush to the ball.

They are square and they're facing towards your target. And so this pronation again it's how you hit a flat shot. If you swing with the continental grip and the ball spins were curves you either didn't pronate early enough to square the strings or you didn't pronate enough in general in order to get the racket face or the strings square to the ball. So Masa when you're attempting to do this and you swing with the continental grip and it continuous to spin you're not pronating properly. Now there's 2 drills that can help you kind of get to fill for this 2 drill that I used in my teaching definitely every week and depending on who I'm working with at that time.

It could be everyday. And there's 2 main ways that you can kind of exaggerates or practice pronating to get the fill for actually rotating your shoulder and forearm to the outside in order to get these strings square to the ball in order to actually hit the hard flat serve. The first one is to pick a target that's way to the right. And if you're right handed I would suggest go in to the add side of the court make sure that you have a continental grip and then I want you to take a ball go to your service motion as normal, but pick a target that's way to the right of what you would normally hit and I typically where I teach we have water coolers in between each court.

And so I'll go to the add side of the court assuming I'm a right handed player. And say, 'Hey, you see that water cooler between our court and the court to our right? I want you to take a continental grip and put up a toss as you normally would. I want you to hit that water cooler and so it's to the right [Ian Westermann] of the net post on the right and my student then has to really pronate to get these strings angled not only straight, but past that and actually angled strings to the right to get the ball to angle of to the right side of the court.

Now again, naturally the ball is kind of want to go the left. The first time of player uses the continental grip. So I'm really forcing them to really pronate well and go past even with the flat serve would be and this is an exaggerated motion. This is not how you actually want to hit the ball to hit a serve, but the purpose of this is to try to get my student to feel what is like to really pronate and turn that palm or turn the racket face to face out to the right. And this should be done at like half speed at the most. Don't try to do this fast and you probably going to hurt yourself and again this is an exaggerated motion.

So do slowly just go one at a time and take your time and try to get the feel for angling your palm out to the right. Once you get the feel for this it's in order to hit a flat serve it's a less exaggerated than this put it's the same kind of feel of turning and twisting the racket face out to the right instead of hitting the ball with our racket strings facing right. We want them to be facing flat and so it's not going to be quite exaggerated of emotion, but it's the same kind of feel.

The second way that you can practice pronating correctly is by practicing bouncing the ball with an over head. An easy short overhead and I have my students do this by tossing to themselves now have them go all the way up to the net with me And then will toss service toss to ourselves and then bounce the ball on the other side of the net and try to bounce it over the back fence or the back curtain on our court. And you'll see pros to thin on TV when I can get an easy overhead bounce it over their opponents and into the stands. The only way to do this is by pronating correctly. If you slice the ball and you hit the right side of the ball and you don't pronate correctly.

You will never bounce it over the back fence. So this is a way to practice doing it correctly and of the ball doesn't even get close to going over the back fence. You were not pronating very well and at contact the racket strings should be parallel to the court surface facing downwards. I think that back not quite parallel, but they shouldn't be angled to the right or to the left. They should be flat facing straight down towards the court and you want a little bit angled on your strings facing back towards

the opposing service line. So that the ball goes forwards, but not much.

We mostly want to hit the ball right down into the court surface to bounce it up in over the back fence. So this are 2 drills you can do by yourself. So practice getting the feel of pronating. Again, make you sure that you have the correct continental grip as were gonna force you to really have to use your shoulder and forearm to rotate and get the strings flash to the ball. It's the only way to do both of the drills I just described. Now in trying to wrap up this topic and I could really go for long time on this, but here's the 3 things that really make pronating difficult to learn using correct technique with the continental grip.

First of all, just the pronating motion in general. If you didn't grow up playing an overhand throw sport such as baseball or American football. We'll you have to make an overhand throw. Pronating in general is often foreign to many players, because if never play the sport with the head to do it correct overhand motion. Every baseball player, every football quarterback pronates when they throw and that's just the good athletic way to do it. So that's the first thing that makes this tough a lot of people. Secondly, it's the timing of the pronation. If you're trying to had flat serve the racket face needs to be flashed and facing towards the target right they contact.

If you're a little bit late and the racket didn't quite it flashed you end up in the slice and the ball will curve off to the left. That's the most common mistake that people make. It's they're too late with the pronation. They never get the racket face flashed and they end up spinning the ball up to the left. It's also possible to be early but this is isn't happen very often, but once in a while.

Once in a while players are little early with the pronation and actually hit of to the right. Again I'm talking about a righty player. Then actually hit the left side of the ball and kind of hit a left slice and hit the wrong side of the ball and I've seen that happen within couple of instances but usually it's the first way and players don't pronate. The timing of their pronation is much too late and they're hitting the right side of the ball instead of hitting the back of the ball. And the 3rd reason why this is difficult to learn is the amount of rotation in the pronation and most players don't [Ian Westermann] Have a lot of pronation on their swing or they don't have any at all. And the racket just keeps facing their and they just push the ball and play.

This is the very weak way to hit the serve. And this is why pronation is so important. That range of motion gives you a time of racket speed gives you the potential for a lots of power and lots of spin and so it's very important to learn this correctly with the continental grip if you really want to hit as good of a serve as it's physically possible for you. Now last thing I'm going to say before we wrap up and I could use a lot of these things as individual topic for podcast to explain, but last thing I really want you to understand Masa is that kick serves and slice serves use pronation too. It's not just a flat serve that you pronate on.

It's just that the timing is different to achieve different angles with the strings that contact. It's not so much that pronation is only used to hit flat. It's a general technique that you should be using on every serve to achieve racket hit speed to make spin and to make power. It's the angle of the strings and the direction of the racket path that determine exactly what type of spin or how much spin is being hit and the pronation should be used on every sinlge serve. It's not just for a flat service for every serve. It's the timing of your pronation and the actual angle of contact that would determine what type of serve you're hitting. It's really important that all of you guys understand that and this is something that universal and a good serve it's not just for a flat serve.

And lastly now say is to get a good visual thing to get a good visual example of this go to essentialtennis.com click on videos and on the right side you'll see different categories. Click on serve technique and there's a video there. These are all free to view. There's a video there called Sampras serve comparison. And it's a great back view of Pete Sampras and also of Steve who is sa

member of the Essential Tennis forums. And I compare side by side.

See Steve's served with that of Sampras and the pronation is a big thing that I talked about in the videos. So if you want to actually see what good pronation looks like in a high level serve. Go look at that video. Again I think it's called Sampras serve comparison video and that's in the video section of essentialtennis.com. So Masa hopefully that's make sense to you and I couldn't longer on this but I won't bore you guys, but a lot of details and lot of technical talking, but hopefully I'd broken it down so that it makes sense if any of you have any have further questions or comments having to do with pronation on the serve.

Feel free to let me know. My e-mail address is ian@essentialtennis.com. [music] [music] [music] [music] Alright, that does it for episode #98 of the Essential Tennis Podcast.

Thank you very much for joining me today and quick shoutout before we close the show and that shoutout is going to Fight fan in California who posted on the forum at essentialtennis.com. Fight fan was kind enough to send me a holiday greeting card and a gift as well which I just recieved in the mail. So I want to extend a warm thank you to him. And a warm holiday greeting and best wishes to all of my listeners as well. As were closing up the holiday season here and were winding down 2009.

I hope it's been a succesful one for all of you and happy New Year and best wishes to all of my listeners for a 2010 as well. I hope that it's succesful for all of us in our tennis endeavors. So that does it for today's show. Take care everybody and good luck with your tennis [music] [music]