

## **Essential Tennis #101**

Announcer : 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 Westermann : Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. Your place for free expert tennis instructions that can truly help you improve your game.

Thanks very much for joining me on today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast. I'm really happy to have you listening. Thank you for downloading the show.

Before we get started with today's listener questions, I'd like to make an announcement, and that is for the next upcoming Essential Tennis Clinic. And this clinic is going to be held on March 20th and 21st in Fremont, Nebraska, which is close to Omaha, Nebraska. This is going to be a 2-day clinic. It's going to feature instruction by myself on technique and doubles and singles strategy, and I'm going to have special guest instructor with me to aid with me on the court. His name is David Groemping.

And David Groemping you guys may recognize that name from the podcast. He's the mental expert and mental tennis coach that I often have on to answer mental tennis questions. He's going to be with me there and he's also going to be giving a workshop during the clinic about mental toughness during your tennis play. So you're going to get not only technique and strategy instruction on the court, around 10 hours of instructions on court, but you also going to get a mental tennis workshop. So you're really going to be working on all aspects of your game at this clinic.

And again it's in Fremont, Nebraska March 20th and 21st. If you're interested in attending this clinic, you need to let me know quickly. The first two Essential Tennis clinics have run of both sold outs. So if you'd like to work with me on your tennis game and with David Groemping, definitely let me know. There's going to be a sign-up on the websites soon, but in the meantime feel free to send me an e-mail at [ian@essentailtennis.com](mailto:ian@essentailtennis.com).

Alright, let's get to today's questions. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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Alright, let's get started with today's show and our first question comes to us from Dropshot on the forums at [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com). Dropshot wrote and said, 'I have a question about being at the net. I'm quite comfortable positioning myself at the net, but I have problems. Not so much with players that selectable really hard of me, but it's those guys that take just a bit of pace of their passing shots and aim it really well dipping low

just over the net with good top spin, and landing usually with an inches of the side line.

Either I'm really slow in my old age or they've hit a really excellent passing shot for which there is no defense. Is there a way to train for this type of shot? Are there side lunges or some other high performance exercises that you can recommend to improve my odds here? Or it is just the inevitable being slowing or reflexes that comes with age?' And he says that he is 51 years old. 'I returned to playing tennis 2 years ago after a 30 year hiatus.'

Well, Dropshot that's a good question. And I don't think that most of these has to do with your age or conditioning. That's the good news. [laughter] No, I don't think that you're out of luck here due to your age. There's several things that are within your control that I think if you improve and focus on and do to the best of your ability you'll have a much better chance against these players.

So let me go through my outline here answering your question. First of all, anybody who's able to hit the shot that you describe and hit it consistently is a very high level player. And yes, that's an amazing shot. And you don't say what's your play ability here is Dropshot. You don't say what level you play at or what level your opponents are. But the shot that you describe to be able to hit that shot a couple of times in a match would be awesome for most players. And you described several different variables. You talked about the ball barely making it over the net dipping low. So I'm assuming with some good top spin here. And you talked about being in angle. Has to and landing with an inches of the side lines. We're talking about a really high level shot here.

Now if you're playing somebody who can do this consistently, then you're playing against somebody who's really high level of player. And it may be that they're just extremely good at this shot and yes, you're going to have a hard time winning, and coming up to the net is going to be difficult. But again, there's a couple of things in your control that you need to really pay attention to, and practice so that you can have the highest degree of success possible.

Now when it comes to coming up to the net and approaching, there's a couple of things that you need to do and really keep track of. And the first one is the quality of your approach shot. And a big mistake that amateur players often make when they do come to the net is they decide to come forwards and approach off of a shot is not great. And it's not a shot that's really challenging their opponents much.

Now I'm a big proponent of my students coming forwards and coming to the net, because it's a big pressure to their opponents. And gives you all kind of benefits. You're closer to your opponent side of the court so you have use your access to angles and it's easier to put the ball away the closer you are. Also you take time away from your opponent, because you're closer to them.

But the flip side is, because you're closer to your opponent you also have less time to react to their passing shot or to their lob, and so that means that you can't just wander up

to the net on any old shot. You just can't do that. You can't hit an average shot to your opponent and just run up to the net and expect to be successful all the time, because if they're in balance and they're comfortable and they have plenty of time to react to your approach shot, the likelihood of them hitting a good passing shot against you increases exponentially.

So we need to make sure that you're coming forwards on a good approach, especially against the player that you're describing that obviously has the skills to hit a great passing shot. You cannot risk coming forwards on an average shot. Now it may be that you plan to come into the net and you want to hit a good approach shot, but after making your swing, you identify that this is kind of going into them. It's not very challenging. At which point I would recommend that you just back up again and you just change plays. And just kind of throw that plan out of the window, because you can't afford to set yourself up over and over again for a passing shot from your opponent.

Now what is the quality approach shot? There's two variables here that I feel are most important. First of all, I feel that depth is very important. And you need to place your approach shot deep in the court. And when you do this your opponent is going to have very little time--one or two things is going to happen. Either they're going to have to back up to account for the depth of your shot so that they have time to react and hit the ball comfortably in which case great. Your giving them more distance to have to carry the ball and to have to try to power the ball or angle the ball past you. And so the deeper the better most of the time.

Sometimes you'll see pros approach the net off a drop shot. That can be successful as well. But your bread and butter should really be a deep strong approach shot.

The second option that they'll have if you do hit a deep is to take it on the rise and this can be very tricky, meaning to take it right off to the bounce assuming that they don't back way behind the base line to account for the depth of your shot. Either way here you're really pressuring them a lot. And so I think you should really practice pretty near approach shots to deep. If you come in on a ball that land around the service line. You're giving them plenty of time to react to the ball after it bounces and that time is going to equal a comfort level for them and probably a balance that they are able to be in and try to hit a quality shot. And we don't want that. So try to keep your approach shot deep.

Secondly, I recommend that most of the time you come into the net after hitting a down the line approach shot. And this is so that you can most easily cover the court and cover the angles on the court. When you hit the ball down the line, you are in a better position automatically to cover the possible angles. If you hit cross court, you leave open a lot of court down the line for your opponent to hit a passing shot.

Now this is not an ironclad law and you don't always have to approach down the line. Sometimes down the middle can be successful. Sometimes even cross court can be successful. But in general, I would go down the list in that order of success. Possible success. Down the line down the middle cross court. Cross court--unless you hit a really

good shot--is going to really open up a lot of court for your opponent to pass you.

This is kind of difficult to describe with words via audio. I'm actually getting ready to put up a video at [essentialtennis.com/video](http://essentialtennis.com/video) that really demonstrates this. When you really see the court it's easy to kind of understand this. But I'm just kind of leave it that for now and just make you aware and make sure that you're aware Dropshot and the rest of my listeners that down the line is usually the way to go in singles when you're approaching the net.

So when it comes to quality of shot those are the two important criteria: deep and down the line. Now, once you've hit your deep down the line approach shot and you're pressuring your opponent with this shot, make sure that you position yourself on the side of the court that you hit the ball. And so if you hit a forehand approach shot on the do side, it was a short forehand you were over on the right side of the court if you're right handed. And you direct that deep down the line right in front of you to the right. From your prospective. You want to position yourself a little bit to the right of the central line, and this because it's going to be much easier for your opponent as around the run to get to your approach. It's going to be much easier for them to hit the ball straight than it is to catch the ball early and hit a big angle.

Now you describe your opponent here being able to hit these big sharp angles. And we're going to talk just a little bit later about what to do about that. But you should be usually covering down the line first and positioning yourself in front of wherever you hit your approach shot.

So if your approach to the left, you should be a little bit on the left side of the court. If you approach to the right, you should be a little bit to the right side of the court. This is called ' shading. ' And basically the rule of thumb is that you should be following the ball. What ever direction you hit your approach shot to, that's should direction you should be moving as you position yourself.

Alright, so that's my #1 piece of advise for you Dropshot, is to come forward on a quality shot and position yourself correctly. If you do those two things then the amount of times that you get past should drop quite a bit. I'd be willing to bet that a lot of these passing shots that are being hit on you are the result of not challenging your opponent very much, and not putting yourself on the right spot.

Now I have three other pieces of advise here for you. First of all, make sure that when they do hit a good passing shot, you're stepping across your body for the most amount of reach. Like a launch that you suggested earlier in your question.

So if you're right handed and you are stretching out to your right to try to get a ball that has been hit well and you're going to have a hard time reaching it, you should be stepping with your left foot. This is very important. If it's a backhand and you're moving to your left, you should be stepping across with your right foot. This is going to give you the most amount of reach as you step across your body and into a lunge type position like

you were talking about.

So make sure that you were doing that and you're not stepping with your out side foot. Your right foot for a forehand and your left foot for a backhand. That's going to limit your amount of reach quite a bit.

Secondly, pay close attention to the tendencies of your opponents and anticipate. Just about everybody you play is going to have a preference. When you hit to their forehand side they are going to usually like a certain type of passing, whether be down the line or cross courts or hard and flat or top spin or maybe they like to lob. When you hit to their forehand or backhand, they will have tendencies as far as what they like to try it first. They are going to have probably a favorite shot or maybe two favorite shots that they like to try to hit when you do come forward to the net. It's your job to pay attention to these.

And Dropshot you should not get beaten by the same shot again and again and again. If you approach on a quality approach shot and you position yourself correctly and you get beat cross court with a sharp high quality angle, you need to put that in your mental log book. If you do it again: approach to the same spot again with the quality of approach and you position yourself correctly and they pass you again with the same shot, OK. At this point after they've done it a hand full of times successfully. At that point you need to start altering your strategy and either approaching to a different place or approach to the same place and anticipating where they are going to go. And you need to change your position on the court accordingly. Do not continue to do the same thing and get beat by the same shot again and again.

And this obviously sounds really fundamental and it sounds very obvious. I guess you'll have to point this out. But this is where matches are win and lost and the patterns of good shots being hit, and one player or the other not making any adjustments. So make sure that you're paying close attention to your opponent. You're watching their tendencies. And then start to anticipate them and make adjustments accordingly.

Now last piece of advise here for you Dropshot. Being in better shape and being stronger can always help. So I'm not going to tell you, 'No don't work out. Don't get in better shape. Don't get your legs stronger.' No, I'm not going to tell you that obviously. I mean all those things can definitely help you. But I just want to point out the several tactical advantages you can have and also the placements of your shots in your technique. I gave you some shots to work on: hitting deep and down the line of a short ball. Doing exercises and getting your body strong can definitely help, but compared to everything else that I talked to you about it's probably going to be the least important part of covering the passing shot correctly. And covering it effectively.

So Dropshot, hopefully that answers your question. If you'd like me to go into any more depth to any of these topics individually, definitely let me know. And yes, I mean you're obviously not as fast as you were when you were 20 years old. That's just how the body works, but if you're smart out there and you know what to look for and you know where to place your approach and where to place yourself. You should definitely be more

successful. So good luck with this. Please let me know if you have any more questions, and I'd be happy to help out.

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Alright, next step we've got a question from Bruce. Bruce wrote to me and said, 'I watched the YouTube video today that demonstrated these footstep. My question concerns the timing of this footstep. Should I make the jump when my opponent contacts the ball? When he-- usually he--begins a backs swing or some other time? Cheers. Bruce.'

Bruce good question. And this footstep is a very, very important topic and something that most amateur players don't do at all. And very often the ones that do, do it, don't do a great a job of it and do it at the wrong time and it's really all about the timing. If you're not split stepping already. I'm speaking to everybody here. If you're not already split stepping, you need to begin that as soon as possible. You need to start putting that into your game, because it's going to help you being balance. It's going to help be more agile. It's going to help anticipate more shots, because it just gets your body moving and gets it in a good balance athletic position and gets your body prepared to actually move. And its so important.

And if you're already doing it. Hopefully my explanation today of how the time is exactly helps you do a decent more efficiently. And so that's an excellent question Bruce. And the timing is incredibly crucial to actually having this be a benefit to your game.

Now the pros split step and land just after they make contact by their opponent. Now they begin the process of split stepping just before contact. You'll see them kind of get going on their tip toes, maybe get a couple of steps, and then they actually make the actual split step which is a splitting apart of the feet, and the feet usually leave the ground for a short period of time, and then they land in a wide athletic stance with their knees bent and facing forwards. That's this footstep.

And usually they begin this process of doing that right before their opponent makes contact, meaning when the ball actually touches the racket. And then the professionals typically land on the balls of their feet just after contact has been made.

I used to think that this was timed exactly with contacts and the balls of their feet were landing just this contact was made, but I learned otherwise based on good video that Will a Fuzzy Yellow Balls created. And he showed several examples of professionals and slow motion timing their split step. And the pros will land just a little bit. When I say a little bit I'm talking a split second after contact.

Now when an amateur playing tries this footstep and screws it up, it's usually, because they're too late. And it's not that they're after contact. They'll actually make this split step after the swing is done and the ball is already off the racket, and that's when they'll actually make the entire split step. And that's much too late. And so typically I teach and I instruct my students to time their split step with contact. And so I ask them to land on the

balls of their feet as contact is being made.

And in reality it's usually a later than this for most players. Most players struggle definitely at first if not just in general and timing this correctly. And I encourage you guys just to start working on this as soon as possible, because it takes most players--especially if you're picking tennis a little bit later in life. It takes most players quite a bit of time to be comfortable with this, and to actually time it correctly and make it a habit.

Ultimately that's our goal is to do this automatically without even thinking about it. You don't want to have to think about how the time or split step during a match, because that's just going to completely get in the way if you actually playing tennis. So that's very important.

So I really encourage you guys to start practicing this on the practice court as soon as possible. And the timing of this is so important. So again usually amateur players are late when they do mess this up. It's very rare that in my experience that an amateur player does the split step and it's way too early. And they're just kind of sitting there on the balls of their feet waiting for contact to occur. Usually players try to do too much with their feet, and this often happens in the serving volley where a player will hit the serve and start rushing forwards and trying to get too close before they make their split step. The ball gets hit then they split step after the ball is hit and by the time their feet are touching the ground on the balls of their feet. The ball is already there. And that defeats the whole purpose of making this split step.

So this is why I instruct players to make their split step a little earlier than the pros actually do it, because I want to make sure that they do it on time. And my reasoning for this is that if you do it early--and let's say for example that my student does exactly as I instruct them and they do it a little bit earlier than the pros do. And maybe they hit their split step even a little bit before contact. Well, you may not be positioned optimally. You wasted a little bit of time that you could have used to move your feet and maybe get your body to a little bit better spot on the court. But at least your body is in balance and you're ready to move. In a split step after you finish with it. You're in a perfect ready position. And you're ready to move in any direction on the court.

This is as opposed to being late and your position maybe better on the court, because you use more of your time to move your feet towards some place on the court. either it would be recovering back to the center of the base line, or moving forward towards the net after a return or a serve in doubles. Maybe your body's in a little bit better place on the court. But once the ball gets to you, you going to be much more rushed and you're going to be off balance and not ready to move for the ball--or maybe away from the ball if it's coming right at you--because you used up so much of your time to move your feet and you didn't get your self balanced.

The perfect example of this is the serving volley. After you serve and volley you want to get close to the net. The closer the better. Because it's going to make your volleys or have foul is easier in general.

However, if you don't split step until after--well after--your opponent hits their shot. Again, by that time your feet touch on the ground the balls already there and you have very little time to react to the ball once you actually balance your body and you're ready to hit the ball. I would rather that you be a couple steps farther away from the net by the time you make your first split step and be balance and ready for the ball and calm and relax and waiting for the oncoming ball so that you can start moving again, whether it be to the right or the left or forwards or backward or whatever. I'd much rather that you're little farther away and be in balance and ready for the ball then closer to the net and rushed. And not ready for the shot. And so that's my reasoning there. I've much rather you be a little bit earlier than a little bit late.

So Bruce hopefully that answers your questions fully and again I recommend that you make your split step so that your feet actually land on the court as your opponent is making contact. By the way, you might notice first I haven't said anything about your opponent's back swing or when the ball bounces on your opponent side or even what type of shot their hitting. It doesn't make any difference. You want to time this with when they make contact. And so it's going to be a little different every time.

You want to watch the ball travel to their side of the court and then identify what type of shot they're hitting, what position they're in, so that you can see when they're going to make contact and you want to begin your split step right before they start to actually swing forward towards the ball.

And I really shouldn't even say that, because it really depends what type of shot they're hitting. If they're hitting a volley and there's not much of a swing there, and so you have to time this on the fly with how your opponent and the ball are intersecting, and where they are in the court, and when the balls actually getting to the racket. So this is tricky. It's not an easy thing. It's not simple. Just like a lot of things in tennis, but it's going to take you sometime.

So Bruce thanks for your great question and hopefully that answers it. Let me know if you have anything farther. Good luck in implementing the split step into your game. It's such an important part of playing good tennis.

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Alright, that does it for the Essential Tennis Podcast episode #101. Thank you very much for joining me today. And in today's shout out I would like to thank Brian and Dana and Renata in Fremont, Nebraska. And they've been instrumental and helping me get set up the upcoming Essential Tennis clinic in Nebraska. So I want to thank them for their efforts in helping find courts to play on and local hotels, and all kinds of stuff like that. And the three of them have been big supporters of the website. So I want to give a shout out to you guys and say thank you for everything that you've done for the podcast and for the website. And I look forward to working with all three of you guys on the tennis court in March coming up pretty quickly.



And again send me an e-mail if you're interested in attending that clinic. I would love to have you and I'd love to help you improve your game. Just like I have many other people at the first two Essential Tennis Clinics.

Alright, that does it for this week. Have fun watching the Australian open everybody. I've got it playing just to the right of me right now as in recording, and lots of great tennis already. Make sure that you catch a lot of that action. Its so much fun to watch the pros play.

Alright, take care everybody and good luck with your tennis.

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