

Essential Tennis Podcast #105

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 : Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast, your place for free, expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

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Thank you very much for joining me today, and before we get to today's questions that I'm going to be answering from listeners, I'd like to remind you guys about Essential Tennis Live. Essential Tennis Live is a live call-in show that myself and Ron Miller, from [inaudible] do together every week and that show airs live on Thursday nights at 8:30pm EST.

Ron and I have a great time doing that show-- we talk about different topics having to do with tennis every week. We take calls from listeners and there is a live chat room. Check us out this week and you can do that by going to blogtalkradio.com/essentialtennis. Or go to essentialtennis.com slash live and hopefully Ron and myself will see you this week. Alright, let's go ahead and get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, let's kick off today's show by talking about some singles strategy which I always enjoy talking about. And this question comes to us from James. James wrote to me and said 'Hi Ian, I thought of something that hopefully might make a good topic for the future-- I suppose it would fall under the title of strategy, putting together a plan A and a plan B. This is my dilemma. Having listened to your Podcasts, I have put together my own plan A in singles which is always as follows: serve and volley as much as I can. Generally try and hit to opponents backhands as much as I can. Wait until I hit a very good shot and then attack the net. Try and attack the net as soon as possible and especially against better opponents.

I believe that this is a similar strategy to your own, and I feel puts my strengths, my volleys, against most of my opponents weaknesses-- their backhands. I love this strategy, but what I struggle with, is I don't really have a plan B. Plan A usually works well, although one of my opponents has incredibly good forehand passing shots, and a reasonable backhand so I have to make sure that I only attack the net on a very good approach shot deep to his backhand side. These opportunities are very limited so he usually ends up beating me around 6-2 in set play.

Is this a case where a good plan B could make a difference? And if so, what would be a good strategy? From experience, I know that reverting to baseline to baseline rallies does not work for me as it is not one of my strengths. Grateful for any help that you can offer-- James'

Really good question. I want to start off my answer by saying congratulations on being so aware and

intentional about forming your plan A to begin with. You're very aware of your own strengths, you know exactly what you are good at. You know what you're not the best at and it sounds like you've really done a good job forming game plan around what you are most comfortable with and what you're best at. And everybody listening should really be taking notes on this, and paying attention to how well you formed your plan A. And congratulations on that because a lot of people don't even have a good plan A. So don't feel badly that you're struggling trying to find a plan B because you've done a great job up until now. That doesn't mean that we can't continue to improve, but I just want to tell you, keep up the good work on continue to play such close attention.

Now, it sounds like this particular opponent that you're talking about even when you're playing your plan A strategy well, it sounds like they are a good half level above you. It sounds like this person is really pressuring you and you're being smart about it. You aren't just coming in off of which is what you have to do. Unfortunately as you play better and better players, this net rushing strategy is only going to work so well because they are going to have more and more of an offensive reply to whatever you are coming into the net on.

So you do have to be careful. It does sound like you are being reasonable about this. I mean on one hand, you do want to stick with your strengths against this player but on the other hand, you can't just run in off of any old shot or else he is going to pass you easily. So it sounds like you've tried different things but nothing is really working and I'm basically going to split this up into two sections-- I'm going to give you two suggestions of other plan B's that you can maybe try. And then I'm going to tell you what I think the real answer is.

So I will give you a couple of suggestions which you asked for, but the long term solution to this is going to be a little bit different from having a different plan B, which is what I think you think is the answer is going to be to your question.

So first of all, plan B suggestions from me, using what you have right now and going out and trying to beat this player, you've already tried to modify your plan A which I think is probably the smartest plan B, which is to continue to try to attack that backhand and only come into the net when you know you have a good opportunity and not just run in off of anything-- that's your current plan B. I think that's a pretty good plan personally. It hasn't worked so well so far, and we're going to get into what you are going to have to change to make it work better in the future in a little bit.

If you want to go out and play him today and try something a little bit different, I've got two other suggestions. First of all, you could stay back on the baseline and push. And nobody seems to respect the pusher but you could just stay back on the baseline and just be steady and consistent and wait for him to make the error.

I know this isn't very exciting, and I know it's not your strength-- I know staying back at the baseline is not what you are good at, but I'm not suggesting that you stay back there and play aggressively or offensively, what I'm suggesting is that you sit back there and just be steady and consistent-- literally

just aim for the middle of the court, over on his side of the court and just put it back into play. Try to get him impatient. Try to get him to make a couple of errors, you could still slip in sneaking up to the net and catch him off guard. And kind of confuse him and make him not sure about what kind of game plan you are trying to use exactly.

But this could be a different look that you could give him and I'm guessing this is something you haven't tried yet because his ground strokes are his strengths and they are not yours, so I'm guessing you probably haven't tried this. But you could give it a shot and see how it works, at least for 3 or 4 games. And just see what happens. If he ends up dictating every point and he just crushes you, then we'll know it's not working. But at least it is something else that you could try.

My second suggestion for plan B would be to stay back and hit short on purpose and bring him up to the net. You didn't say anything about his volleys at all, and I'm wondering if he has the ability to hit volleys or overheads. You might want to think about staying back, hitting a drop shot or not necessarily a drop shot, but just something low and short that's going to force him to come forwards and see if he likes to volley or not. See if he likes overheads.

A lot of times baseliners have terrible overheads, so you could hit him a short ball, kind of get him to sneak forwards, get him close to the net, and then just hit the ball up in the air and see if he knows how to hit overheads. You didn't say anything about his net skills, so I'd like to see you test that out and see if he is competent up at the net-- you might want to think about doing that.

Now, let's go back to what I think is the real answer, the real long term solution to this problem, which is playing against this opponent. And I want to highlight something that you said in your question, which was, 'I have to make sure that I only attack the net on very good approaches deep to his backhand. These opportunities are very limited, so he usually ends up beating me around 6-2.'

This is really the big problem here, is that you only have limited opportunities to approach the net. Now at some point, you are going to have to increase the level of your ground strokes. You are not going to be able to move up a half a level from where you are now-- let's say you are 3.5 right now. You're not going to be able to every beat-- well I'm not going to say ever, that would be dumb. But you're never going to consistently beat 4.0 players until you do raise the level of your ground strokes because you pointed out the problem here, you love the net, you love to volley, but you're not going to be very successful unless you put your opponents at least a little bit off balance first, before you come forwards. Otherwise, like this person you are talking about are going to pass you pretty easily. There is just no way around this.

So as you play better and better opponents, you must have a way of making them uncomfortable before you come into the net. It's not that you're going to have to give up your net play, and your plan A or your A strategy of getting to the net and using your volleys. It's not that you're going to have to give that up, you just can't get away with coming to the net after hitting an average shot.

So just being steady from the baseline, is not going to be enough against these players. And coming into the net off an average shot, isn't going to be enough either, so the long term solution to your problem here James, is that you are going to have to develop a weapon from the baseline. You are going to have to be able to pressure this player consistently if you want to beat him consistently. He's a half a level above you now, and so you're going to have to bring the level of your ground strokes up. Now, if you have any questions specifically about raising the level of your ground strokes, I'd be happy to help you. I'm not going to get into that now since I've answered your question. And I want to get to other questions today.

But that's my answer to your question, is that you're going to have to come up with better ground strokes and that means hitting with top spin, that means swinging aggressively over and over again-- not on every shot, but when you have your opportunities, and that means it's hacking at a backhand and doing it over and over again with an aggressive shot. Then you'll be able to come forwards and continue to be successful with your volley game. But until you do that, you're going to be falling back on plan B's that are basically going to be hoping that he screws up. And that's only going to get you so far.

So James, hopefully that answers your question. Thank you very much for the great question, and again, keep up the great work. You're really doing a good job. I'm happy that you are paying such close attention to the game, keep it up and feel free to write me again if you'd like some tips on how to make your ground strokes more aggressive in general. [music] [music] [music]

Next up, I just want to do a quick shout out to two very important people this past week. Two people donated to the Essential Tennis Podcast this last week, and I really appreciate that so much. First off, we've got Andrew K in California, who donated \$25 to Essential Tennis-- thank you Andrew. Also, John M in beautiful Alpina, Michigan, which is in the north eastern corner of Michigan, I've been there before and it's a pretty part of the country. Real close to the Macane bridge. Anyways, John M donated \$60 from Alpina, Michigan-- thank you John very much. So John and Andrew were my two donators from last week. I appreciate you guys very much and if the Essential Tennis Podcast has helped your tennis game, and you appreciate that, please send me a donation and help support the Podcast and the website.

Just go to essentialtennis.com and on the front page on the bottom right, there is a button that says donate. Thank you Andrew and John. [music] [music] [music] - Next up is a question from Bruce that also has to do with singles strategy. He wrote to me and said, 'I'm a 3.5 player, playing in a USTA league-- suppose I'm in a rally and neither side has a particular advantage, what are some strategies for gaining an advantage on my opponent and hopefully winning the point? I'm a lefty and I'd like to use this to my advantage if possible.'

You bet Bruce. I happen to be left handed as well and have definitely won many matches by using my left handedness to my advantage and it's something that is definitely fun to do as a lefty. There is not a lot of left handed tennis players out there-- I mean there certainly out there, but compared to rightys, it's just something you are usually not used to when you play a lefty. Not many people practice with

lefties. So it's something that's often times difficult-- so that's definitely an advantage for you.

Now, I have three different things here in my outline that I think are going to be the biggest things for you to focus on when it comes to gaining the advantage in a singles point. And I'm going to go through them one by one, only one of them really has to do with being a lefty specifically, so the first two apply to all of you listening. The third one is going to be especially for you lefties out there to give you some ideas of what you can do as a left handed player to really gain an advantage throughout a match.

Now, my first of three things that I want you to concentrate on is the use of the directionals. And if you're not familiar with the directionals, I'm going to talk about that for a couple minutes right now. They were made popular by Paul Wardlaw and are typically referred to as the Wardlaw directionals. And basically it's a set of rules or guidelines for playing a point that states when you are in a baseline rally, back and forth with an opponent, and you get an outside shot, you should go cross court. When you receive an inside shot, you have the opportunity to more safely go down the line.

Now let me explain inside and outside shot. An outside ball is one that is traveling away from you and is towards the outside of the court. So as an example, if you are right-handed player, since I know most of my listeners are righty. I'm sure you are used to switching things over as I am, over to a right-handed example. But if you guys are a right handed player, and your opponent has struck one of their forehands cross court over to your forehand, and it's traveling at an angle away from you, away from the center of the court and out towards your forward side, that's an outside shot-- it's traveling away from you and it's going farther and farther away from you. It's an outside ball, it's going to the outside of the court. An inside ball is a ball that is traveling towards you and it's coming in towards you. An example of that would be if your opponent strikes a backhand, if they are right handed and they hit a backhand on the ad half of the court, over on their side of the court, and the ball is coming towards you-- let's say you are standing right in the middle of the baseline, and they hit a shot from their backhand side that's coming towards your forehand.

So, it was basically a down the line shot but it was angling in towards your body.. That's an opportunity where you can start to hit down the line. Really the most common way that you'll see an inside forehand is if you're running around your backhand to hit an inside out forehand. And so, for you rightys out there, that means you are shifting to your left a little bit-- you are on the ad half of the court which is your backhand side, but hitting a forehand. That's often times an opportunity for you to go down the line.

Let's say your opponent just hit a backhand cross court over to your backhand side, but you run around it to hit a forehand instead and the ball is coming in towards your body , it's angling in towards your forehand, towards your right side of your body, that would be an inside forehand. At that point in time, you have the opportunity to more safely go down the line, or you can go back cross court and hit the ball inside out. Going down the line would be called inside-in off that particular shot.

Hopefully I haven't lost you guys. Hopefully I haven't confused you guys there-- I'm trying to explain the

difference between inside and outside shots and hopefully make it clear for you guys. If you don't understand that, I've got a video-- if you guys go to EssentialTennis.com/video, I've got a video where I talk about the directionals.

Anyway, you want to use the directionals Bruce. That's probably the number one thing to understand and you're usually going to get mostly outside shots which means you should be usually hitting mostly cross court. And cross court is the way to go for several reasons. The court is the longest when you hit cross court, from corner to corner, you've got more space to hit to. The net is lowest when you hit across the center of it-- it's 6" lower in the middle than it is out at the net posts. And also, when you strike an outside ball cross court, you are hitting it back where it came from which is usually a little bit easier to time as opposed to the ball coming across your body, traveling away from you and trying to time your string to push it down the line without it trailing farther off to the side and going wide. Not only that, but you've got the higher net and the shorter court when you go down the line off an outside ball.

So, those are the three main reasons why cross court is usually the smarter play. And often, times you guys will see professional players, in a cross court rally, kind of feeling themselves out and they'll hit 4, 6, 8 shots back and forth to each other cross court. And players who don't understand the directionals, often times will say 'why are they hitting back to each other? They keep hitting back to the same place.' And it's because neither player wants to take that risk of going down the line with an outside shot. It's not that the pros will never try it, when they have an easy enough shot and they can kind of warrant the risk of going down the line, with an outside shot, they'll go for it. But, for amateur players, I stress to them to stick with that pattern.

So, that's number one-- be aware of that and even if maybe it's your weakness and you're hitting towards your opponent's strength, be patient and keep it cross court most of the time. Now that brings me to point number 2-- be patient.

Once you understand the directionals and you start to see how they can work for you and once it starts making sense to you, why certain shots should go certain directions, it's really important especially at your level, to just be patient, stay in the point, keep the rally going and try to work your opponent and you said here that we're assuming that neither side has much of an advantage and this is really where you want to minimize your errors and minimize your mistakes and stay steady, stay relaxed. Don't panic, don't try anything fancy and just play the high percentage directions and the high percentage shots.

And that's how you are going to win the majority of your points at a 3.5 level. Most points end at a 3.5 level with an error-- with somebody just messing up for no good reason. And so, if you can know the directional, and know which direction is safest and smartest, and if you can be patient and steady, and not get all crazy and start going for incredible shots and trying to hit winners, that's really how you're going to be the most successful.

Now, eventually you're going to want to develop some weapons and I talked about that in my first

question today. But you really want to have a good solid core and foundation of being steady first and understanding basic tactics and basic strategy like the use of the directionals.

So those are my first two suggestions to you Bruce-- first of all, use directionals. Second, be patient, be steady. And now number three, this is going to be for you leftys out there. Bruce, you need to work that backhand-- your opponent's backhand. You need to hammer that backhand over and over again. And this is where the directionals are a beautiful thing for a left-handed player.

Let me describe to you how I play 95% of my singles points. My forehand, and hopefully your forehand is your strength like mine, so this benefits you the most, but my forehand is by far my stronger side from the baseline and usually the opponents that I play, they are right handed and their backhand is their weaker side. And sticking with the directionals, that works out great for a left handed player because when I take my forehand and I hit it cross court, it's going to my opponents weakness. It's going to their backhand, it's going to their weaker side.

So, most forehands that I receive, I hit cross court and my opponent knows that after the 2nd or 3rd game, they know that I'm hitting over 90% of my forehands cross court and I'm going to continue to pressure that backhand over and over again. Now, inevitably, they are going to start trying to hit that backhand down the line because they want to try to get it to my weaker side, to my backhand.

And this is where I have the opportunity to run around my backhand and continue to hit forehands and that's where often times, I'll get an inside forehand and I'll be able to continue to pressure that backhand shot, or I have the opportunity to go inside out and hit it away from my opponent where they were just on the ad side, hitting their weak backhand. If I'm able to run around my backhand and hit a forehand, I can either continue to pressure their backhand, or I can go inside out and get them on the run. Basically, I'm trying to dictate these points using my forehand as often as possible because the more forehands I hit, the easier it is for me to keep it to their backhand side.

And this is such a huge advantage and I love it. Against a player who is my equal of maybe a little less strong than I am, it's just so much fun to just dictate point after point using my forehand. And I've definitely played sets where I've hit backhands. I just hit as many forehands as possible and they all go towards my opponents backhand side. And again, I don't care if they know my strategy or not-- they are going to know right out of the gate that they are going to have to use their weakest shot and they are going to have to hit it all day long. Now, if they are stronger than me or even with me, it's very possible that they'll play this strategy right back at me and they are looking for forehands to hit to my backhand. And so it's kind of a battle of who can dictate these points first using their stronger side. And it becomes a really interesting tactical battle.

So that's for all of you lefties out there and some thoughts on how to dictate points, how to use your strength and pin it against your opponents weakness as often as possible and just do it over and over again.

Also with your serve-- last thing I'm going to mention here, the lefty tactics for singles players, Bruce your serve, your left handed serve, naturally goes from left to right. If you have any slice or any spin on your serve at all, it's traveling from your left to your right and from your opponents point of view, it's from their right to their left, which means that your serve will naturally trail towards their backhand side. And that's another great advantage that us lefties have, to be able to get the ball to our opponents weaker side as often as possible that can start off the points in an advantageous way for us for sure and just keep hammering that backhand.

So anyway, Bruce this kind of seems simple but it takes some practice, it takes concentration and it takes some repetition to really see these patterns and be able to play them over and over again. - Please write me back and let me know if you have any follow up on this but again, the three main points were-- use the directionals, outside shots should go cross court, be patient and be steady. Remember that most points are going to end with a mistake and find that backhand as a lefty and make them hit as many backhands as possible.

If you follow those three guidelines, I guarantee you are going to win more points. Well, Bruce thanks very much for your great question. Again write me back if you have any follow up, but good luck with your singles points and good luck in your league play this coming season. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, that does it for this weeks show-- Essential Tennis Podcast episode #105. Thank you very much for joining me today and if you have questions that you would like me to answer on the Podcast, feel free to send me an email at lan@essentialtennis.com or if you go to essentialtennis.com and click on Podcasts, on the Podcast page, there is a button that says 'ask a question' and that will take you to a little form to fill out and you can ask a question and submit it that way as well.

Well, I hope you guys all have a great week. I hope you get out and play some tennis and here where I'm living, that's not possible yet, at least not outside, but hopefully where you are, you get a chance to play this week and put to use some of the things that we talked about this week about singles strategy.

Thanks guys. Have a great week. Take care and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]