

Essential Tennis Podcast #109

Ian Westermann

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 instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by ProTranscript.com and also TennisTours.com -- more on that new sponsor later in today's show.

I want to kick things off today by saying thank you to everybody who participated in the contest I ran last week. 158 entered into the drawing for a new flip Ultra-HD camera and I've got my winners all selected here and those of you who won, will get an email from me shortly.

But thank you to everybody, especially those of you who listened to the Podcast for the first time-- great to have you guys on board.

I also want to announce a new clinic, the next Essential Tennis Clinic will be held in Baltimore, Maryland and will be on May 28th, 29th and 30th.

Features of this clinic will include 9 hours on the court with tennis instruction from myself and other tennis professionals. Also, a mental tennis workshop from David Grumping, a mental tennis expert whose been on the Podcast many times. And a video analysis session and everybody is going to get one of their strokes analyzed by myself with high speed video.

So lots and lots of value in this clinic. If you're interested, send me an email or go to essentialtennis.com and click on clinics. There is only 4 spots left, so definitely let me know right away if you would like to attend.

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

Alright let's get started with today's topic on the Essential Tennis Podcast, and it comes to us from Carl E on the forums on Essentialtennis.com and Carl wrote and said ' can we revisit footwork in the Podcast? One thing I'd like to hear about is using the cross-over step to recover into the court. And how about use of a cross-over step while moving around the baseline. When should it be used? What's the choreography like? How can we practice this so that it becomes second nature?'

And in the forums, Gaskeys Backhand also commented as well 'could you please also pickup the footwork from the very beginning because I'm guessing there is a lot of people like me who've just begun to take tennis seriously and have never been taught anything about footwork-- Thanks, it would really help. '

Alright, we are going to go over footwork on today's show, and it's going to be the only topic we cover. And I'm really going to go into depth about the different types of

footwork, the different types of steps that you guys can use on the tennis court. What they are good for, what they are not good for and I'm also going to go over the most common shots in tennis and how you should use those different steps during those common shots so you guys can move effectively. And Footwork is incredibly important in tennis and I'm really happy that I'm doing an all-footwork show because you can only hit as good of a shot as your footwork is.

Now professional players, high level players, are able to hit incredible shots even when they are off balance and in an uncomfortable position but for the rest of us that aren't incredibly gifted athletically, it's very important that we learn how to move around the court as efficiently as possible so that when you do get to the correct spot on the court, you are able to hit as good a shot as you possibly can because your body is there in balance, you're in the correct position, the ball is in the right spot in relationship to you and you're able to hit the best shot possible.

And then the second part of that, is after you've hit your shot, it's very important to get back to a good spot on the court immediately following whatever shot you just happened to hit.

So, the first thing we're going to do is talk about types of steps or different ways you guys can move your feet around the court. I'm going to give a quick definition for each of them so that you guys understand what I'm talking about when we start to talk about individual strokes and how you guys should move your feet during those different types of shots.

So we're going to go over 6 different ways you can move your feet on the court. The first one is a side shuffle and Carl was pointing this out and wanted some explanation on the side-shuffle specifically. The side-shuffle is lateral to the baseline or it can also be perpendicular to the baseline and kind of anything in between. Basically the side-shuffle is a way to move your body laterally. And this is commonly referred to when talking about recovering from a ground stroke and wanting to move back to the middle of the baseline and we're going to get to that later. But the correct way to use the side-shuffle is to have your toes pointed forwards and making a balanced move from right or to the left. Your knees should be balanced, your feet should be shoulder-width apart and your feet should not cross.

That's what differentiates this from different types of footwork. During a side shuffle, your feet do not cross-over. And so it's a balanced way to move around the court. It's not the fastest way you can move around the court but it keeps your body in very good balance. This is basically a way that you can move in a ready position and your body is kind of all set to go. As you shuffle from the right or to the left, or up and back, we are going to talk about how to use both.

So that's number one. Number two-- cross-over step. And again, you can use this lateral to the base-line or perpendicular to the baseline and we'll talk about how to use both of those later in the show. But the difference between a side-shuffle and a cross-over step is that your feet are crossing over-- they are crossing each other.

And a variance of this is also the karaoke step or the grape vine which is sometimes referred to as a series of cross-over steps... We are just going to keep it at cross-over step just for simplicity sake.

So that's number two. Number three, the back-peddle. And the back-peddle is basically

moving heels first. So the back of your body is facing the direction you are trying to move. Believe it or not, but these steps should be used sometimes and we're going to talk later about when they should be used.

That's number three. Number four is forward stride or sprint. Basically you guys are facing dead on forwards. Your toes are pointing forwards towards where you are trying to go. And you're either in a sprint or another kind of forward motion.

Next up number five are adjustment steps. And these are different from a forward stride or a sprint in terms of their size. An adjustment step usually is a series of quick little steps to kind of fine tune your position on the court and to be able to really put yourself in just the right place.

And number six, the last in our six different types of steps is the split-step. And the split-step is a way to get your body in balance and we're not going to spend a lot of time talking about the split-step today because I've talked about it in previous shows in a lot of detail and if you guys want to learn about when to use the split-step and literally how to do it physically and how to move your body to split-step correctly, check-out Podcast #101, #90 and Podcast #13. And all there of those previous Podcasts, I've talked about the split-step and it's a very important part of your footwork and we're not going to go over it in detail today but go into the Podcast archives if you would like to hear more about the split-step.

So a quick review before we go to the next section-- six different types of steps: The side shuffle. The cross-over step. The back-peddle. The forward stride or sprint. Adjustment steps and the split-step.

So, next up, we're going to be talking about how to put all of those together effectively within different strokes and how to move your feet correctly within different strokes. Before we do that, I'm really excited to tell you guys about the newest sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast and that is TennisTours.com.

TennisTours.com is the place to go if you guys are planning on going to an ATP or WTA professional tennis event. They do tickets and they do travel packages to go to all your favorite tournaments including the Grand Slams. It can be really tough to get reliable tickets for the Grand Slam events, Australian & French Open, the US Open and Wimbledon and that's their specialty-- the Grand Slam events. And you guys can purchase individual tickets from them or even complete ticket packages including hotel and accommodations. You guys can purchase ground passes, luxury suites and everything in between. They offer wide ranges of different types of tickets for every event that they do have for professional events.

So if you're going to go to a professional event which an incredible way to learn about tennis and to experience tennis by watching the best players in the world, go to TennisTours.com and definitely check and see if they do carry tickets for the professional event that you're going to be traveling to. And especially if it's out of town and you need accommodations and hotels-- these guys do everything together and do it all for you so you don't have to worry about it.

Now, when you check out TennisTours.com, make sure to use the promotional code essential and you'll receive a discount off your purchase. That's 'essential' in the promotional code field as you're checking out.

Show them that you appreciate their sponsorship of the Essential Tennis Podcast by supporting TennisTours.com. I appreciate them very much for their support of the Podcast. Thank you guys.

OK, now let's get into some specific situations around the tennis court and how you guys should be moving your feet most effectively. Now, as you guys move to anywhere on the court and hit any type of shot, there should be a sequence of different moves or different things that you need to accomplish in order to move effectively. And that sequence is, preparation, movement to the ball, recovery and then preparation again-- there is kind of a cycle that you guys should be repeating in between and during and after every shot so that you guys can be in the best possible position with your body.

Now, let's talk about some specific shots and how you guys should be using those specific types of steps within those different phases of your movement around the court.

First of all, let's talk about ground-strokes and moving side to side, either to the right or the left for a forehand or backhand. Now preparation, the preparation phase, is basically your split-step. That's how you best prepare your body to be able to move towards any possible shot. It puts you in a nice ready position, in a balanced position. You're not moving anywhere-- you're just ready.

Now if you want to use some stutter-steps and some shuffle-steps instead of an actual split-step, that's fine as long as your body is balanced. And again, check out those previous Podcasts for a detailed discussion on that.

Now, after your split-step on a ground-stroke you want to transition the forward steps and if it's a forehand and you're right-handed, you would turn yourself to the side and make forward steps out to the right to get to that shot. And these steps should be quick and you want to get there fast so that you can be in balance once the ball gets to you and you're in a good, comfortable position.

Now, the next phase is adjustments steps. You want to next use adjustment steps to kind of fine-tune your position between yourself and the ball. These should be different from your forward steps because we don't want to continue making long strides when the ball comes close to us because that's often times how players make mistakes and if you mis-judge just a little bit how the ball is going to bounce or where exactly it's going, and you're in the middle of a full stride towards the ball and it ends up bouncing a little funny or maybe the wind catches it or it has some spin on it you weren't expecting, you're done-- you're screwed.

So you have to be in the habit of making small, little steps as the ball gets close to you to be able to really make last second adjustments and you might think you know exactly where it's going but don't make that mistake.

So, again preparation, the split-step and movement to the ball starts off with forward steps, then adjustment steps, then you make your swing-- your forehand or your backhand swing.

Now, after you've made your swing, it's time for recovery. And this can be done when you're moving to the right or the left in one of two ways-- you can use either shuffle-steps or cross-over steps or a combination of both which I recommend that you guys do. And it kind of depends on your position on the court. If you're not very far away from the middle of the baseline, you really only need to use side-shuffle

shuffle-steps and you would do that by pointing your toes forward towards the net, not crossing your feet over, and just making two or three shuffles back to the center of the court.

Now this is something that rec players and students of mine, for whatever reason, don't like to do. I guess they feel silly doing it. It's not something they've done before ever playing tennis because they've never done it correctly.

If you guys watch tennis on TV and [inaudible] Wells is on right now as I'm speaking, you will see tennis pros using side-shuffle steps to move along the baseline after they've made contact. The reason why it's so important is because we need to be in a balanced position, in a ready position, while moving back to the middle of the baseline. That's important because we don't know where the next shot is going.

After you've hit your forehand or backhand ground-stroke and the ball is traveling towards you opponent, you do not know where they are going to hit next, and so if you take the quicker route and let's say you move out to your right, hit a forehand ground-stroke and then you simply turn your body to face the middle of the court and run back, that would be a lot faster than using a side-shuffle or a cross-over step, however, if your opponent hits back to your forehand side again, and you have not yet returned back to the center of the court, you're moving in the exact opposite direction and your body is facing the exact opposite direction and it's going to be very difficult to gather yourself, stop your momentum and turn back to the right where the next shot is coming-- please don't do this.

You need to get yourself lateral to the baseline and move back sideways while facing the net so that you can see what is going on and so that you're balanced in case they cross you up and they hit to a direction that you're not anticipating.

So using that side-shuffle step is very important. Now Carl, talked about using a combination of steps and having a good rhythm and I suggest that when you guys really get pulled off to the side, you use a combination of cross-over steps and side shuffle steps and you guys will very commonly see the pros doing this.

They'll move out to the right or to their left, make their adjustment steps, make their swing and very typically make one cross-over step and then several shuffles to get back to the baseline.

Or maybe if they're really far out, maybe they'll make two cross-over steps and several shuffles to get back to the middle of the baseline but very often you'll see them at least one cross-over step and then transition into a shuffle.

Now both the cross over and the shuffle step keep you sideways facing forwards towards the net so they keep you in balance. The cross-over step is a little bit faster and it kind of gets you moving immediately after your swing and the shuffle step is kind of more fine-tuned and a little more unbalanced and it keeps your feet underneath you, they are not crossing over... It's more difficult for you to get caught off balance when you are shuffling.

So, in review and I realize I may have repeated some things here but this stuff is really important and that you guys follow this specific pattern. Split-step, turn and make forward steps towards the ball. Make adjustment steps, quick little steps as you get close to where you're going to make contact. Then make a cross-over step then finish it up

with side-shuffles back to the middle of the base-line. And at that point, you should repeat the preparation phase and use a split-step and a side-shuffle is very similar to a split-step but whenever your opponent makes contact, even if you're not back to the middle of the baseline yet, you should be making another split-step to repeat this pattern. The preparation, the movement of the ball, the recovery back to the middle of the baseline, and then prepare again.

And when you guys do this correctly, there is definitely a rhythm to it and this is why the pros, especially the players with really good foot-work, look like it's so effortless because they use all of these steps together and they do it very seamlessly and it's all coordinated together and it is almost like a dance going back and forth, back and forth. And this is something you guys should practice, and I'm going to talk about how to practice it later.

Now, let's talk about one of the tougher shots in singles and that is moving back for a ground-stroke and you guys should move back when your opponent has hit a high, deep shot to your half of the court and it's not going to be at waist height-- it's going to be bouncing up over your strike zone, you've got to back up and let the ball come back down again. In order to move back effectively, for a ground-stroke, you guys should be turning to the side and side shuffling back.

Do not use a back-peddle movement or foot-work to move back for these shots. So if it's a forehand and you're right handed, your right foot should pivot back to put you in a square stance and then you should side-shuffle, or if you want to use a cross-over step and then side-shuffle back, that's perfectly fine. But get back there and turn to the side already so that you're in balance and also so that you are ready to swing. You've already turned your body to the side and you are ready to go. It doesn't mean that you have to hit in a closed or a square stance, you can still hit from an open stance but as you are moving back, make sure that you get yourself turned perpendicular to the baseline so that you can move back in balance.

This is a common mistake for rec players to move back with a back-peddle type step and that kind of makes them off-balance and not only that, but when the ball gets there, they are not turned to the side yet and can make for some trouble, some complications.

Now, after you make your swing, after moving back to that shot, simply turn forwards towards the net and use a forward step or a spring to get back to the middle of the baseline and then split step to make sure that you prepare again-- so that's for moving back.

Now ground-stroke moving forwards-- on a low shot or a shot that is not traveling very far into your half of the court, you might have to move forwards. In order to do this, if it's straight forwards, you guys should simply be moving forwards with your body facing the net. As you get close to the ball, you should be turning your upper body to the side and or changing your stance, whichever type of stance you'd like to use to hit this shot. And this is the one time where you guys should be back-peddling is after you've hit a short ground-stroke or a ground-stroke you've had to move forwards into the court for, straight-forwards and after you've made contact, you want to get back to the middle of the baseline again. Don't stay up in no-man's land. This is where it's open to use a back-peddle type step, is when you've moved straight forwards from the middle of the baseline, you've made your swing, and you want to get back to the middle of the baseline again.

The alternative would be to turn around and face your back to your opponent and hustle back to the middle of the baseline but don't do that. We need to be facing forwards and ready and watching and seeing what's going on-- so use a back-peddle step to get back to the middle of the baseline.

Now, so we've talked about moving to the right or the left, moving back and moving forwards for a ground-stroke. There is combination's as well and this is where things get a little tricky but it all makes sense. If you are moving up into the right, you should turn and face towards the direction you want to move yourself-- make a forward step or a sprint. Make your swing and this is where you want to use a kind of diagonal shuffle. So if it's forwards and to the right, and you are moving up for a forehand, make your swing then pivot, get your back foot kind of back so your right and left foot, draw a line between where you are in the middle of the baseline and use a side shuffle in a diagonal direction back to the middle of the baseline.

If you are moving back and to the left, if it's a deep back-hand, then you would want to again pivot your left foot back, use a kind of diagonal side shuffle to move yourself back behind the baseline. Make your swing, then go ahead and face towards the middle of the baseline and use a forward step and move back forwards towards the middle of the baseline.

What's important here guys is your balance and we want to be prepared for every shot and each subsequent shot. You want to be prepared for the next one. So whenever you are moving back towards the middle of the baseline, we want to be facing forwards, whenever you're moving towards whatever shot you are trying to get to, usually you want to be facing that way.

When that wouldn't be the case is when you are moving backwards and you are kind of moving with a side-shuffle type position. So those are all the different possibilities for ground strokes. Let's talk about overheads and I just wrote an article about this-- how to move back for overheads and it's something that rec players usually do very poorly.

What you guys don't want to do is use a back-peddle type step to move back for overheads. After you're prepared and you are in your ready position, and your opponent lobs you, it's incredibly important that you use either a side-shuffle or a cross-over step to move back for your overheads.

This is a very common mistake and something you guys should absolutely be working on. So if you are right-handed and that lob goes up, get your right foot pivoted back-- that's the first thing that should happen. Get yourself in a square stance and from there either cross over with your left foot going across over in front of your right, and continuing a cross-over like a quarterback going back for a three step drop which is what I wrote about in my article. Or you can just stay lateral-- you don't have to cross your feet over and you can just use a side-shuffle. Just make sure your feet get perpendicular to the net and you are shuffling back and not back-peddling. Back-peddling is pretty much the slowest way you can possibly move across the court and not only that, but I have personally witnessed several times, in fact many times, player's falling backwards over themselves because they are in poor balance as they try to make back for an overhead. Please do not do that.

So it's really important that you get into a position where you can either side-shuffle or cross-over to hit that overhead.

And lastly, let's talk about volleys and on a volley, you want to cross-over whenever possible which means for a forehand volley, you guys should be stepping across with your left foot to reach for a forehand volley and across with your right foot to reach for a backhand volley. If you have to move multiple steps, then make sure that you turn your body to the side towards the direction that you are trying to cut off that volley--move there quickly, then just like on a ground stroke, use a combination of either a cross-over step and several shuffle steps, or you can just use shuffle steps if you don't have very far to travel. But make sure that you get back to the center where you are supposed to be for the next shot by moving laterally across the court.

Lastly, let's talk about how to practice everything that I've talked about today. Now, some of this may have been review for some of you listening. If you are a 4 or 5 player listening to this Podcast, you probably already know about all the different types of steps I've been talking about and you probably already know about when to use them correctly as well.

If you are 2.5 or a 3.0 player, a lot of what I just said is probably new to you and you've got a lot of work to do to catch up in the footwork department. Now I recommend a three step program or a way of practicing in order for you guys to make this a part of your game and if you have to work on all of this, you've got a lot of work to do.

If only one or two things sounded new to you that I just talked about, then it should be pretty quick for you to make this part of your game. But the first thing I recommend is shadowing. Basically meaning practicing this without a ball and this can be on a tennis court or not. It doesn't even have to be out on a tennis court. You can do this in your back yard or on your drive way or in the middle of a park as long as you aren't too embarrassed to do it. But I recommend you guys do this and follow the patterns I was talking about on your own.

And just kind of get a feel for what the rhythm is like moving between these different types of steps and moving in all these directions that I discussed. And I would take some time, especially from the base-line as this is really where it is important... It's important all over the court but I think where the most different types of steps get used is moving to the right to the left, forwards and backwards as you move along the baseline to hit your ground-strokes, especially in single's play.

So I recommend that you practice moving in each of the four main directions--forwards, backwards, right and left and using the different combination's of different types of steps that I described. Once you really feel like you've got it down and you're using all the different steps correctly without a ball, have a friend of yours feed some shots to you or just toss shots to you. And there is kind of a famous tennis drill called the Spanish Drill that I use when one of my students really needs to work on their footwork and basically I stand on their half of the court, just a couple of feet away from the middle of the baseline with a basket of balls, and I simply toss tennis balls-- I might toss straight out to their right, I might toss straight out to their left, I might toss short to the right, short to the left or I could toss deep behind the baseline to the right or deep behind the baseline to the left.

Whichever direction I toss, my student has to use the correct footwork to move to that shot, make their swing, then use their correct footwork to get back to the middle of the baseline again.

So this is a controlled environment, I am right in front of my student, I can see what

they are doing right and what they are doing wrong. It's not terribly realistic because obviously I'm just tossing the balls underhand and the ball is not flying towards them from the other half of the court. So the way the ball is coming to them is not match-realistic-- it's just a way to really focus on the footwork and nothing else.

So that's a great way for you guys to practice with a partner on a tennis court and you are going to need a basket of balls or at least 10 or 12 balls because the idea here is to get them moving and this can be a good way to work on your conditioning and your fitness as well. As well as using all the different types of steps correctly.

And the last way to work on this is in a live rally, and I've followed these three steps myself when I teach. I have my students demonstrate to me without a ball at all how to do it correctly, then I'll feed them various types of shots to make sure that they can do it with the ball coming towards them. And then the final way to show me that you really understand what you're doing is to be able to do this in a live rally back and forth in a controlled rally where me and my student are maybe hitting forehands cross-court to each other. And I will mix up my shots-- give them high ones, low ones, and varying degrees of right and left and make them show me that they know how to move their feet correctly.

So I would follow those three different ways of working on this footwork to make sure that it is really integrated into your game and that your body is starting to learn it and once you feel like you are doing it automatically, you can go ahead and start using it in match play. Not that you can't go out and play a match right now and hopefully use some of this and have it improve your game, but expect that you're going have to work at this if you aren't already using most of these different footwork already.

So that brings the footwork Podcast to an end. Hopefully that wasn't too monotonous for all of you guys-- I went into some detail there and I'm sure I repeated myself a couple of times on some of these different techniques and ways to move your feet, but this stuff is really important and I'm a little surprised that I hadn't done a whole Podcast on footwork before. But this is a good primer for you guys who are just starting off in tennis and really need to know what to do with your feet. And those of you who are experienced already, hopefully there is just a couple of things in there, or different ways of moving your feet in different positions that you hadn't really considered before and you can go ahead and take those one, two, or three different footwork elements and go ahead and put them into your game.

But no matter what, as always, I hope this helps you guys improve and that's always my goal with everything I put out on the Podcast. So Carl and [inaudible] backhand on the forums, thank you guys for a great topic and hopefully this helps you guys get better at your game. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, that does it for episode #109 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for joining me on today's show and I hope that it was enjoyable and helpful to you in your game. As always, let me know if you have any questions that you'd like to be answered on the Podcast. My email address is ian@essentialtennis.com.

Now in wrapping up today's show, I want to say thank you to several people who have made donations to the Podcast in the last two weeks and I really really appreciate the support of all of you who have made donations-- either one time donations or subscription donations to the website and to the Podcast. You guys are really helping me out a great deal both financially in helping to pay for what I do here at Essential

Tennis and also emotionally. It really feels good to know that people out there are appreciating the show enough to make a financial donation. Even a \$5 donation shows me that you appreciate it and in return I appreciate that very much.

So, let's say thank you to a couple of people here-- First of all Guidare in Texas, I hope I'm pronouncing your name correctly, \$20 donation thank you. Ian in Colorado, \$60. Gary in Pennsylvania donated \$25. Bruce in Florida is a new monthly subscription donor at \$5 per month. Kelly in Alabama also a new monthly donor at \$5 per month. And then we had three people make their regular monthly donation in the last two weeks-- Steve in North Carolina, \$5, Bill in Missouri, \$10, and Carlotta in New Jersey, \$5.

So thank you to all of you guys so much for your donations and if the Essential Tennis Podcast has helped you improve your game, please consider making a donation of any size to the Podcast and I would appreciate that very much. Just go to essentialtennis.com and on the front page in the lower right, there is a button that says 'donate'.

Alright, that does it for this week. Thanks very much for joining me. Take care and good luck with your tennis. [music]