

Essential Tennis Podcast #103

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 : Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast, your place for free, expert, tennis instruction that can truly help you to improve your game. Today's episode of the Essential Tennis podcast is brought to you by ProTranscript.com. ProTranscript.com transcribes every podcast show that we do, if you guys go to essentialtennis.com-- click on Podcasts and there is a little drop down menu that says 'transcripts'.

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I hope you guys enjoyed the Australian Open final. I had a great time watching it with Will from Fuzzy Yellow Balls and we did a live video webcast and did commentary and answered questions during the match, had a really good time doing that with him. And congratulations to Roger Federer of course, for winning yet another grand slam title-- congrats to him. And I don't know about you guys, but I was really moved by Andy Murray's response and his emotions during the trophy presentation. I really hope he can win a grand slam some time soon, both for himself and for the UK.

I think it's just a matter of time, he's a great player but needs to learn how to play a little bit more aggressively. But hopefully you all enjoyed watching the match as well and I can't wait for the next grand slam-- the French Open.

OK, let's get to the questions, sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music]
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Alright, let's get started on today's show. And our first question comes to us from Francisco in New Valda, Texas, which is a little bit west of San Antonio. He wrote to me and said 'hey Ian, I have a few questions' and we're going to take his questions one at a time here-- he's got 3 great questions that I'm going to get to today. His first one has to do with how to maintain a high level of focus or play during practice. He said, 'I was recently hitting with a friend of mine and was hitting really good for about the first hour, then we took a break and I couldn't hit as well. I was making more mistakes than before-- I don't know what happened.'

Well Francisco, this is going to be a short answer-- I've talked about this in the past on the podcast about how to practice effectively-- in fact, I've done a whole episode on how to put together a practice

session, which was I think specifically for singles, but go check that out in the archives-- I'm sorry but I don't know off the top of my head which episode it was. But if you just do a page search for practice, you should be able to find it pretty quickly.

Now, I basically have two tips for you-- I have two pieces of advice for you to be able to maintain a higher level of quality and a higher level of concentration in your practice play.

First of all, you need to have a plan. And this is probably the number one mistake that amateur players have when it comes to their practice sessions and this is the number one reason why amateur players, or club level players don't have very productive, or very high en-focused practice sessions as they don't have any kind of plan. They walk out onto the court with their tennis bags, their rackets, their water and they go out there and they just hit.

Now, that's certainly better than nothing and if you're happy just doing that, and you're getting what you want out of tennis by going out there and just hitting balls back and forth without any real focus to what you're doing, then that's perfectly fine-- I'm not going to yell at you for not being super organized about it. It's perfectly fine if you want to go out and just hit the ball and you're happy with that. But if you want to improve faster, and if you want to hit better, more consistently and not have these let downs like what Francisco is describing, let me encourage you to walk out onto the practice court with your practice partner and a written plan. Write it and sit down, think about what you need to work on and write it down ahead of time.

And I've got 4 things that I think you should do when it comes to having a plan in your practice sessions. First of all, make sure that you have specific drills and this does not have to be complicated-- it doesn't have to be fancy. If I personally was going out to practice for my tennis game, right now, if I was going out with a partner who was my level, what I would probably follow would be something like this-- I'd go out and we would start out with short courts, rallying from the service line for a couple minutes. We would then rally down the middle of the baseline for probably 15-20 minutes. We would then rally cross-court from the baseline with a specific target in mind, and that would be to the correct half of the courts and past the service line and we would probably do that on each half of the court for 10-15 minutes each.

I would then want to do volleys, and we would do that by having myself at the net, him at the baseline and we could either just go down the middle of the court or also direct the ball to each half of the court as well. I would do overheads, mixed in with volleys and then we would do serves and returns. And that's basically just a little bit of everything and that would probably take myself and somebody the same level as me-- if we did this specifically to work on our games, it would probably take us an hour or an hour and half or so. And that after that, we would probably compete.

So have specific drills like that. And if there is a part of your game that you really need to work on that is just obviously much weaker-- for myself, that would be my backhand ground-stroke-- spend more time on that or come up with different drills just to work on that.

Now, that's number one-- have specific drills. Number two, is have specific goals or achievements for each drill. So let's say for example I would want to work a little more on my cross court backhand from the baseline-- when I say specific goals and achievements, I would put a cone out there or if we didn't have a target, I would pick a specific place on the court and that would be between the service and base line. And I'm left handed, so my cross court backhand is across over on the deuce half of the court.

So I would aim for that box in the back part of the court, and me and my partner would rally until I hit a total of 50 backhands that land in that area of the court. Or maybe me and my partner would keep track of our shots together and we would go until combined, we've hit 100 good cross court shots on the baseline, on the deuce half of the court past the service line.

So that would be an example of a specific goal of achievement or if you have targets, if you have some little plastic cones to use, maybe we could go until each of us hits our target three times or as a team, until we knock the targets 5 times-- something like that. This is going to help you keep your focus and concentrate on what you're doing as opposed to just hitting the ball and not really having a target or a purpose.

So make sure you have a specific goal, a specific achievement and make targets a big part of that-- doesn't have to be a physical target, it can be a certain area on the court as well.

Thirdly, make sure that you put in competitive games and put something on the line during your practice session. And this could be ground stroke games from the baseline, it could be games working on specific parts of your game, maybe an approaching game or working on your volleys and on your partner's passing shots-- or it could just be a set play as well.

But come up with specific ways to compete and then again, put something on the line, make it worth something-- and this could be sprints afterwards, some kind of workout, pushups, or the loser has to do 20 pushups etc. Make it something that neither of you guys want to do afterwards so that it puts a little bit of pressure on both of you. And this is really important because it's going to train you to be a better competitor. It's going to train you to be more focused and to compete at a higher level. So that's number 3, competitive games with something on the line.

Fourthly, stay on task. Have the concentration and have the focus to stick with your plan-- first of all have a plan, and then stick with it. That's number four. So that all falls under the category have a plan when you go out there to practice and underneath that heading-- 4 things, have specific drills, have specific goals or achievements in mind for each drill, do competitive games with something on the line and stay on task. If you do those four things Francisco, I guarantee you, you will have more productive practice sessions and you will not have these let downs-- I mean don't get me wrong, you are still going to have days where your game varies and you are going to have good sections and bad sections of your practice. You're not always going to play 100% every single time you walk out onto the court. That's just a given-- but you are going to consistently play better when you actually have the focus to have a game

plan like this.

Now, lastly, I said there was two things I was going to tell you to improve this-- number one was have a plan. Number two, practice with a plan and stay on task. Once you learn how to have a plan and go out there and make the most of your time on the practice court, you need to practice doing it. And you need to continue to do it until it becomes a habit and at that point your game will start to improve faster.

Those of you listening to the podcast right now are listening because you want to improve your games. I would love to see a survey of everybody listening right now and see how many people are doing all four of the outlined items that I talked about, about having a plan in their practice session. If I had to bet, I would bet that out of the club players, people who aren't on a tennis team who have the benefit of having a coach set this type of practice up for them, I would bet that less than 10% of you listening do anything like this now. And so that leaves most of you with a way that you can really improve your tennis game. So have the concentration to go out and do this with your practice partner.

Francisco, thanks for the great question. [music] [music] [music] [music]

Alright, I'm now going to take a couple seconds here and I want to communicate my appreciation to a couple of very important people this past week-- I had three new people donate to essentialtennis, to the podcast, and I just want to thank those people briefly before I get to my next question. First of all, Richard in Mass sent a \$15 donation-- thank you. John M. In Texas who was with me in Palm Springs for the last essential tennis clinic, he started a \$5 a month subscription donation and John thanks very much for your support, I appreciate that very much. And lastly, Ben in Utah, who was also at the clinic in Palm Springs, California, Ben sent a little note with his donation and said that he's going to send a \$5 donation for every win that he has in the tournaments that he's playing in. So he sent me a \$10 donation for the 2 wins that he had this past December in the last tournament that he played.

I think that's a creative way and a cool way to give back to essential tennis and donate for every win-- Ben I think that's awesome and thank you for your support as well.

All three of you guys, Richard, John and Ben, thank you guys so much for your support and if the essential tennis podcast has improved your tennis game and helped you out, please help me out by donating-- it doesn't have to be a lot, but every little bit helps with the expenses that I have here as I run the website. Just go to essentialtennis.com and click on the big button on the bottom that says donate.

[music] [music] [music] OK, moving on to the 2nd and 3rd questions from Francisco in Texas. He's got some great questions about tennis strategy. And I enjoy talking about strategy a lot because it's another big way that you guys can improve your tennis games and it's not like stroke technique where it really takes a lot of repetition and hard work and it takes a lot of patience. Strategy is something that you can improve very quickly, it just takes awareness and it does take practice as well to be able to implement it correctly over and over again.

But I think it's a really great way for you guys to be more aware of ways you can change the way you are playing in order to be more successful. Now his second question is, how do you know when to change the direction or hit greater angles, or go for a more aggressive shot. My sister had played in a USTA tournament and even though she was consistent and kept getting everything in, she still lost. I feel like if she had been a bit more aggressive or changed the direction of the ball, on short balls, she might have won more points in the match that she lost 6-1, 6-7, 8-10.

Francisco, this question really makes me think about the match between Andy Murray and Roger Federer just last night here in the US. And in that match, we saw Andy Murray who is very steady, he's patient, he likes to try a wide variety of shots and he kind of likes to play cat and mouse type games a lot of the times. But his game style is very steady and consistent. It's not that he never hits the ball hard, he certainly has weapons but his default game style is to just be slow and steady from a professional perspective. He obviously hits the ball much harder than most of us do-- pretty much all of us, but from a professional player's standpoint, he is slow and steady.

Now he should've been more aggressive last night against Roger and it is kind of a very similar situation from what you're describing with your sister. Federer came out very aggressive, pressuring Murray and Murray didn't really try to go right back at him until the 3rd set. And even then when he did a good job of that and he got up a break, he went right back to just being steady again and Federer put the pressure right back on him and got the break back.

So this is very similar type of scenario to what you are describing. Consistency will only get you so far in tennis and there is obviously different degrees of consistency and there is consistency within different levels of strokes-- in other words, you can be a very consistent player at a 3.0 level, hitting 3.0 level shots but just because you are consistent there doesn't mean you are going to beat a 4.5 player who is just an average 4.5 player. It doesn't work that way-- consistency is different from level to level. However within her own level, she is going to have to develop some weapons or angles or some different strategies at some point, if she wants to move up to a completely new level and challenge players that are above her right now.

So at some point, she must develop weapons. And when should you change what you're doing really is your question. When should you start going for more angles, when should you start to be more aggressive and the answer to that is when it becomes clear that your opponent can out hit you consistently. And what you don't do is, let's say your sister's game is to be steady and consistent, and I think that's great by the way. I think that should be the first thing that you learn as a tennis player, is just how to be steady and keep the ball in play.

But, you don't want to go away from that strategy too early. If it's, let's say, 2-2 in the opening set of your match and your opponent hits a huge forehand winner that you are never even close to touching, and maybe he's hit that twice now-- you guys have played 4 games, you are in your 5th game right now and he's hit this winner twice in the match. That's not the time to go ahead and change your game plan. Your staying even with him, this is a competitive match. Maybe at some point later in the set, you might

have to pick it up a little bit to finally get that edge and win the set but this is not the time to jump ship and change your strategy or change your sister's strategy.

When you would want to change is when it is clear they are beating you on a consistent basis. So if they win the first 3 games in a row, and you really haven't made an unforced error yet, you are being very steady and consistent but you are losing 0-3. At that point, you've got to say to yourself, this is clearly not working-- I'm not missing, but my opponent is just that much better than me right now. They are hitting shots that are that much stronger and you've got to do something better. You have to start pressuring them more-- just putting the ball in play isn't good enough.

So, it depends on the situation, who you are playing against and exactly how well they are playing to determine exactly when you want to change up that game play. But starting off steady and consistent is not bad, it's a great way start off a match. Now let's go to his third question. And it's also a strategic question-- 'do you change how hard you hit or strategy according to the player? For example, if it is a pusher or counter puncher, do you move them around more and go for more directional change and against a hard hitting player, do you play it consistent and get it in as many times as you can?

This one is also from my sister-- she played consistent against a pusher and lost and also lost against an aggressive base-liner. How would she have played these matches differently? Would she go for more on her shots?

That's a really good question Francisco, and what you're asking would be a great product to kind of layout every different type of game, or ever different style of tennis play and you name a couple here-- pusher, counter puncher, aggressive baseline player, other types of players who might play are maybe somebody is just really aggressive on each shot or maybe a net rusher-- somebody who comes to the net a lot.

There is all kinds of different descriptors that we can put on different types of players and in general, there is usually a strategy that is best to play against them. It's not always the case and within each of these different types of players, there is also many different subsets. Everybody is a little different and this is a part of what makes tennis fun and interesting and also very frustrating at times. Everybody that you play is going to have different strengths and weaknesses so you have to learn how to adjust and so in short, my answer to your first question-- Francisco asked, ' do you change how hard you hit or your strategy according to the player?' And my answer to that is yes, yes, yes!

You need to know how to change your game up, and change your strategy based on your opponents. That is what strategy and tactics is, is being able to change up your game based on your opponents. You have to be able to do that. You should have an 'A' game, where this is what suits your strengths best, and this is your style of play. And for me, personally, I never really did a good job in my competitive years of doing that. I kind of would just go out and just try to hit good shots. And I never really had a focused style of play or strategy out of the gate where I knew this is what I'm going to do. I knew what my strengths and weaknesses were but I never really had a style mapped out that I was going to try to

stick with.

So you should have an A game, and that is what you should start your match off with and see how things progress. If you are winning, then don't change anything, stick with it and stick with what you are comfortable with and that is going to work out fine. But if you're losing, and if you're losing consistently it becomes apparent that this is not working out, you have to be able to adjust based on the strengths and weaknesses of your opponents.

Real quickly, I'm going to go over 4 different types of players and real briefly give you an example of what you would have to try to do against those players. Number one, the pusher & counter puncher-- you have to be able to pressure and attack but be steady and consistent at the same time. Just being steady and consistent against a pusher is usually not going to be good enough because that is their game play. That is their style of play and nothing can be more boring than watching two pushers play each other because neither of them are good at attacking and it just becomes a push fest back and forth.

So if you want to beat a pusher, you have to be able to pressure them somehow and Francisco pointed out hitting the ball harder, hitting more angles etc You have to be able to do that against a pusher and do it steadily because if you miss every time you try to hit the ball a little harder or you miss every time you try to open up the court by hitting angles, then obviously the pusher is going to win anyway. And on the other hand, if you just push back, they are probably going to win as well because now you are playing their style of game. And this is why the pushers are so frustrating and so tough to play for most people. By the way, in the archives you'll see a show I've done just on playing pushers. So that is style number one, the pusher.

Style number two, super aggressive dummy is what I wrote down and you are going to play people who just love to hit the ball hard and they are very aggressive on every shot-- this is kind of a style that I'm guilty of having played in the past. Somebody who goes out and tries to hit everything hard. And this is somebody you want to be steady and patient with. Don't try to out hit them when they come out in the first game and hit every shot really hard, don't be intimidated by that if they only make 75% of them. Certainly if they only make half of their shots and the half that they do make are incredible and hard and really tough, but then they miss the other half because they were trying to be so aggressive.

You want to be steady and patient against this type of player. Don't try to out hit them, allow them to make mistakes-- that's number two.

Style number three is the net rusher. And when you play somebody who makes it apparent that they are going to come up to the net a lot, you have to be prepared in advance to be able to hit aggressive and accurate passing shots. And that is just how it is-- if they are coming up to the net every point, you have to have the ability of passing them. You can't give them a lot of volleys because that is what they are hoping for and they want to be able to work the point from the net. Being able to hit good lobs would also be valuable. Also if you hit deep ground strokes to begin each point, you are going to keep them off

the net a little bit more often.

Lastly, the all court steady and aggressive player and this is somebody who is just a level or half a level above you. They are able to hit good shots from anywhere on the court, they are able to hit aggressive shots from anywhere on the court and it just seems like this person just has it all. They are just really good. And when you play this type of player, you have no choice-- you have to elevate your game and try to out hit them over and over again. You cannot just be steady and hope for them to make mistakes because they are better than you are at the point in time. And you have to elevate your game and at least try it. And that means that you might make some more errors than you usually do but if you don't try something, they're just going to take over every point and beat you anyway. This is kind of what happened with Murray the other night-- he played Roger who was attacking as often as he could, he was attacking very steadily, so for Murray to just be consistent wasn't good enough. And he had to elevate the level of his game and go for more than what he would normally be comfortable with.

So Francisco, that's a brief overview of several different types of players and how you would change up your strategy and your game play according to the player. And this is real important for you and your sister and everybody else listening, hopefully your sister listens to the podcast as well and she needs to go out and start practicing these different styles of play for herself so that when she plays different opponents, she is able to actually change her game up and do the right thing. She should not be playing the exact same game play for every opponent because different opponents are going to react differently and they are going to have different strengths that are either going to be good or bad depending on the situation.

Francisco, thank you very much for your great questions today and hopefully my answers have been helpful. Please feel free to let me know if you have any further questions on any of this and everybody else listening, I've got a list of questions from people to answer on the podcast-- if you'd like your question to be featured on the show, send me an email at ian@essentialtennis.com [music] [music] [music]

Alright, that does it for the essential tennis podcast, episode #103. Thank you very much for joining me today on the show, I appreciate it. For my shout-outs for today, I want to give a shout out to a couple of essential tennis listeners and members who joined myself and Will to watch the Australian Open final live which shows some dedication here in the US since the match started at 3:30am here on the east coast.

But the people who said hi in the chat room during the show were Steve, FightFan, and Charles to name three. Those three I remember just off the top of my head. If there was more of you in there, I apologize for not remembering. I will probably remember a couple of people later and kick myself. Thank you to you three for joining us and throughout that show, over 3,000 people tuned in to watch our commentary so we are really happy with that and we definitely intent on doing it for the other Grand Slams this year at least. And I'll be looking forward to interacting with you guys during the next Grand Slam Final event.

Alright, that does it for us this week. Thank you very much everybody for tuning in and we'll catch you again next week. Have a great week and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]