

Essential Tennis Podcast #116

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Speaker: 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 TennisTours.com, where you can use the promotional code Essential to receive a \$25 discount off your next purchase of professional tennis event tickets and travel packages.

Before we get to today's topics, I'm going to answer a couple of listener questions on today's show. Before then, I just wanted to simply thank all of you who have been regular listeners of the podcast. I appreciate all of you very much. Without you, the show would not be possible. I want to thank you for downloading the show, esp those of you who download on a regular basis and listen to this show weekly. Those of you who have rated the show and commented on iTunes, thank you very much.

And I want to esp thank those of you who have sent in questions for me to answer. That's really what makes this show tick. And really makes it unique, I think. That's what makes the internet and podcasting in general so much fun, I think, is the communication back and forth between a host or producer and his or her listeners.

So thank you all very much. I appreciate it, and I hope to continue making the show even better for all of you listening.

Now let's go ahead and get started with today's questions. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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Alright. Let's get started with our first question. It comes to us from Sandro in Italy. Pretty sure it's the first podcast question coming to us from Italy, so Sandro, thank you very much for your question. I appreciate it. And I'm sure that you've been enjoying watching the recent ATP events there in Italy: the Rome tournament. [inaudible] tournament just wrapped up yesterday. Good match between Rafael Nadal and Federer.

Anyway, let's go ahead and get to his question, which is: I have been playing tennis for 4 years at a local club. I've also played some tournaments. When I play, I have a lot of

problems looking at the ball. My eyes go to where I want to send the ball, and of course I lose it and hit a poor shot. I can keep concentration on the ball for 4-5 minutes, but after that my eyes go to the point where I want to put the shot.

As you can understand, I've lost many matches against players a lot lower than my level because of this. I hit a lot of unforced errors, giving away the match. Do you have some tips or exercises to keep my eyes on the ball, and not where I want to put the ball? Thank you, Sandro.

Sandro, that's a really good question. I'm going to be spending some time on this today. I'm going to go into some detail, because I think this is a topic that is misunderstood very often. I think it falls into 2 categories.

First of all, I think it's misunderstood. That's #1. Though there's people that know it's important, but have misunderstandings about how exactly it works. There's another group of people I think, who don't even feel like it's a very important or worthwhile thing to focus on. I disagree with it. I'm going to talk to you guys why.

Just to give you a heads up, [laughter] I'm probably really going to be going into detail on this today. It's a topic that I feel strongly about. I think that it's smthg that is the difference between levels of play. In other words, it's smthg that higher level tennis players just do automatically. It's not smthg they have to think about. Whereas as more beginners or intermediate level recreational players are not even aware of it often. It could be a real different maker. So I'm going to spend a lot of time on it today, because I feel that it's very important.

Let's begin first with: why is it important? Well, in my experience as a teacher, I've spent a lot of time on the court as a teacher teaching recreational players and avg. level club players. Those are the people that make up by far the biggest chunk of my audience here on the Essential Tennis Podcast. So I'm speaking to you guys: the weekend warriors, or just the recreational players who go out there on a regular undefined and 4.0 player.

Now, if you're a 4.5 level player, this can pertain to you as well, but probably not quite as much..

Anyway, in my experience watching recreational players, there are errors due to making poor contact with the ball way more times than they think there are. Most recreational players in my experience are just not aware of how often the ball does not hit the middle of the racket. When I say 'poor contact,' I'm talking about the ball hitting somewhere on the racket other than where it's supposed to.

Now of course we have some margin for error. The ball doesn't have to hit an area on the strings the size of a tennis ball in order to be a good shot. There's probably 1, 2, maybe 3 inches of margin for error, all around the actual center or the actual sweet spot of the racket.

But once the ball starts making contact with the racket out towards the edge--even if it doesn't physically touch the frame of your racket--it really detracts from the quality of your shot a great deal. More than people think! The reason why it's so important for us to focus on watching the ball closely is because most players just aren't very aware of when this happens, and how often it happens. When I'm watching players play, I very often watch and see in front of me a player mishit a shot badly.

An example of this might be, let's say in a doubles point somebody I'm watching on an instructional court that I'm teaching during, a lot of times I'll watch a player mis hit a volley. And see a low volley--a shot that they're trying to play with a little more touch of finesse; they can't really attack on it--and the ball will just purely hit off their frame. I'm not even talking about a shot that's a little off center. It completely hits off their frame, and hits the bottom of the net. It doesn't even get close to making it over. I'll very often ask the people on my court when I'm teaching: 'Alright, everybody stop. Hang on a second. I need to talk to the person who just missed the shot.' And I'll look them in the eyes and say: 'Why did you miss that shot?'

And I am absolutely shocked by the wide range of answers that I get back to that question! Time after time when I ask that question, people give me answers other than: 'The ball hit my frame.' They'll say smthg like: 'I hit it too softly. I was trying to go for a tough shot; it was too soft.' Or maybe they'll say: 'I didn't get down low enough with my knees. Low volley. I stayed too upright.' Or they'll say: 'I didn't open up my racket face enough. My technique was poor.' Whatever. They'll say smthg besides: 'The ball hit my frame.'

Then I'll tell them: 'No, you're incorrect. Your technique looked great. You were in the right spot. Everything looked good, except that the ball hit your frame.' And then everybody laughed and did, 'Oh, ha! Well obviously, yeah. I hit my frame. I knew that!' Well, think about it. What could be more important than the ball hitting your strings? You go through all this time and effort of working on your technique and trying to make it better and better. Then the ball comes your way and doesn't hit your strings. How can you possibly even think about anything else besides: 'Well crap! The ball did not hit the middle of my racket, so of course it wasn't a good shot!' [laughter] Now, out of people who I haven't asked that question of before, honestly I would say 10-20% answer correctly.

Now, if I'm talking to a person who knows me well and has worked with me over several hours, they probably know what I'm getting at and immediately know what I'm asking. They'll give me the correct answer.

But out of people who don't know how I teach and what I really emphasize on the court--which is mostly basic things and big chunks of important parts of tennis that need to be done well in order to improve your game--they very often miss this question, which is always baffling to me.

So let's move on and talk about a debate that many people on the internet have when it

comes to talking about actually watching the ball. There's 2 main arguments that I see. I've seen a lot of discussions about the merits or demerits of watching the ball. There's 2 main detractors that I've noticed the most.

The first one is when somebody will say on a tennis message board or blog post: 'Hey, you guys really need to be watching the ball,' very often people will reply and say: 'Well, you can't even see the ball hit your strings! So why could it be important to watch it closely? I can't watch it, because I can't actually see it. So what's the point of that? It seems like this is a waste of time to try to watch the ball hit my racket or hit my strings, because I'm not going to see the ball anyway.' And that's true.

That's important for you to understand, that the ball comes and leaves your racket much too quickly for you to actually see; meaning see, meaning have a snapshot in your head of the ball making contact with the racket. So that is true. But that's not the point! [laughter]

When I ask people to watch the ball closely, I'm not asking them because I want them to tell me what number's on the ball or I want them to draw a picture for me of what it looked like. Because I know that they can't physically see the ball hit the strings. But that's not really the whole purpose of watching anyway.

Now, in terms of the ball coming and leaving quickly, just to give you some information here. I heard this just recently in an instructional DVD that I watch. The amount of time that it takes for the ball to come and touch your strings, and then leave the strings again, is typically between 2-5 1000s of a second. Think about that. So if we're talking like 3 1000ths of a second is the amount of the time that the ball actually stays on the strings of your racket. So obviously, if you think you can see that occur, you're incorrect. [laughter] It happens much too quickly.

But again, it's not the point to physically see it. The point of watching the ball is to focus on the most important part of the moment, and that is the ball. The whole purpose behind watching the ball closely is to ensure the best possible concentration on what's happening. That the most important point of time during a tennis really back and forth is when the ball is hitting your strings.

Because if it doesn't hit your strings, it doesn't matter how good your technique is. If you're technique is perfect but the ball hits off your frame, the result will be a poor shot and your good technique was wasted. So we need the best possible contact and therefore we need the best possible concentration on the ball to make sure that happens. Otherwise, we're just really paying ourselves a disservice.

Now the second main argument that I see online, when people argue against watching the ball closely, is they say: 'Well, the pros don't always watch the ball.' Then they'll paste in a link to an image of some professional player making contact with the ball. It will be a snapshot with the ball right on the strings and their eyes are not looking at the point of contact. Their eyes typically are just a little bit in front of the racket. The ball is on their

strings, and their eyes are not looking at the strings.

Well, it's also not the point of my talk here--it's not the point of watching the ball to actually have your eyes perfectly in the right place at perfectly the right time over and over again. Once again, it goes back to concentration and focus on what's important in general. It doesn't have to be perfect in order to benefit you. Your eyes don't have to literally be on the point of contact when you make contact. You also don't literally need to watch the ball hit your strings. That's not the point. And anybody who argues either of those 2 arguments is missing the whole point of the exercise of focusing on the ball.

Now, my second comment on that is that the pros very rarely hit their frame. [laughter] You will see a pro shank a ball every now and then, but for the most part, they're making very clean contact. They're amazing athletes. Most people don't understand how good of athletes they're watching when they watch professional tennis. And to be perfectly honest, they don't need to be perfect and have their eyes literally on the point of contact.

That being said, some pros do most of the time. When you look at photos of Roger Federer making contact with the shot, usually his eyes are right in contact. Other pros their eyes are just a little off and not quite looking at the strings when they make contact, and that's fine.

Bottom line here guys is the point is to hit the strings as often as possible. Period.

So, let's move on and talk about exactly how to do that. I'm going to go through a pattern, or a sequence of events that you should be following in order to best focus on the ball, and give yourself the best concentration possible on what's important.

This is smthg I'm probably going to write in a whole e-book about in the future. And really lay it out in great detail. I'm getting into detail here today for sure. But there's a lot of points that I could make that I'm not going to. I'm just going to lay out a simple sequence of events that you guys should be following when you're in the middle of a rally or a point back and forth. So this is the pattern you should follow.

First of all, once the ball comes off your opponent's racket, you need to keep your focus on the ball all the way up until it gets to your racket. And your focus can't waver during this period of time. The period of time that it takes for the ball to leave your opponent's strings and get to your strings, your focus needs to be on the ball and nothing else. This is difficult. This is exactly what Sandro was talking about. There's so many other things that could take your concentration. You could be watching your opponent and trying to figure out what they're doing on the other side of the court.

As Sandro pointed out, you could be looking at your target and anticipating where you want the ball to go. Maybe you have a sharp angle volley you're trying to hit. It's a forehand volley and so contact is happening on the right hand side of your body. Your target is way over on the left of the court. It's very tempting to look away and want to check out your shot.

Well, you know what? The ball is going to go where it's going to go regardless of if you watch or not. So whether or not you look at your target has nothing to do with if the ball goes there or not. However, you'd better believe that where the ball hits on your racket is going to make a big impact on where the ball goes. So you guys need to focus on the important part of what's happening here, and that is: where the ball's hitting on your racket. That's where your focus should be, and it all starts watching the ball come off your opponent's racket. From there you should be following it all the way into our own racket.

An interesting piece of trivia as far as how the human eyes work, as humans we have just about 180 degrees of total field of vision, and it's split into 2 parts. You have your peripheral vision, which is the vision that's out to the side of your eyes. And this vision is blurry. We can see objects in our peripheral vision, but you can't focus on them. Meaning fine focused vision. In other words, when you have some text or an image off to your right or to your left, you can't actually read that text or focus clearly on that image unless you move your eyes and put the focus part of your vision on whatever you're trying to focus on.

That part of your vision--the part that's actually sharply focused--is only 3-5 degrees out of the 180 degrees of your vision. A very small percentage. Most people don't realize how little of their vision is actually focused. The rest is blurry. Once the ball leaves your opponent's racket, you need to keep that 5 degrees of focused vision on the ball all the way until it gets to your racket. No exceptions. If those 5 degrees of vision leave the ball and look at your opponent or your target a split second before you make contact, you're decreasing the chances that you're going to make good contact. You're doing yourself a disservice there.

Once you've made contact with the ball, you want to shift your eyes from the point of contact, hopefully just a little after you make contact, and you want to shift them to your opponent. You want to start looking at what your opponent is doing. This is going to tell you when the ball is coming next. And also, it's probably going to give you some really good information as far as what type of shot is coming from your opponent as well. These are topics I could do a whole show about individually.

But by watching your opponent, you'll see when their swing begins. You'll see what type of swing they're going to make. That's going to tell you when you need to be ready for the next shot, and also what type of shot is coming to you next. That's going to help you prepare yourself and be ready for the next oncoming shot.

When the ball gets to your opponent's racket in the middle of their next swing you want to shift your eyes from you opponent and then back to the ball again, and you'll repeat that sequence.

So the sequence is this. Watch the ball come off your opponent's racket and follow it all the way into your racket. Once you've made contact, shift your focus back to your

opponent's again. See what they do; see where they go on the court; see what type of swing they make. Once they make their swing and they make contact with the ball, shift their focus back to the ball again, and then repeat.

So there should be this shifting from the ball to your opponent; to the ball to your opponent; and back and forth again. It's not that you want to watch the ball the entire time, because you'll miss out on a lot cues from your opponent in between shots. Once you've made contact with your shot, you want to watch your opponent's again until it's time for them to make contact, and then you shift your focus back to the ball again.

So this sequence of events and the way that you control your eyes is very important. For many of you, this is going to be a conscious thing. You're going to have to really mentally focus on it in order to make this work. But trust me, it's worth it! I really encourage you guys to practice it. In the long run, your concentration will become better, and your contact will become better. You'll hit the middle of your racket more and more often.

Before I wrap up this topic, I want to tell you guys about today's sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast. That is TennisTours.com. I've got a really awesome package to tell you about. The U.S. Open is going to be coming up at the end of the tennis season in Aug. Always an awesome event. And championship tennis tours at TennisTours.com has put together just an incredible package to be able to go check out the U.S. Open.

As part of their packages, you can choose between either a 4 or a 5 star hotel in NYC. You can choose the type of seating level that you'd like for your tickets between court side, lodge, or promenade. You also choose between attending a Broadway performance of your choice; a ticket to the Mets or Yankees game; or a city tour. That's pretty awesome. And you get free limousine shuttle back and forth to the U.S. Open and your hotel.

Talk about an awesome experience! I mean, you get to go check out NYC; go to a baseball game or Broadway performance; get the limousine shuttle. You get to choose what type of tickets you'd like when you go and watch the U.S. Open. Plus--and this is my persona favorite--they're going to be sending you an invitation to a championship tennis tours and Essential Tennis Podcast cocktail party at the W Hotel in Times Square. I'm going to try to make arrangements to be there personally. I'd really love to go there to see the Open this year and meet some of you guys who support both my show and championship tennis tours.

Please do support them. Thank them for being a sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Go check out their U.S. Open ticket and accommodation packages. As you can tell, they put together a first class ticket package with so many different options and different types of amenities. I guarantee you will have an amazing time in NYC.

So go check them out: TennisTours.com. Make sure to fill in the promotional code Essential with a capital E, and you'll get your invitation to the championship tennis tours

and Essential Tennis Podcast cocktail party in Times Square during the U.S. Open.

Just 2 other things that I wanted to point out before I wrap up this topic. First of all, I think it's good information to point out how you can tell when you do hit off center. When you don't hit the right place on your racket. When the ball makes contact with your racket. There's 3 main ways you can tell. First of all, the sound. It will sound different. After awhile, once you start paying attention to this, you'll be able to tell without seeing your opponent hit.

Or let's say there's a point going on behind you; you're not even playing. You'll start to be able to pick out clean hits and shots that are off center. After awhile that becomes very helpful, because when you make a swing and it's a bit off center, it's good to get that audio feedback and be able to tell: Alright, I need to do a little bit better job watching the ball. I need to make better contact on my next shot.

Secondly, feel. It's going to feel completely different. The racket will twist and turn in your hand. Or it will vibrate. It just doesn't feel like a clean, crisp shot. Very often I see people blame their grip slipping on a bad grip, when in fact they've just hit off their frame. And that kind of twirks the racket in your hand. It destabilizes the racket in your hand and makes it want to twist and turn to the side. When the racket twists in your hand, please don't tell yourself that you're gripping too lightly, or that your grip is wearing out and getting slippery. Maybe it is. But the grip will not slip in your hand unless you hit off center. And that's what's going to twist the racket around in your hand.

And thirdly, the result. This is the one that should seem obvious, but I pointed out earlier in my explanation of this topic that very often players don't even think that it could have been possible that they hit their frame. When the ball just doesn't go anywhere close to where you were aiming or trying to hit it, try to think back and see if any other of those other 2 things were there. Did it feel right? Did it sound right? If it didn't go where it was supposed to either, it's a very high likelihood that you hit off center.

And lastly, when you do hit an off center shot, and you do it on a regular basis on a certain shot. Let's say a backhand ground stroke. You tend to hit off center really regularly. Look and feel for a pattern. Very often in my experience teaching, when players have problems off center, it becomes a pattern where the ball hits the same place over and over again.

So let's say you have a 2 handed back hand and the ball consistently hits the top edge of your racket. That's going to kind of twist the racket back and open the face up. It's not going to feel right or sound right. A lot of times when players have problems, they fall into hitting a pattern in the same place again and again. So pay attention to that.

Once you recognize the pattern based on where you see it hit and also how it feels, you can start to make changes.

If it continues to hit the top edge of your racket on your back hand, you know that you

need to lift the racket a little higher so that you hit the middle of the racket instead of the top frame. So you can start making specific adjustments like that. So pay close attention.

Lastly, I just want to say: Stick with it guys! This is smthg that seems like it's very simple, but it's not. When I start with students, very often they have no idea when they hit frame. And people that I've been working with for a long period of time; that I've give a lot of lessons to; after awhile they start to tell me first--I don't even have to point it out to them anymore! They'll hit a shot off center, and it's not a good shot as a result, and they'll immediately look at me and tell me it was off center.

Or they can even tell me where it hit. They'll feel it. They'll see the result. They'll recognize the direction the racket twisted in their hand. And they'll tell me, 'That was off center. It hit right here.' Then the next time they get that same shot, they can make an adjustment with where they put the racket by using their hand and adjusting where the racket is in relationship to the oncoming ball. They can make the correct adjustment and the correct change. And that's the whole point, is to do a better job of making good contact.

So, that brings that explanation to an end. Sandro, it might not have been exactly what you were looking for. You were asking for exercises or drills. I really just wanted to get through that and explain to you guys in detail why it's important and how you do it. I want you to go out there and practice doing it. Practice the steps that I explained. And I promise you you're going to get better at it as you become more aware of it, and as you start to narrow it down and focus better, and start to make changes where you see patterns of making a mistake and not making good contact.

Again, this is a topic that seems very simple, but it's incredibly important. So I encourage you guys to focus on it and do a better job with it. This is one of those things that can really improve your tennis.

I'd be curious to hear what you guys think about my explanation here. And also I'd be curious to hear feedback about you trying this for the first time. That'd be cool.

So send me an e-mail: ian@essentialtennis.com. Hopefully this was helpful to you.

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Alright. One more thing I'd like to talk about before we wrap up today's episode. It has to do with the learning process in tennis. I know that if you're listening to my voice right now you're really passionate about the sport of tennis. [laughter] Especially if you just listened to me go over the detailed outline of watching the ball. I know that you're really taking seriously your tennis improvement. That's great. You're exactly the type of person I've been looking for while doing the podcast.

And I talked to somebody just like that yesterday. His name was Andrew. He called me. And by the way, for those of you who don't know, Essential Tennis has it's own website

phone number. I use Google Voice with that. It actually comes through right to my cell phone. I can't always answer the phone, obviously. A lot of times I'm on court teaching. But if you'd like to leave me a message, I can get back to you. Or sometimes I may even be able to pick up and talk. But if you guys go to Essential Tennis and click on Contact, there's a phone number.

So anyway, Andrew had called me and he wanted my opinion on a couple different things. First of all, he gave me a pretty long list of different websites, different products that he had purchased and tried online. I think Andrew's pretty typical as far as listeners of my show in that he's trying to find as much information as possible. Obviously, Essential Tennis is not the only place online to get tennis instruction. There's lots of different places and a lot of good information out there.

He asked my opinion about a couple of specific websites and teachers and coaches online who put out instructional information. He just wanted to get my take on a couple of different places and what I thought about their content. What this came down to was eventually he was asking me for suggestions of other ways to get instruction that is going to help him improve his game.

Basically he said, 'Listen. Please tell me a DVD or smthg I can buy that's going to take my game to the next level.' I asked him about his game. He's been playing for 3 years. He's just looking for that next way to improve. In talking to him I can tell he's really pumped up about this, and really is looking for that next change. The thing that's really going to push him over towards that next level of that play.

I gave him a couple of misses of advice. I want to pass that along to you guys, because I think it was a good conversation and I hope that he came away from it with a little bit more understanding of what it takes to really continue to improve your game. You guys need to be patient and keep working hard. Tennis looks easy when you watch it on TV or when you watch high-level players in person.

But it takes a long time to continue developing your game. It's not smthg where you get that 1 piece of information, or that 1 product, or that 1 DVD and you watch it and it just makes sense. And it's like, 'Oh, this is great!' And you go there and just play incredible. And all of a sudden, 'Wow, I'm a good player because I got that piece of information that I was missing before!' Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

Now granted--don't get me wrong--you need as much good information as possible, and that's why I'm here, and that's why there's other instructional websites as well. But just understand that even after you've learned that information, it takes time. It takes practice. It takes repetition. It takes perseverance and character to be able to continue working on those things. Even once you have the information, it takes sometimes long periods of time before that information actually makes its way into your game, and you have to stick with it.

Andrew had been playing for 3 years. I told him, 'Let me guess. When you first started

playing, you were really into it. You improved really quickly for probably that 1st year. Then you probably hit a plateau.' Andrew was like, 'Yeah. Definitely.'

Don't be surprised by that, guys. You're going to have seasons in your game as you continue down towards the path of improvement where all of a sudden some things might click. And especially at first; when you first start working really hard at your game, you're going to improve very quickly. Because you just started. You're going to see big changes really fast.

Eventually, that's going to slow down, and those big changes will come with more and more work. It takes more effort, more concentration, more repetition, and the better you get at tennis, the more work it takes to make that next improvement.

So to Andrew and everybody else out there, stick with it. It's worth it! Make sure that you appreciate the journey. That's such a cliché thing to say, but enjoy the process. Enjoy finding that next piece of information and then going through the process of learning it on the court, and making it part of your game. Just don't expect it to become automatic right away. It's going to take time. You've got to stick with it.

So those of you out there listening to me, don't look for that magic solution. Don't look for the silver bullet, or the magic pill, or that magical DVD where you're going to watch it and sit there on the couch and go, 'Oh! That's it!' Then go out there and move from a 3.5 to a 4.0 like the next week. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

But if we continue to work together, and I continue giving you guys pieces of information here and there and you can put them into your game one at a time; piece by piece; you can continue to improve. Just please have kind of a long-term outlook on it, and don't get impatient. Don't go buy everything [laughter] and subscribe to every single website thinking that the more information you throw at your head, and the more you try to memorize, the better you'll get. Because that's not the case. You've got to work on one thing at a time, and move on to the next thing.

So Andrew, be patient. And everybody else, be patient. Hopefully what I've said here has made sense and is a little encouraging and inspiring to you guys. Keep up the good fight, and I'll always be here to help you continue to improve.

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Alright. That does it for Episode #116 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you for joining me for today's show. Thank you for downloading the file and for taking the time to listen. Hopefully it's been helpful to you. If it has, do me a favor and spread the word. Please tell your friends, your teammates, your co-workers who play tennis, your family members who play tennis--whoever. If you know other people who are really crazy and passionate about tennis as you are, please do me a favor and tell them about this show. Tell them where to download it either on EssentialTennis.com or on iTunes. I want to continue to grow this show as much as possible, and I can't do that without the help of

you. So thank you very much.

Alright, that does it for this week. Take care everybody, and good luck with your tennis.

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