

Essential Tennis Podcast #100

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

Ian Westermann : Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. Your place for free, expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast and today's a little bit of a milestone in the show, we are celebrating our 100th episode.

I want to thank everybody who has been with me. Some of you guys who have been listening from the very beginning, I really appreciate the support of all of you who listen to the show and download the show on a regular basis. You guys are the reason why I continue to do this show and thank you very much for your support.

Also I want to thank my forum members. They're probably the most enthusiastic and the most passionate of the people who follow the podcast and you guys are always a great encouragement to me. Thank you everybody who posts on the forums. And I want to thank my guests as well who have been on the show. Some people many times and it really helps make the show much more interesting and more interactive. So thank you to guests as well who have been on the show.

Well, let's go ahead and get on to today's topic and by the way, I got good suggestions from several of you for what to do for the 100th episode and I've probably asked that question a little bit too late-- just didn't have enough time to really plan anything special or fancy and I'm not really one to do that anyway. So today is just going to be a regular show besides this intro, but one more time, thank you everybody whose been supportive and helping me as I keep on going. Hopefully, not too far in the distant future we'll be doing show #200.

Let's go ahead and get to today's topic. I'm going to be talking with Jason Kohl and answering a listener question. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music] [music] [music]

My guest on the show today is my good friend Jason Kohl. Jason and I played college tennis together at Ferris State University and he's been my good friend over the years. We shared suites in college and shared a lot of time on the court and spent a lot of time even since college and it's really good to have you on the show. I enjoy talking with you about tennis.

[Jason Kohl] Thanks, buddy. We've had a good run so far.

[Ian Westermann] So today's topic is going to be interesting and it's something that I've talked about briefly on the podcast before, but not very in depth and I think it's an important subject for our listeners to understand exactly what differentiates different NTRP rating levels and quite possibly more importantly, I really want my listeners to understand the differences between amateur level players, even let's say top amateur level players and low professional level of players or just professional level players in general and it's something that I feel so many amateur players don't give enough respect to professional players and exactly what they're watching on TV. And so we're going to be talking a bit about that today in answering a question by a listener and somebody who posts on the forums.

But before we do that, Jason can you please take a couple of minutes and I want people to kind of know where we're coming from as far as our own playing level. So can you please give people a quick kind of background on exactly what level of tennis that you've played in the past?

[Jason Kohl] Well, I've played doubles in college and then [inaudible] run to Europe and Canada and several other places and played some teachers and what not and then I was an assistant coach for the University of Virginia which currently is the #1 team in the country.

[Ian Westermann] Nice. So in college as an example, I mean Ferris State when you and I played there, it was usually ranked in like in the 30s nationally in division II is that correct? If I remember correctly.

[Jason Kohl] I think we were around 20.

[Ian Westermann] Was it?

[Jason Kohl] Whatever somewhere around there.

[Ian Westermann] Alright, Jason and I are both played for one of the upper divisions II schools, not the best college tennis in the country by any means, but certainly up there and Jason played well ahead of me on the team, he's definitely a much stronger player than I am. I played the bottom of the lineup there and in the past have played in 5.0 leagues as well. I don't have any experience really in playing after college while Jason he mentioned traveled around and actually played some lower level professional events.

So both of us and Jason also as you said was a college coach at UVA, which some of those players are actually tour players-- they are actually playing ATP events these days?

[Jason Kohl] Yes well [inaudible] was the #1 guy in the team. He won 2 national championships while I was there and he is currently ranked like 130th in the world.

[Ian Westermann] Nice.

[Jason Kohl] Pretty much everybody on the team is ranked somewhere around 900 or below.

[Ian Westermann] OK.

[Jason Kohl] So they've all got points as juniors. They've been winning [inaudible] titles and stuff like. So it's really that they are quite talented people.

[Ian Westermann] Alright, I just wanted to go over that briefly so that listeners get an idea of the experiences that we've had around top level players and people that are very, very talented. I just want people to know we're not just making stuff up and we've got some decent experience between the two of us. Neither of us made it as a professional tennis player, but we've definitely been around our fair share of high level players. So I just want people to understand that we've got some good experience working with-- and Jason and I now both teach full time at private clubs where we interact a lot with 3.0 players and 3.5 players.

And so I just want people to get a good picture of the range of players that Jason and I have experience with. Now let's go ahead and get to today's question. So it take me a couple of minutes to fill you guys in exactly on everything that this question asker wants us to talk about and then Jason and I are going into a discussion of different levels of players and give this person some pointers on somethings maybe he can do to get better and trying to beat a player that's a lot better than he is.

So this comes to us from Flame Yu in Southern California. He writes and says, 'Hi, I'm 22 years old and have been playing and had limited coaching from a 29 year old former pro for a few years. I've lost 6 matches 6-0, 6-0 and earned no games. I only win a few points here and there with some luck.' Now he goes in to some details about both of them and I'm going to skip over some of these, but I wan to give you guys an idea of his perception-- the differences between himself and this playing partner that he has.

He says, His background easily beats D2, D3 college tennis players, is in good shape, but not his best. He's a very good coach and played for China in the past. He's playing style is 5.5 or 6.0 attacking, ruthless all quarter, pros he knows my pros and cons better than me. He's mentally strong and focused. He disguises his shots well. Instant footwork also unlike me. ' He says that this player's cons are he hits a one handed backhand and dislikes a high backhand and he dislikes low slices to his semi western forehand.

Now Flame Yu for his own playing style says that he is a 3.0 to 4.5, very wide range there and he says that his pros are that he is a strong fast thinker, focused and simple, he has low unforced errors with medium power. He says he has a big forehand hitting zone and he's a very good slicer/pusher. He says he's cons are difficulty reading a disguised shot of this opponent. Has sub part footwork and reaction time, relatively weak physically. He says his flat forehand shots are 50/50 in terms or errors to making the shot. He says he has an OK 2 handed backhand, serving, returning-- 5 years of total tennis experience and 2 years competitive experience with coaching.

Now he lays out a couple of tactics. He says, 'I always play calm. Never panic, plan A is avoid pointless forehand exchanges with this player.' He tries to hit high and deep to this player's backhand and he says, 'Don't dare to go into the net against this guy for a fear of a passing shot to the face. Sounds like he's probably smart. Now he says, 'Results, these types of players are in a whole different level, you sense they are ultra competitive and hold nothing back. I truthfully won't win a match, but the goal is to earn a few extra games off him. Please share your wisdom on top level players. I'm looking to be more mobile against players that are way better than me and have sound strokes.

Alright, so sorry for the long introduction there, but I wanted the listeners and Jason as well, to have a good sense of where these guys coming from and we've got 2 players here who clearly have a wide difference and ability level between them and this is something that I can relate to walking on to the college team at Farris. There were players on the team currently that were ranked in the top 10 in division II tennis and were incredible athletes. I had to figure out how to compete with these guys and they were experiences that I'd never had before.

And so I know where you're coming from Flame Yu. This can be really tough and having not won a game yet against this player, I'm sure it's starting to get a little bit frustrating. Now Jason the first thing I want to talk about is the differences between NTRP levels and you and I were talking on the phone about this a couple of days ago. And Flame Yu makes it kind of tough, he puts himself between a 3.0 and 4.5. Jason and I have seen video of Flame Yu hitting and he and I put him around a 3.5 or so based on our opinions.

So let's say that this opponent that he's playing against is in fact not currently, but previously like a 6.0 level player and Flame Yu currently is a 3.5 or 4.0. Exactly, how much of a difference in terms of technique and competitiveness and talent in general-- Exactly how much of a difference are we talking about here. Let's make people aware of exactly how big the difference is.

[Jason Kohl] Well, I hate to be the Grim Reaper here, but that's just a massive difference. If you go on to the USTA website, you can find that they described somebody at the beginning of a player level as in a 3.00 can be easily beaten 6-0, 6-0, by somebody whose at the end of that same level which would be a 3.49. If you're jumping up an entire level legitimately then you should be beat 6-0, 6-0 by that person. So I think at the club level, a lot of the times what you'll get is somebody whose potentially the best player there and everybody thinks they are a 6.0, because they are clearly better than anybody else.

[Ian Westermann] Right.

[Jason Kohl] And then they don't really get an accurate reading, not necessarily in the example of what we're talking about, but even that Michael I do know is that there's one guy who is clearly the best and everybody thinks that's he's a 5-0, 5-5 and in reality, he is kind of a weak 4.5.

[Ian Westermann] Two things, first of all and yes I was unaware of that kind of general benchmark that you just laid out. That half a point, I don't know if that's exactly a point or half a point, but from a beginning 3.0 to, OK half a point. So that half a point difference that the USTA actually has published

saying that it should be a 6-0, 6-0 match between those 2 players?

[Jason Kohl] Yes.

[Ian Westermann] Wow.

[Jason Kohl] Yes it's on there.

[Ian Westermann] I think that should put it in the prospective for people right there. If you're dealing with a player whose 3 half a points in front of you, that's clearly a huge difference. I was talking about somebody that who not only is capable of beating you 0-0, but can probably do it quite easily without even trying very hard. That sounds about right?

[Jason Kohl] Yes, it should be a toy job-- at that point it should be a yoyo. Not to be harsh, but if you're playing a full point ahead, 3.0 to 4.0 or something of that nature, it really shouldn't be much of the match for the 4.0 and would be kind of boring. It's the way that it's supposed to be described. Now a lot times you get someone who is a true 3.5 or something of that nature, playing in a league and everybody gets beat by a certain guy 6-2, 6-2 and everybody thinks that guy is a 4.0 or 4.5.

[Ian Westermann] Right.

[Jason Kohl] In reality he might just be a 3.9 based on their rating. So it's kind of a tricky game to keep someone in an accurate rating and just because you get beat by that person doesn't mean that they're 10 points ahead of you.

[Ian Westermann] Yes. I think that's really important for listeners to understand and realize and I think that you really accurately pointed out a few minutes ago that I think players misjudge and give too much credence to players who are better than them, but not by so much, because they just don't have much frame of reference-- have a lot of experience on the court against players who are in a wide range of levels. Most club players or amateur players play with players that are like them and they might watch upper level players play from the side lines, but never actually experience with an actual 5.0 player is like on the court and I think you're right that leads to a lot of inflated of opinions on NTRP ratings.

Now I also want people to understand the differences between let's say top amateur and a low level professional player. Somebody who is let's say a top of division I tennis plays futures and challengers that's sort of thing isn't winning full level ATP tournaments yet, but he's doing the challengers and futures and first of all let me point out that a 5.0 level player. I tried to find the link to the USTA page that talks about the current ratings, but 5.0 players make up something like 3 or 4% of all tennis players in the United States and 4.5 and above is like I think 8 or 9%.

So just going with the 4.5 or 5.0 players, we've already got pretty high level of players. Now let's take a difference Jason between somebody who is winning matches just at a challenger or future level. Tell

everybody the difference between somebody whose a low level professional player compared to a 5.0 league player.

[Jason Kohl] 6.0, 6.0? Quickly. There's the difference between the 5.0 and 6.0 like I said it's a full point that's not really a competitive match in the list the footwork pretty-- much every aspect even if it's not the professional strength would be significantly better than what a 5.0 brings to the table. The difference there is about the same as the difference between the 2.0 and the 4.0 or 4.5. You seeing drastic differences.

[Ian Westermann] And these are the players that are not-- not to talk down the players who have gone out and tried the tour or maybe not been that successful, but these are the players who are not even really 'Making it' on the tour are they?

[Jason Kohl] No, but that's a little bit tricky and a lot of those players could just see a few points of two games away. It does get very competitive on the tour and the time travel and there are a lot of reasons why you might be struggling. If you've earned 700 or so ranking, you're up there.

[Ian Westerman] Sure. So these guys who are playing challengers and futures and maybe having moderate success winning a match here and there-- not winning actual events yet. What's the difference between them and somebody whose ranked in let's say the top 100 on the ATP tour?

[Jason Kohl] You know, honestly a few points or few games, a small weakness here and there, it's not nearly as big as the difference between the 3.0 and the 4.0.

[Ian Westermann] Really?

[Jason Kohl] You see all the time that it happens-- in futures you have the #1 seed ranked 300, 400 something like that. And you'll see somebody who is unranked in the future. That's says something.

[Ian Westermann] So you're saying essentially the top 750 or 1,000 players are all pretty close in level, what differentiates them? How come some guys are consistently in the top 20?

[Jason Kohl] Well, there's obviously differences. Their better, more consistent at strokes, more consistent with their level from day to day.

Mentally tougher and then the big difference, well not big difference, but there's a consistency difference between say a top 50 guy and a top 20 guy.

[Ian Westermann] OK.

[Jason Kohl] [inaudible] In daily consistency. That would be said, their strokes and everything should be at a really high level.

[Ian Westermann] Alright, so these 5.0 players-- usually most club players in my experience-- I mean the best tennis that they ever see personally meaning on the court right in front of them is probably a strong 4.5 or maybe a 5.0 level. So these top club players are just not anywhere near even a low professional level. Is that correct?

[Jason Kohl] Yes, nowhere near.

[Ian Westermann] Alright, I hope that [inaudible].

[Jason Kohl] It would essentially be a different sport they are watching there.

[Ian Westermann] Yes I hear you. Well, hopefully that puts some perspective for our listeners then. What you guys are watching when you're watching tennis on TV, the top players at your club or if you don't play at a club, if you just play at a public facility, the top players that you will ever see out there are just not anywhere near. I supposed that goes without saying, but I just feel like players a lot of times just inflate the ratings and I think give too much credence to upper-level amateur players and there's a huge difference between the two.

Now let's get back to Flamiel, Jason, and where do we start with this? When we're talking about a 3.5 or even if we say a 4.0 level player with Flamiel. What can we do or if you I were coaching him or teaching him, where do we start with actually trying to improve his game so that he can start to take some games off of this player that he's playing against?

[Jason Kohl] Well, even the difference in levels that he has mentioned, I would say the only legitimate chance of him winning games would be to pick up a monster serve, that can give them free points. Making up like 3 and a half level or 2 and a half levels of difference-- your talking 10, 20 years at least. So I would say if you're looking to go out and win some games sometime in the next 5 years and be more competitive, than you really need to work on that serve and make some things happen there.

[Ian Westermann] When you say a difference of 10 or 20 years, you're talking about time used to train I assume?

[Jason Kohl] Yes. You can move from the 2.5 to the 3.0 quite quickly with practice. Move from the 3.0 to the 3.5 even quickly. Once you're talking about moving from a 4.0 to a 4.5 or 4.5 to the 5.0, that's taking a lot of years unless you're a junior whose [inaudible] or something. That's a good opportunity to train assuming he's not in that category. You're looking at a lot of time put in to beat the person at an overall game. If you are looking to get cheap points, just pick up a monster serve.

[Ian Westermann] Yes and where Jason is coming from with that everybody is basically, once these 2 get put on level ground and it's just in an exchange back and forth and the point has essentially started and they're both on neutral ground, this upper level players strokes are just not really going to be fazed by the ground strokes of Flamiel. He has seen in the past so much more pace and so much more spin that

Flamiel's ground strokes are going to have to pick up in levels significantly to really ever be able to pressure this guy consistently and that's what it is going to have to take to win games, is consistently pressuring him from the base line. It's not going to be-- I'm going to get a big forehand and when I hit that big forehand one shot I'm going to win a point. Against players like this who have good anticipation and incredible quickness and really good athleticism, it's going to take more than one good shot per point to be able to win points consistently and that big serve that Jason's talking about could tip points in your favor by giving you an offensive opportunity right away to set off the point.

[Ian Westermann] It might not be an ace or an actual service winner, but you could at least set yourself up with an easy ball, that you could hopefully then attack and again and put away, but starting off on neutral ground, his entire games really going to have to pick up a ton to be able to win games off this player, isn't it Jason?

[Jason Kohl] Yes, that's improving your forehand, your high forehand, your slice forehand, your backhand, your slice backhand, your high backhand, your first shots. There's so much more work to be to complete at a ground stroke to ground stroke level with this guy, but that's really a lofty goal. And I've seen even against [inaudible] who was obviously 2 time national champion-- amazing player. I've seen people with huge serves get a lot more games than they should've. If they were to have started with a drop feed, they would've won 6-0, 6-0, instead these guys are [inaudible] 3-3, 4-4 just because they are starting so many points off on the advantage.

[Ian Westermann] Yes. That's tough. Alright, so #1 Flamiel is probably the serve and in going through your YouTube videos Flamiel, I wasn't able to find any video footage of your serves. I'm not sure what kind of shape it's in right now, but if you post a video of it on the forums at essentialtennis.com, I'd be happy to give you some pointers. I'm sure Jason would as well.

What would you rank after that Jason? And we just talked a little bit about how essentially you've probably have to just pick up the whole level of every other stroke in your game, once the serve has been put back in play, in order to really consistently compete with this guy and win a couple of games, but if you had to pick one thing to maybe rank 2nd after the serve, what would you tell him to work on? Whether be stroke or tactics or fitness or what do you think would be 2nd most important?

[Jason Kohl] If I can bundle footwork and fitness together, then I'd go there.

[Ian Westermann] OK.

[Jason Kohl] Usually one of the huge things that separates players is simply their footwork., their court coverage. When I use to play against the player like [inaudible] who was clearly a better player than me. I could rally with him with for 6, 7 balls. Problem is he's pressuring me through those 6 or 7 and putting me in a bad spot and then come the eighth ball, he's got a relatively easy shot to take the point. If he's playing with this guy and actually in rallies and he's going to need to be able to last that 6 or 7th ball and not be at a negative point after it and not be so tired that he can't play the next point. Usually that's

where people fall off.

[Ian Westermann] Well, not only that and yes certainly just having the stamina in general is going to help him a lot, but if he wants to attack and actually be able to ever pressure this player, he's going to have to be in impeccable position in my opinion, to be able to actually attack and do it consistently and hit an aggressive shot that's ever going to pressure this player and something that Jason and I both noticed for sure while watching a couple of videos of Flamiel rally, was that the footwork was just not there. It just looked lazy. It just wasn't doing much for his feet. In between shots, he would literally walk back to the center of the base line and that's not just ever going to cut it against this players is it Jason?

[Jason Kohl] No. This is a kind of a blanket statement, but as a 3.5 or 4.0 player, in a base line to base line rally, will pretty much never ever hit a winner on a 5.0, 5.5, 6.0 player. The better player should be in position and ready to move unless you're just [inaudible] like crazy and taking one in a million chance, you're not going to hit a base line to base line winner. So if you can't keep up with the fitness and you can't hit winners, where hitting winners against somebody that high is a foolish goal, there is no way you can pull that off.

[Ian Westermann] Alright. Well, Jason anything else to add to this before we start wrapping things up. Any other thoughts on differences between NTRP levels or differences between amateur and professional level players or any other last tips for Flamiel before we start wrapping things up?

[Jason Kohl] Well, good luck. I didn't mean to sound negative but I would say if you get a chance, watch the fitness of people who are higher level than you. Obviously, there can be some people who are heavy and just hit the ball real clean and have a great history, but usually as you see a better player, you'll see a more fit player. And it's just hard to get around that. So good luck sir, I hope that you can take this guy a little bit closer than you have in the future.

[Ian Westermann] In the past I think you mean?

[Jason Kohl] Well, in the future taking closer, but you have [inaudible] on my part.

[Ian Westermann] Just want to clear that up. Well, and yes let me reiterate what Jason just said. Yes, Jason and myself talking about this topic, it certainly was not our intention to discourage anybody or talk down at anybody, definitely not in the least. On the other hand, we want to make sure that everybody's realistic and knows exactly what they are getting into when they talk about raising the level of their game by 3 halves of a point. And it's not that it is impossible, it's not impossible, but if we're talking about the difference between a 3-0 and the 4-5 or definitely 3-5 and 5-0. You guys need to be prepared especially if you are past your 20s. You need to be prepared to really focus on this and be in it for the long haul, because it's not a simple thing. Its not an easy thing.

The tactics and the technique of it, is probably something that you understand and you can see the differences, but actually being able to do it and do it consistently. Jason was talking about the

differences between the lower level professionals and the upper level professional players is being able to hit that better shot consistently again and again and again. And that's kind of the same thing between a 3-5 and 5-0 is well, actually that's not correct, because techniques are very different there. Let's say between 4-5 and 5-0. 4-5 players are able to definitely hit solid shots, but not quite at the same consistency level and just not as often as the 5-0 player.

So anyway, you guys just need to be prepared to work hard and Flamiel I hope that you have success as well in the future and let us know if you have any further questions and hopefully we gave you some things that you can actually work on and try to improve to get closer to this player.

Well, Jason thanks very much for you time. I appreciate you talking to myself and our listeners, it's always great to have you on the show and I appreciate your input.

[Jason Kohl] Thank you too. [music] [music] [music] [music]

[Ian Westermann] Alright, that does it for episode #100 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you for joining me today and I hope today's show was interesting and informative for you. And today's shout out I'd like to give a shout out to 2 people who took the time to send me an e-mail. There was a lot of suggestions for show 100 in the forums. The 2 people who sent me e-mails were Colorado Lane and also Peter in Sweden who sent me some suggestion for show 100. Sorry I didn't use your guys ideas, but I really appreciate the input.

Lastly before I wrap up today's show, I want to remind you guys about Essential Tennis live. Myself and Ron Miller are going to be doing an Australian Open preview show this Thursday live at 8:30PM Eastern Standard Time.

If you want to listen to that show live or call in and give your predictions. You can go to blogtalkradio.com/essentialtennis or go to essentialtennis.com/live and follow the link there to go to the show page. [music] [music]

Alright, that does it for today's show. Thanks again everybody. Take care and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]