

Essential Tennis Podcast #107

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.

Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by ProTranscript.com.

Thank you very much for joining me today, and before we get to our two questions that I'm going to be answering from listeners, I want to tell you guys about a contest that's going to be running all during next week. I just want to give you guys a heads up on this-- I'm going to be giving away a free Flip Ultra HD digital video camera.

And for those of you who are on the Internet looking for tennis instruction, which if you're listening to this Podcast, I'm going to go ahead and assume you are. And you know that video is a huge part of what's going on now as far as learning more about tennis and technique etc.

And when you have the ability to record yourself and look at your strokes and look at what you're doing-- it's such a huge tool. So I want to give a lucky person out there the ability to do that with HD video and the flip cam is awesome for this-- I've been using this myself.

So I'm giving one away, and all you're going to have to do is listen to podcast #108 which is going to be out a week from today and during that show, I'm going to give you guys the details on exactly how you can enter into that contest to win the flip-cam and a lot of other stuff as well.

So make sure you tune in next week-- you're going to want to hear the podcast as soon as possible so that you can get entered right away into that contest.

Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music]

Alright, let's go ahead and get going and our first question today comes from Fred in Washington State and he wants to have a little discussion about open versus closed stance in your tennis game. He wrote to me and said 'you recently talked about open and closed stances but you didn't seem to mention how closed and over-closed stances are typically used when running around back-hands and or working around jam shots. As working around being jammed, what is the best way to handle being jammed up on a serve-- like being served at the left foot for a right hander-- is the correct move to step back hard with the right foot and hit a closed or over-closed forward return rather than some awkward and wimpy shot? At 3. 5 and perhaps higher, I find a lot of the more successful servers tend to use jam serves instead of going wide for aces because correctly working around jam returns, is generally a weakness for a lot of players. On wide servers, returners get a racket on a wide shot, can frequently get a return using the

power of the serve, plus unlike a wide serve, a jam serve has a lot of court space to miss and will still be a good serve.

He means that you are basically aiming for the middle of the box so you've got a good margin for error there.

Alright Fred, thank you for the great question, and yeah, the jam serve is definitely one that is underused-- Fred says he sees it being used quite often at a 3.5 level and that is really good tactically. That's a great play for the people you are seeing doing this.

Now, before we get going with exactly how to move your feet, to get around this shot, I want to do everybody a favor here and give the three main types of stances and give a quick definition of those so you guys know exactly what I'm referring to here. And there is basically three main types of stances that you can have at any point in time-- open, square, or closed. A square stance is sometimes referred to as a neutral stance as well. We'll start off with a square stance, or a neutral stance. A square stance is one where your body is lined up 90 degrees to the baseline and your feet are making a line that is perpendicular to the baseline.

So if you are right-handed, and you have a forehand coming your way, your left foot would be pointing straight to the right-- if you are looking at the net-- and that is forwards to the right would be the direction that both your right and left feet are pointing and if you drew a line between the toes on your right foot, and the toes on your left foot, they would make a perpendicular particular line across the baseline. So your 90 degrees turn with your stance to the baseline. That's really the main way to visualize it, is if you drew a line between your feet-- between the tip of your right foot and the tip of your left foot-- if you drew a line and continued it, it would bisect the baseline at 90 degrees.

OK, so that's a square stance or it's also called a neutral stance. Now a closed stance is one where your left foot is farther across your body than square. So you're not 90 degree anymore, rather than that line being 90 degrees to the baseline-- it's now closed, which means that if you are a right handed player getting ready to hit a forehand, your left foot would be more to the right. So that would be creating a more closed stance-- your back would be more facing towards the net, and your chest would be more facing towards the back of the court. This is a closed stance.

Fred used the term over closed which I'm pretty sure he meant closed. I've never heard the phrase over close before but closed is typically what is being used to refer to a stance that is more than 90 degrees. And again, your back is facing more towards the net and your chest facing more towards the back fence. That would be a closed stance.

An open stance is the opposite, your left foot is more to the left. If you are a right hander and getting ready for a forehand, that opens you up more if you just stay straight and you are twisting or turning your upper body at all, now your chest is more facing towards the net and a wide open stance would actually have you facing straight forwards and the tips of toes pointing straight forwards and if we drew a line between the tips of your feet, the line would be parallel to the baseline.

That's a wide open stance. And there is all kinds of different stances in between. The ones I just mentioned, open is parallel to the baseline. Square or neutral is perpendicular to the baseline and closed is past perpendicular to the baseline. I guess you could say a full closed stance would be parallel to the baseline the other way where your back is

completely facing towards the net. That would be completely closed as opposed to completely open where your chest is facing towards the net instead of your back.

Alright, now that we have that out of the way, let's go ahead and continue talking about the different ways we can move our feet to get around shots that are jamming. And the most common are return-of-serve, which Fred mentioned, and volleys as well.

Players very often get jammed up by volleys when they are at the net. Now the worst thing you can do when you start getting jammed up by a shot, is nothing. Do not stand there and let the ball jam you.

The closer the ball gets to your body, the more inhibited you are in terms of different techniques that you can use to hit the ball. Everything gets jammed up-- your arm or racket gets close to you and it's very difficult to hit an effective shot.

So you've got to do something and it's a good idea to practice moving your feet to get around a jamming shot. You've just got to make an attempt to get in a comfortable position.

So, what should you do? And I'm going to talk about two different circumstances here, one where the ball is coming right at you, and the other that Fred was talking about, when the ball is kind of on one side or the other a little bit, but it's coming into your body, it's not going to be a comfortably positioned shot if you just stand there and do nothing.

Let's talk first about a shot that comes directly at you. First of all, I want you guys to pick the stronger side-- when the ball is coming directly at you, you've got your choice. You can pick either a forehand or a backhand and you should be picking the one that you are most confident and comfortable with. Don't feel like you have to hit a forehand or you have to hit a backhand. You should practice moving towards your more confident side so that you can hit the best shot possible. And for myself, it's my forehand and whenever I possibly have the choice between a backhand and a forehand, I always hit a forehand because my forehand is better so tactically it just makes sense to make as many forehands as possible.

So how do you do this? Well you want to pivot around your opposite foot, around back in a circle-- let me explain this: For those of you that are right handed, I just want you guys to visualize this-- let's pretend that you are getting ready to return serve and your opponent hits a hard flat serve, that is coming right at your body and again, you're right-handed and what I said was pivot around your foot. So if you are right-handed, I'm going to say your opposite is your left foot and what you want to do is pivot around that foot and turn your body back. And so your right foot should pivot back around your left to get yourself turned to the side. And once you get yourself in a square stance, where your right foot has pivoted back around behind your left and you are in a square stance, at that point you would want to take several small quick steps on the balls of your feet to move yourself back. And that would end up moving yourself to the left, to move yourself out of the way of the oncoming ball, and that's going to move your body out of the way of the ball and allow you to hit at the right side of your body.

Let me repeat that one more time-- so you are in a ready position facing forwards, you identify the ball is coming right at you, you are going to want to take your right foot, pivot around your left foot which is going to stay planted to allow you to turn your body back. Turn yourself back so you are in a square stance, take several small steps back

which is going to end up being to the left side of the court, and take several small quick little steps to move yourself out of the way of the oncoming ball.

That's the best footwork that you can possibly use to get yourself out of the way. If you are a lefty, it would be the opposite-- you would take your left foot and pivot it around your right foot and then move yourself back quickly towards the right.. assuming you are trying to hit a forehand.

If you are trying to hit a backhand, it would be the opposite. But this pivoting and turning and taking quick little steps on the balls of your feet, is the most important part. That's what's going to actually move yourself out of the way. That's the best footwork to use.

Now what if the ball is coming to one hip or another or as Fred described it, he said a righty with the ball coming towards his left foot. And I can tell you guys that in College tennis when I was playing doubles, we would commonly aim for hips. So if I was playing a righty, I would aim for their left hip and try to jam them up on their backhand side. That would be a common way for me to communicate that to my partner. If the ball is coming towards one side or the other, but it is not comfortable-- if it's not giving you enough space that you are able to hit a comfortable, confident swing and it's going to be jamming you up, then it depends on how difficult exactly the shot is.

If you have enough time, pick your stronger side and still move in that direction. So, Fred was mentioning a serve that comes at his left foot-- well Fred, if you've got the time to get around it and you can hit a forehand, then do it if your forehand is better. Don't settle for a backhand if you don't have to. If you have time to get around it, do use your forehand swing-- you just better make sure that you've got enough time to get around that ball and you would use the same footwork that I've described for when the ball comes directly at you.

If you don't have enough time and the ball is really getting on top of you quickly and you don't have a chance to get around and hit your more confident shot, then you are going to have to unfortunately settle for your backhand side or whatever side the ball happens to be coming towards.

And at that point, you would do the same footwork but you would just pivot around the other way. So for you, a backhand, you would take that left foot, pivot it back around your right, and take those quick steps to the right to move your body out of the way. And this is something you guys need to practice-- and you can practice it without even being on a tennis court-- just practice the footwork, and practice doing it quickly. And pivoting, moving back, probably two or three quick little steps to get to the side, then make your swing. Go back to a ready position, and do it again.

It's important to practice this stuff so in the middle of a match, you guys can do it without thinking about it. And obviously, doing this on a practice court, would be very valuable as well.

Now let me talk briefly about volleys. I've mentioned that volleys are the other shot that people tend to get jammed during. And the reason for this, is you are close to the net. And so you don't always have a lot of time to react to the ball. It's not like getting a groundstroke where the ball is bouncing and you've got time to set yourself up. The ball is coming right at you, and there is very little time to react to the shot.

Now, to avoid it, I've got a couple things for you guys to keep in mind and to do. First of all, you must learn how to use a split step-- this is very important. If you are not split stepping already, you've got to start doing it and this goes for the return of serve too, but especially for the volleys because of your lack of time. You've got to get yourself in a wide, ready position on the balls of your feet. You've got to get your feet moving before the ball starts coming to you so that you're activated and your body is ready to move and your kind of up on your toes, and ready to go. You've got to have that physical readiness to be able to move out of the way of these shots. You cannot be flat-footed and effectively move out of the way of the ball when it comes right at you.

So that's number 1-- the split-step. Number 2-- go ahead and have a mentality and assume that you are going to have to move somewhere. Do not be complacent either mentally or physically when you are at the net. You don't have the time to be lazy. And the split-step is the physical part of it and mentally, you just need to be alert and aware and just assume you are going to have to move somewhere. And I think a lot of times where club players make a mistake and really get jammed is they are just waiting for the ball. And they are just like 'alright, ball, come get to me. And whenever the ball gets to me, I'm going to hit my volley', and that's not good enough.

You need to have an assumption or a readiness in your head when this ball gets hit by my opponent, I'm going to move somewhere-- it might be to my right, it might be to my left, or the ball might come right at me and I'm going to have to move somewhere.

Don't ever think that it's just going to come right to your racket because it's just not going to happen very often. Now, the last thing I'm going to mention here as far as the volleys go-- keep in mind everybody, that a backhand volley is going to be easier to hit when you are being jammed and a lot of club players prefer their forehand volley which is a shame because they go through this big movement with their feet to try to get out of the way with their forehand, when a backhand is a lot easier to hit when you do get jammed up.

And the reason for this is, your elbow and your arm can slide out of the way and move out to your dominant side. So if you are right handed, your right elbow would drag out to your right from a ready position, and your racket face can go ahead and slide it right in front of your body. And so you can hit with the backhand side of your racket literally, right in front of your body, if it's an extreme emergency and you cannot get out of the way of the ball. You can slide your arm to your right and get the racket right in front of you and you can play a defensive volley that way. Try to do that with a forehand, it's very difficult-- it's virtually impossible to hit the same shot that is coming directly at your stomach with a forehand volley-- so keep that in mind, that a backhand is probably going to be your best friend when you really get into a pickle and that is a tough situation at the net.

Alright, I'm going to add one more thing-- when you do get jammed and you have time to get out of the way at the net, it's the same footwork as on the groundstrokes. You want to pivot around your opposite foot, get out of the way, and get your body to the side so that you can make contact at the side of your body when you are up there at the net. And I'm going to close with that on this topic. Fred, thanks very much for your question. I really appreciate the great topic for me to talk about and if you have any further questions about this stuff, let me know.

Thanks very much for being a listener. [music] [music] [music] [music]

OK, next up I'd like to recognize a couple of very important people who sent in donations over the last two weeks. First of all, James in the UK, donated \$10. John in California donated \$100 to the podcast. Thank you very much John.

Also, Gerrard in Germany donated \$50 and I apologize if I'm not pronouncing your name correctly. Dan in Washington State donated \$50 to the show-- thank you Dan. And I had two regular subscription donors-- one from Shelley in New Mexico with a \$10 subscription payment this month and John M in Texas with a \$5 subscription donation. Thank you guys very much.

So to you six, thank you guys for your donations-- I really appreciate it. It really helps me out as the normal expenses I have from week to week and month to month as I continue to run the website and the Podcast, and continue to try to improve them. And if the Podcast has helped you and has helped you improve your game, I would really appreciate your support, if you could do a monthly donation or a one-time donation either way, I always appreciate it so much.

So thank you to you six and if you would like to donate to the show, simply go to essentialtennis.com and there is a link on the lower right that says donate. [music] [music] Alright, let's get back to the and we've got one here from Gorren and I don't have a location on Gorren, but he is a 3.5 player and he wrote to me and said 'How do I effectively play in windy conditions? Could you address serving strategies and ground strokes? I understand a lot on proper footwork but is there anything else? I have a good attacking top spin forehand but every time during a windy match, my forehands seem to be sailing out a lot or into the net and it really hurts to see my forte go away like that.

Sure Gorrad, I'd be happy to talk about that and I've got an outline here that is going to discuss several things that you really need to pay close attention too in the wind. And this is something that all of us have to deal with at some point or another and I'm actually a little surprised that I've yet to talk about this. This is going to be the first time that I've talked about playing in windy conditions, but it's such an important thing to understand and to practice.

A lot of times, where I work, where we have both indoor and outdoor courts, when conditions get really windy people like to go inside where it's easier-- don't do that. If you guys have the option, don't run away from elements like that, whether it be sun or wind or outside distractions... Put yourself in the middle of these situations to make yourself a tougher player so that you learn how to deal with stuff like this. First of all, Gorran talks about foot work. Foot work is key and this is the first thing that you need to be aware of-- and I've got four different things that you guys can use to help yourselves out in the wind.

The first one is foot work-- I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this as it kind of goes without saying, you cannot stop moving your feet at any time, ever, when you are playing in really windy conditions. The ball will continue to move, it will float from side to side or maybe bounce higher or lower than you are used to and it will catch you off guard. That's just a given when you are playing in really windy conditions and so you have to anticipate that and expect it and you've got to continue to move your feet. A lot of little steps, quick little steps and continuing to improve your position, even when you think you are in the right spot, just keep moving your feet so that you are kind of already going and you are ready to move if the way the ball bounces or travels in the air catches you off guard. So that's number one of four. You've got to keep your feet

moving.

Number two-- mentally prepare yourself to play safer. You cannot play usually, well I'm going to go ahead and say never, you should never play as aggressively as you normally do in really windy conditions. And adjustments you should make are aiming farther inside the lines-- so if you get an easy forehand and it's a shot that you would normally aim three feet from the line in trying to pressure your opponent. Give yourself five feet or four feet. Give yourself extra room-- you cannot afford to hit your same normal aggressive shots whenever you would normally hit aggressive. You can't hit as aggressively as the wind is going to make changes to your shot that you are probably not always going to be aware of.

So when it's really windy, make it a little safer as far as your target is concerned. So be a little bit less aggressive. Also, more height over the net-- using more top spin is very important. You cannot afford to be impatient and annoyed also. -- Actually let me go back to the second to last one-- the more height with top spin, make sure that it is with top spin and your not just floating the ball up into the air where the wind can grab it and carry it too far. If you are not able to hit with a lot of top spin on your ground strokes, then be careful with this and it depends on which direction the wind is blowing exactly. But be aware of the direction of the wind, and if you are not able to hit with top spin to pull the ball back down into the court again, then just be careful. You just can't be as aggressive.

If you are able to hit with heavy topspin, that would be the best because you can aim higher over the net and the top spin will help pull the ball back down into the court again. That's really ideal to be able to hit with heavy top spin and give yourself some good clearance over the net to make it a safer shot. - And as far as mentally preparing yourself to play safer, be patient. Don't get easily annoyed. You are going to make mistakes that you probably normally don't and you can't afford to be impatient and get angry and start hitting aggressively and trying to finish the points quickly-- at least not most of the time unless you are just having a really good day which in the wind, normally doesn't happy, but let's be honest, normally we don't have good days in the wind.

So, you've got to be patient and be safe and take your time out there. You don't want to rush yourself because you'll probably rush into more and more errors. And that tends to snowball for a lot of people and they'll kind of get annoyed and frustrated and as a reaction to that, they'll hit even more aggressively and make even more mistakes and that's just something that you cannot afford to do.

So that was number 2-- mentally prepare yourself.

Number 3, you must be able to adjust your targets based on the wind. Here is what I mean by that, it depends on the direction of the wind. If you've got a wind that's blowing from side to side, so from right to left or vice versa, the ball is going to drift into that direction. And as this becomes a pattern, you have to account for it based on which side you are on and that means if the wind is blowing strongly from your right to your left, and you're hitting a cross court forehand and you are right handed, you've got to give yourself more margin for error and hopefully you've already got a lot of experience practicing aiming. I've talked a lot in other podcasts about practicing your groundstrokes and having a target.

Hopefully you've done a lot of that and you've aimed for targets, specifically, so that

when you get out in the wind, and you are playing in tough conditions, you can literally adjust that target closer inside the lines or closer to the lines. Maybe you are hitting into the wind and let's say the wind is blowing from your left to your right and you're trying to hit a cross court forehand on your right side-- so you are hitting into the wind. Well now you've got to adjust your target to be more to the left than you normally would. So you've got to be able to make these adjustments and to do this, you've got to have some practice hitting for a physically target on the court so you can that you can make these adjustments.

Now if the wind is back to front, if it's blowing either at your face or at your back, then your shots are either going to sail much farther or they aren't going to travel anywhere at all. And Gorren, it sounds like this is where you have a hard time because you talked about your forehand always going out or always going into the net when you are playing in the wind. So it sounds like this is where you really have the most trouble and this is difficult on ground strokes. And examples of this would be if the wind is blowing really strongly at your back, you cannot hit the same ground stroke that you normally would. The wind can really carry an aggressively hit ground stroke. So when it is really blowing hard at your back, you've got to aim a little lower and you need to put more top spin on the ball. Again, for those of you who don't know how to hit top spin, god help you. You are really just going to have to aim lower to keep the ball from going farther and you'll probably end up having to pull back on your strokes as well and not hit quite as aggressively.

If you do know how to hit with top spin, you should hit with more top spin, less drive. You should not be trying to hit the ball quite as hard but really make it loop and make it come back down into the court-- you cannot afford to just hit the ball up in the air and have the wind carry it. You've got to put some good top spin on it to have it come back down.

Now if the wind is blowing at your face really hard, then it's the opposite. You've got to get the ball up into the air because we've got to make it carry. We need to make it go farther otherwise it's going to miss into the net or even if you don't hit the net, everything is going to land short and weak because of the wind that is blowing into your face.

So when this is happening, you've got to hit more of an aggressive shot. You've got to get more height so that the ball travels farther and you're not hitting everything into the net or short.

Those are some specific examples of things and adjustments you are going to have to make when it is really windy out. So that was number three-- you've got to be able to make target adjustments based on the wind.

Number 4, use the wind to your advantage. And you guys can actually take windy conditions and use them to work for you if you are smart and if you really look for your opportunities. I'm just going to mention two specific examples here to give you some ideas but you can find other ways to use wind as well.

One specific situation might be to match up your strength that you already have with the wind. For example, if you are right handed and you have a good slice serve on the deuce side and you are right handed, and you are good at serving out wide, if the wind is blowing from your right to your left, that is perfect. And go out there and really try to kick that slice serve out wide and you are going to have to aim a little more to the right

than you normally do because the wind is going to carry the ball farther to the left. So you can't aim for the line, you are going to have to aim inside the line, probably a couple more feet than you normally do. It depends on how strong the wind is exactly. But when the wind is blowing hard from your right to your left, use that good slice serve and really put a tonne of spin on it and the ball is going to travel way out to the left and travel from right to left more than it normally would and that's a way that you can actually use the wind.

And another example I have is to come to the net when the wind is at your back. When the wind is blowing into your opponents face really hard and it's making it difficult for them to hit shots that are very penetrating and very pressuring to you because the wind is kind of holding their shots back. Come up to the net, it's going to make passing shots and lobs very difficult for them-- so pressure them. And do it on purpose-- if the wind is really blowing at your back, just kind of put the ball up into the air and have the wind carry it deep into their side of the court, run into the net and put yourself there and challenge them. Say, 'alright, let's see if you can hit a passing shot into the wind past me.' Or hit a lob that doesn't sit up really easy for me because the wind is blowing in your face.

So if you really think critically and think about what is going on around you, you can use the wind to your advantage. It doesn't always have to be something that is terrible although I understand it can be very difficult.

So Gorren, there is my advice to you and the four tips again were-- use tonnes of footwork, you've got to use your feet a lot.

Mentally prepare yourself to play safer. You have to be able to adjust your targets based on the wind.

And finally, use the wind to your advantage when you have the chance.

So thanks very much for your question Gorren, hopefully this is helpful to you and let me know if you have anything further. [music] [music] [music]

That does it for this week's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast-- episode number #107. Remember to definitely tune in next week, and episode #108 will be coming out on March 8th 2010.

Usually I release them late morning or early afternoon EST. Not always, but usually around that time on Monday-- so a week from today on Monday the 8th, definitely get that podcast as soon as you can so that you can submit your entry to be able to win that free flip cam, the Ultra HD flip cam. Definitely get your name into the hat there and maybe you'll have a chance of winning. And I've got a lot of other prizes up for grabs as well so it's not just that and all of them are free. So definitely check that out next week.

Until then, thank you guys very much for turning in. I appreciate your support of the show by downloading the podcast and listening to it and I will talk to you guys next week.

Take care and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]