

Essential Tennis Podcast #117

[music] 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 strategy, 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 Tennis tours.com where you can receive a \$25 gift discount off your next purchase of professional tennis events tickets and travel packages. Before we get started with today's show, I'm wondering if any of you out there are experienced in writing iPhone or iPad applications. I am I'd really like to get an Essentials Tennis iPhone application going and one for android [inaudible] the android platform as well, and if that's something that you think would be fun to work on and you like to give me a hand on getting an application out there like that. Please shoot me an email, I'd appreciate it very much. My email address is ian@essentialtennis.com

Thanks very much, now let's go ahead and get started with today's show. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music]

Alright let's get started with today's topic, which I think is really interesting and one that you guys are going to enjoy. Our question today comes from [inaudible] in Brazil, he wrote to me and said, "As my technique improves more and more I realize, that to win in tennis, you need more than just sharp technique. So I start to study the strategy, tactics and mental parts of the game. I'm just a beginner in those topics, but so far one thing is clear to me, to know yourself is just as important as knowing your opponents weaknesses and weapons." [inaudible] that's a really good observation. I'll continue with his question here, "Knowing that it would help me and probably a lot of people, if you analyze the most important types of players you have in tennis. Counter, puncher, all-court player, etc. How I identify my style of game and how I work to improve it. I'm reading quite a lot about it and one thing in particular is problematic for me the game style, is the game style something natural, or chosen? Do I start as a counter-puncher by only having ground strokes and a base-line game, work through the middle court to be an aggressive player, and then get a grip on net play to serve and volley and after mastering all the court, turn into an all-court player and only then make an informed decision about my game? Well I think that this would be, I think this is just the beginning of my doubts as i go deeper on this new ground. Any insights would be helpful."

Well [inaudible] really good observations and good question as well. And to be honest with you this is something that I hadn't really considered before. Obviously, I'm very aware of different styles and generalities of tennis players and the different kind of ways that we enjoy being on the courts and maybe different parts of our game that are stronger than others. Every body has different parts and sections of their game that they prefer over others. There's not a whole lot of people that are just good at everything and we're going to get to that, in detail, a little bit later. But I had never really thought about the connection between making a conscience choice of wanting to be a certain style of player as apposed to just being a natural type of player. So, I had a good time thinking about this, I enjoyed

thinking about it, and in creating the outline for today's show, and I'm going to go into some pretty good detail. Kind of like last week's show where I really focused on the topic of watching the ball. We're probably going to spend all of today's show on this topic and I'm going to be outlining four main types of tennis players styles, that I think there are. We're also going to talk about professional for each style that I think probably represents that style the best. And I'm going to tell you guys how to improve each of these styles and I want you guys while I'm talking about these different types of players, I want you guys to be thinking about your own game and trying to figure out which of these styles fit you best.

So that when I get to the part about improving, you'll know, in general, what to work on next to continue advancing your game. So, let's go ahead and start talking about the different types of players. And I'd like to start off saying that these are definitely generalities, alright, I mean everybody's a little the difference. Everybody has a little bit different skill set, and has different strengths and weaknesses, and there can be some overlap between these 4 really main types of players. With that being said, more than likely, all of you guys listening are probably going to most cleanly fit into 1 of the 4 of these categories. So, listen closely, and see which one you are. The first one I want to talk about is the counterpuncher-pusher-defensive baseline-type player.

And this is a type of player that we are all very familiar with. It is very common style of tennis, and it depends on who you are, but it is probably the easiest way to start off, by not hitting anything fancy, not being very aggressive, just keeping the ball in play. And probably the hallmarks of this type of player are being very comfortable on the baseline, usually does not like to dictate point play, simply meaning that this type of player does not really feel comfortable being assertive, is not very comfortable being aggressive, and is much more comfortable allowing his or her opponent to dictate play, and simply absorbing their pace and putting the ball back in play.

Also, usually this player makes very few unforced errors and simply waits for his opponents to make mistakes. And it could be easily argued that this is a very kind of pure and fundamental style of tennis. After all, you can only win a point if you keep the ball in play, and so this type of player is really at the core of it really playing solid tennis. They are really focusing on not making mistakes, just keeping the ball in play, usually not a whole lot of power, or aggressiveness behind their shots, and this type of player is usually very frustrating for recreational-type tennis players to play. And often times, recreational players want to try to hit those big shots. They want to try to hit winners and be aggressive, and when they come up against a pusher or counter-puncher, or whatever you want to call it, it can be frustrating to make mistakes, and feel like the other person did not really beat you, but you beat yourself because of the errors you make. So, this can be a very frustrating type of player to play. Usually this player does not like the net very much. They will stay away from the net and just keep the ball in play.

Now an example of a professional player--the first person that came to mind for me was Layton Huett. Layton Huett is definitely a counter-puncher type player. He does not have big weapons from behind the baseline. Do not get me wrong, he has got great groundstroke's. He has some skills at the net, but definitely not terribly comfortable up there, he would rather stay away from the net and keep the ball in play back from the baseline. And he waits for the most part for errors from his opponents. Now if this is

you, if you are this type of player who is kind of passive, does not mind running down a ton of shots, just keeping it in play, that is about it, to improve you want to work on hitting short and weak shots aggressively. You want to develop some weapons, and it is very possible that you are successful at your own level of play, but if you want to move up a whole other level, and start beating players who are a level above you right now, it is important that eventually you start to develop some weapons and some aggressive shots. So, work specifically on short, weak shots. Hit towards you. Work on hitting those aggressively. You are going to need to learn to hit some topspin to keep those safe. Also, work on your net game. Get a little bit more comfortable up there so that when you do get that weak shot, and you attack on it, you can follow it forward, and work on putting the ball away at the net. Also, work on creating pace and topspin from back at the baseline. Work on being a little bit more pressuring from back behind the baseline where you are usually playing your points. So that is the counter-puncher, pusher, defensive-type players. By the way, I did a whole podcast on how to beat this type of player sometime ago. I want to say it was Episode 30 or maybe Episode 40. Go to the archives and download that show. It is only about how to beat this type of player.

Now, the text style of player is the aggressive baseline player, and this type of person is again very comfortable on the baseline, just like the counterpuncher. However, this person loves hitting the ball hard and dictating play. This person is most comfortable and is having the most amount of fun when they are really unloading on the ball and going for big shots. This person typically has very little patience. They will take the very first opportunity that they get, and just go for a winner, and very often this person has either a really good day or a really bad day on the courts, and not a whole lot in between. And it kind of depends on whether this player is on or not. In other words, when this person is really comfortable, and really timing his or her swings well that day, and really hitting the ball well, this person is really tough to beat by somebody at their own level, because they are just hitting everything big, and making it.

However, when this type of player is having a little bit of an off day, it can be a disaster, because he or she will just make a ton of on-course errors due to their aggressive game play. If you are a little bit off and play really aggressively, you are going to make a lot of mistakes. So that is kind of the downfall of the aggressive baseline player. An example of this player in the professional ranks would be James Blake. And [laughter] not that I am saying that James Blake is not a smart player, but I have seen him play in person. I have watched him play on TV many times. He loves to hit the ball hard. He definitely hits the ball a little bit flatter than most of his peers, and he just likes to go for big shots. And kind of like what I describe a second ago, he is either really on or he is making a lot of mistakes that day, and it kind of a big swing back and forth. And a lot of times there is not a whole lot of in between for James Blake. Now, to improve, if you are this type of player.

If you are an aggressive baseline player, you want to work on developing rhythm from the baseline. Rather than developing pace and power you want to be able to keep a certain pace of shot in play over and over and over again. And that will probably mean that you take a little bit of pace off your shorts on average in general, but you want to find a pace, a speed, to hit the ball at that is consistent, but still confident without being overly aggressive, and making a lot of errors. This is something that I will give a

shout out to Brian Mark of the Forums. He has been working on this. He would definitely be in this category of an aggressive baseline player. He loves to hit the ball hard. He likes the net too, so he is not 100% a baseline player. But recently he has really made some big strides in his game by working on his rhythm by being able to hit back and forth, back and forth, still at a confident pace, but at a consistent speed and at a speed that he can manage.

Lastly, this type of player typically needs to work on their net game as well. Not always. Like I said a second ago, Brian is definitely an aggressive baseline player, but also likes to be at the net. He plays quite a bit of doubles. But in general, usually aggressive baseline players would much rather let the ball bounce and do not like the net a whole lot, so working on their net game is usually a good thing.

Alright, style #3 is the net rusher. This person would much rather be at the net taking the ball out of the air than letting it bounce. Usually they do not like to rally from the baseline. They are not as comfortable hitting ground strokes, and this type of player usually moves in on just about everything. As soon as they get their first opportunity, even if it is not a good one, they immediately move into the net, because that is just where they are comfortable. They feel like a fish out of water when they are back behind the baseline, and having to hit a couple of ground strokes in a row. A professional example of this would be Taylor Dent. Taylor Dent will serve and volley on every serve the entire match, and on a fast court will also hit return of serves and move right in after return of serves. And he will come in off of just about everything. It is rare to see him play an entire point from the baseline.

He will usually come in at some point, and by the way, I love watching Taylor Dent. It is an exciting style of tennis to watch, there is always a lot of action, and he had an awesome match last year at the U.S. Open. I am forgetting who he was playing. I think it was a Spanish player. But an amazing match at the U.S. Open. It was a night match. Now, if you are this type of player. If you are a net rusher, and by the way this style of player is, I do not want to say the way of the dinosaur, but definitely more and more rare these days to have somebody who is more comfortable at the net than at the baseline. If you are this type of player, you need to work on your technique, and confidence on the baseline kind of goes without saying. You need to work on identifying the correct times to move into the net as well.

Oftentimes, these types of players will move in off of absolutely just everything, and an aggressive net rusher will really benefit themselves a lot by working on being patient and coming into the net when it makes the most amount of sense, and that means being able to hit a couple of groundstroke's and and waiting for your opportunity before you do move in. Do not just move in off of everything. Be patient, rally some groundstroke's, wait until you have the upper hand in a point, and then use that opportunity to attack. Otherwise, you kind of...I mean it can be very effective against some players to always pressure off of everything, and always move in, but against somebody with confident groundstroke's, you will find yourself getting past a lot and player it is really good to be able to take your time and wait, and pick and choose your opportunities. So that is #3, the net rusher.

And now we come to #4, the last kind of main style of play, and that is the all court player, the fabled all court player, somebody who is just as comfortable at the net as at the baseline. This person has no

obvious big holes in their game, and they are just pretty solid at everything. And this is a tough player to play, obviously, and you guys will honestly rarely play somebody like this. Now you might play a half a level or level above you that seems like they do absolutely everything well and everything perfectly and they do not make any mistakes, but the reality is that most players (definitely, at least 90% of tennis players) have some stroke in their game that they are just not very comfortable with, and it is your job to figure out what that is, but an all court player is in general pretty good at everything...pretty solid. A professional example of this, and this is the really obvious one, Roger Federer does not really have a stroke that is a big weakness. Sometimes he will have days where his backhand is not that solid, but for the most part, he is comfortable from the baseline. He is also comfortable at the net. He is definitely competent up there. He has played some doubles, and he can hit an amazing shot from anywhere on the court and that is a really rare quality. There are not a whole lot of players like this. In my opinion, among recreational players, the 2 main styles that you guys are going to see are either the counterpuncher or pusher, defensive-type baseline player or an aggressive baseline player. Those are by far the 2 most common styles you are going to see.

Or maybe something in between. Somebody who you really would not say is a counterpuncher, but does not just blast everything from the baseline, as well. Those are the 2 most common things. If you are an all court player, be honest with yourself, [laughter] if you are an all-court player, and every part of your game is pretty solid, you just want to continue to work on everything together. Make sure that you do not just focus on one part of your game. Make sure that everything continues to improve, both your net game and your baseline game, your tactics, your serves, your return. Try to work on everything at once. And that can be tough. Most of us have some kind of weakness that we know that we should really spend some time on that. I guess [laughter] the downfall of an all court player is they have to really even everything out and spend equal time on everything. So, there are the 4 main types of tennis styles in my opinion. Those are the 4 most common ones that I see. Some of them are more common than others, but I think all you listening should be able to put yourselves into one of those 4 categories. Again, it was counterpuncher or pusher, aggressive baseline player, net rusher or all court player.

Before we get to the next section of my outline on this topic, I want to remind you guys about the sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast, and that is Championship Tennis Tours. You can find them at tennistours.com. They have been putting together travel packages and tennis tickets to professional events since 1987, and I am going to tell you guys again about the incredible packages that they have available for the U.S. Open this year. It all starts with picking your choice of tickets and you can choose between court-side, lodge or promenade tickets. Next up you get to choose between 2 different hotels: a 4-star and 5-star hotel, the W Hotel in Times Square or the Essex House Hotel, both in New York City, obviously. Next up, you get to choose between either a Broadway performance of your choice, a ticket to a Mets game, a Yankee's game, or you get to have a city tour around New York City.

While you go back and forth between these things, you get the use of a limousine shuttle to the U.S. Open and to your hotel, as well. Also, you get a ticket, and invitation, to a cocktail party at Times Square that is going to be exclusively for Championship Tennis Tours and the Essential Tennis Podcast. How awesome is that? So not only do you experience New York City, you get to experience the U.S. Open,

you get to go watch top-level professional tennis, and you also get an exclusive cocktail party in Times Square, and I am going to do my best to be there myself. Hopefully I will be. I would love to see some of the Open this year, but Championship Tennis Tours is who is making this possible. Go check out the pricing on this package. I mean, how can you possibly beat that package and that combination of different events and ways to experience the Open and the City as well at the same time. So, go to tennistours.com and when you check out make sure to use the promotional code Essential with a capital E.

You will receive a \$25 discount off of your purchase, and that is how you will also receive your invitation to the cocktail party during the U.S. Open in Times Square. Please show them your support by making a purchase. If you are not interested in this package, you can go there just to purchase individual tickets, as well. You do not have to go for the big shebang, although definitely check that out. Show them your appreciate for their support of the Essential Tennis Podcast. I thank them very much for their support.

Alright, let us keep moving ahead with today's topic, and the next section I would like to talk about is whether or not style is a natural thing or it is chosen by the player, and decides that this is going to be my style of play. In my experience, it is definitely a combination of both. And I would like to use myself as an example here. And we are going to talk about physical skills and abilities first, and what naturally makes somebody a certain style or type of player. Natural, physical things or abilities I have are, I have pretty good anticipation. I have good hands and touch, I am relatively quick, and I also have a lefty serve. I am a left-handed player. Most returners do not returning leftie's serves, so the combination of all those things together would make me either a counterpuncher back at the baseline or a good net player. And I love being at the net for all of those reasons that I just listed: Anticipation, quickness, leftie serve. On the flip-side, physically, I am not a very big person [laughter] .

I am 6 feet tall and right around 160 pounds. Back when I was playing in college, I was only like 145, 150 on a good day, and also by backhand is a big weakness of mine. It is my biggest weakness. So when you put together my lack of size and relative strength, and my weak backhand back at the baseline, I would show you guys that it would probably not be smart for me to be a big baseline player. Either a counter-puncher or an aggressive baseline player. More than likely, my skill set would make me a better net player, and that is the case. I am better at doubles than I am at singles most of the time. I love to be at the net, and against somebody who is even with me or a level above me, I am usually not very good back at the baseline. I kind of get picked apart very often at the baseline because, again, the combination of not being very big and strong and have my backhand groundstroke being a definitely weakness. So, against somebody who is half a level better than me, I usually like to try to get to the net as often as possible to make the use of my skills. So there are some examples of kind of a natural skillset, and how it can steer you or should steer you towards a certain style of play.

Also, personality is a natural thing that all of us are born with. I mean I not a psychology, but I think most of us are pretty born with certain personality traits. I am sure they are also developed as we grow up and become adults, but personality can also definitely be a factor in picking out a game style. Often times laid back people are counterpunchers or baseline players that just like to keep the ball in play.

Outgoing and extraverted people very often are aggressive baseline players or net rushers. They like to make things happen. They like to really initiate. Now, this is certainly not always the case. Sometimes it is exactly the opposite, but it can also... I just wanted to throw that out there as another kind of natural way that game styles become developed for tennis players. I think it is a combination of personality traits and physical skills and abilities. Now, on the flipside of the coin, you can definitely choose a game style that you want to develop, as well. I mean, you guys can choose. You can go purely based off your physical skills and your personality and the way you like to play out there and the way your strokes kind of fall into place. You can also simply choose what you want to develop, and what you want to spend the most amount of time on when you practice. And that can shape you as a tennis player, no doubt. Figure out what appears to you most on the court, and the type of play that seems most attractive and fun to you when you do go out and play tennis, and work on that. Just because I have a weak backhand does not mean that I cannot go out there and just drill the heck out of my backhand for about 2 months, and just really work on and focus on that. Leave the rest of my game alone for a while. Continue to practice it, and certainly maintain it, but really spend the most amount of time on my backhand so that I can become more of a baseline player. I could definitely do that. Now, if at the end of those 2 months my backhand is the same [laughter], I am going to be very frustrated, first of all. But, second of all, that would be a strong indication that being an aggressive baseline player is probably not for me, and I probably do not want to play all of my points from the baseline. I want to use what is kind of naturally given to me, and I want to continue coming up to the net because of my different skill sets.

But this is a choice all of you guys can make, and there is no wrong answer to this. Just choose whatever you think is going to be most fun to you, what you really want to work on, what you admire the most in other players, and go after that. I think you might be overthinking this a little too much. You want to develop all different parts of your game, but as far as what style you want to play during competitive points, that is something that you can definitely pick and choose and try different stuff out and see what works best for you.

Just 2 more things I want to hit on before we wrap up today's show. First of all, Remulo talked about a progression through different styles, and I think this was a really good observation by him. He talked about how very often beginning tennis players start off as essentially a counterpuncher. They work on their groundstrokes first, then once they become good at that, they will maybe start working on their net game, and then try to put everything together. And I think that is a really good observation, Remulo, and I think that is very often the way it goes, and it is actually very similar to how I teach people. When a fresh total beginner comes in and starts taking lessons with me, I always start off with groundstroke's first, because I feel like [laughter], you know, how can you possibly be a tennis player without being able to maintain a groundstroke rally back and forth. You have to be able to hit a return serve and play, and I think it is probably most satisfying for a player beginning to play tennis when they can just hit a ball back and forth from the baseline, and that is just a good, fundamental place to start in my opinion. After my student has become pretty competent with both forehands and backhands, I typically add netplay to that. Now, there is no set formula.

If you are just starting to play tennis and you love playing at the net, and you want to develop that first, I do not think there is anything wrong with that. Now I would encourage you to try to develop both parts of your game at the same time, if possible, but to be honest not everyone has the same amount of time and ability to do that. We are not all blessed with the same athletic ability, and very often people need to pick one thing at a time to develop, and then move on to the next thing. So, from that perspective, Remulo, yes, I think that is how it works. You want to move from one element of the game to the next. I do not think most people have the luxury of being able to take everything and say, alright, this week I am going to work on my serve, my forehand, my backhand, my approach shot, my forehanded and backhanded volley, my overhead and my return of serve, and I am going to improve all of those things this week. [laughter]

That is not really practical. Most of us should be picking 1 or maybe 2 of those things, really focusing on those and trying to bring them up to level, and then once you are satisfied, go and pick out 1 or 2 other things. And that is how most of you guys should be working through the progression of your tennis games. And you can shape and mold your playing style as you go, depending on which of those elements you like the most, or which ones you pick up most quickly.

Now, if you do have the ability to work on everything at once, then God bless you, but that is not going to be most of you guys, and there is going to be kind of a natural progression through different strokes. And you guys can pick how you would like that progression to go. I would encourage you guys to kind of map it out and decide what you want to work on first, and have fun with it. Enjoy going through and kind of checking off 1 thing at a time as you work your way toward being comfortable with all parts of the game.

The last thing I want to talk about is tactics as it relates to all of these different styles, and hopefully you guys are paying close attention when I described the 4 different types of players. And I just want to throw out a really simple tactical thought to you guys before I wrap up today's show. Very simply, when you guys go out and play tennis, watch for the different styles, and you want to try to put your opponent, not into a box. We do not want to say that, OK, this person is always a counterpuncher and they do not have any weapons, and so I do not have to worry about that. Everybody is going to be a little bit different as I talked about earlier in the show, but try to notice their generalities. Notice what they really like to do.

More importantly, notice what they really do not like, and then basically you want to take whatever they do not like to do and make them do it again, and again and again. If you are playing a net rusher, somebody who comes in after everything, you want to try to keep the ball deep, keep them defensive, and keep them away from the net. Or you want to work on your defensive shots and try to lob over them off the net. But one way or the other you want to keep them away from the net. If you are playing an aggressive baseline player, somebody who hits the ball hard, you want to be steady, consistent, do not try to out hit them if it is not your game, and if you can, try to draw them into the net. If you have a good touch, good hands, try to bring them forward without giving them too easy of a shot that they can just put away consistently. And make them volley, make them hit overheads. It is probably not

something that they are comfortable with if they are an aggressive baseline player and they are comfortable at the net, as well, you are going to have a tough time that day. You are going to have to pick out something that you can attack and make them uncomfortable with. But my point is, pay close attention. Remulo pointed this out earlier when I read his question he talked about looking for these tendencies in his opponents, as well as himself, and being able to match up your strength hopefully versus their weakness, and that is really the fundamental truth and tactics. That is really what you guys want to look for first. And try to exploit whatever natural things that your opponent is not good at. Remulo, I want to thank you very much for your question. Thank you for writing me from Brazil, and I hope my discussion of your question has been helpful today. Please let me know if you have any follow-up questions, but I appreciate you being a listener. [music] [music] [music]

Alright. That does it for Episode 117 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for downloading today's show and giving it a listen. I hope that it was helpful to you. And please tune in every Monday as I release a new podcast. Usually Monday afternoon here on the east coast of the U.S. Before we wrap things up I definitely want to thank a couple of people who have donated in the last couple of weeks. I appreciate you guys very very much, and those people are Sandro in Italy, Bill in Missouri, Ben in Utah, Max in New York, Charles in Maryland, Steve in North Carolina, Kelly in Alabama, and John in Texas. Thank you to all of you who have donated some funds to the Essential Tennis Podcast. They really help me to continue to do what I am doing at the website and at the podcast, and if the Essential Tennis Podcast has helped your game, and you appreciate the show, I would really appreciate a donation of any kind that you can set up a subscription donation or just make a one-time donation to the show, as well. Just go to essentialtennis.com, and in the bottom right-hand corner that says 'donate.' Thank you guys very much for your support. I appreciate it very much. [music] OK. Thank you guys very much. Take care, and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music] [music]