

Essential Tennis Podcast #118

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Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you love tennis and want to improve your game, this podcast is for you. Whether it is technique, strategy or the mental game, tennis professional Ian Westermann is here to make you a better player. And now, here is 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 receive a discount off your next purchase of professional tennis event tickets and travel packages by using the promotional code Essential.

Before we get to today's topic on the podcast, I want to remind you guys about the video section of essentialtennis.com. Some of you guys may not know that I do instructional videos as well. And there are many of them up there for free on the website. Just go to essentialtennis.com and click on video in the menu on the upper left-hand corner. Alright, [music] let us go ahead and get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, let us get started, and today's topic is going to be focused towards you doubles players, and specifically covering the lob, which is very often a difficult shot for recreational players to cover. And our question today comes to us from Michelle in Massachusetts who is a 3.5 level player. She wrote to me and said, 'how do I deal with ladies who lob in a double's match. I had a match the other day with 2 women who would constantly lob us. We tried different formations only for them to hit nicely down the line or lob back keeping us off the net. We did try to stay 2 back when they served or even a foot or 2 inside the service box to try to react to the lob. Eventually, it got to us, me in particular. I started to play their game instead of mine. I like to play aggressively and attack the net, but that was just not happening. They got almost everything back that we gave them with a lob. At times we would get a point or 2 when we hit at the net person, but it was just not enough. It was not enjoyable to play, and couldn't believe that we could play for another hour like this. I walked away from that match incredibly mad at myself for allowing those women to make me feel so inadequate in my abilities, and left me with little respect for them in their game of tennis.'

Well Michelle, it sounds like a really frustrating match, and I definitely feel for you, and this is a pattern that I see repeated all the time at the club where I teach and other clubs where I have talked recreational doubles' players very often...well, there are 2 things here... First of all, recreational doubles' players very often struggle with covering the lob, and with overheads in general, and secondly, on the flipside of the coin, recreational double's players are very often frequent lobbers, and you know, for good reason. If you are playing a team that is not great at covering it, then it is a good strategy. And I am getting a little bit ahead of myself, so let me go to my outline here, and we are going to be spending all of today's show on this, because I think it is a very important topic, and I have got a large outline here having to do with how to cover this and play more effectively at the net Michelle, for you and for

everyone else listening.

First of all, I want to congratulate you on your good doubles' tactics in general. It sounds like you are comfortable moving into the net, and that is awesome. Congratulations on that. I work extremely hard with my doubles' students to improve their transition game and their net game to get them comfortable moving up to the net. Very often, beginning players are not comfortable up there, and so at a 3.5 level, to have that be kind of your main game style in your doubles' play I think is great. So, nice job working on that. However, there needs to be a balance in your abilities. The more that you move in, the better you need to be able to back up. You cannot just have one or the other. You cannot be one-sided. It is kind of like a car. I am kind of a car person... The faster the car that you have, the better the brakes have to be. [laughter] When you are modifying a car, you cannot spend all of your time and money on the engine and not also upgrade the brakes, because the faster you get going, and the faster you are able to get going fast, the faster you also need to be able to slow down. Otherwise, it is just not safe. And I look at that the same way in doubles. The faster you move in towards the net, the faster you also need to be able to retreat to be able to cover behind you. If you are only good at one or the other, you are going to leave large spaces of court open.

Now, I want to talk about one other thing here, Michelle. Before we actually get started talking on what to change and how to improve this part of your game, I am going to lecture you a little bit. [laughter] I was going to apologize for that, but you know what, I am not going to apologize for it. You said that...now, where is that section... 'it is not enjoyable to play. I couldn't believe that we had to play like that for another hour. I walked away from this match incredibly mad at myself for allowing those women to make me feel so inadequate.' You should have stopped that sentence there. I wished that you had not finished your email to me by saying that you left with little respect for them and their game of tennis. I think that is a mistake. I think that is a big mistake.

Do not disrespect them and their tennis skills. The reality is that they beat you fair and square. They did not cheat you out of the match. You missed more shots than they did, so they deserve to win the match. That is how tennis is played. If you and your partner were not able to keep enough shots in play and if you were not able to use those shots to challenge your opponents very effectively, then quite honestly you did not deserve to win the match. So, to be frustrated with yourself for losing to that style of tennis, I completely understand. I am on the same page with you. I would have been incredibly frustrated as well to lose to that type of player, but to have little respect for their game, I understand where you are coming from. You feel like for them to stay back and lob everything maybe does not feel as legitimate as a strategy. It is not a high level-type strategy, and probably not a strategy that is going to be them very far in doubles in terms of long-term thinking.

You know, they are not going to become 4 or 5 players sitting back there and just hitting lobs all day. However, you do need to give them some respect. You do need to shake their hand and say good match, and you need to in a way thank them. Thank them for pointing out an area of your game that you need to work on. [laughter] You should be happy about that. They have shown you a part of your game that does need to be improved. If it did not need to be improved, then you would not have lost this match.

So, do not worry about it, and certainly do not diminish them, and I think that is something that a lot of players do. Pretty common after playing a pusher, as well. Somebody who plays a defensive baseline game. After losing to that style of player, very often recreational players badmouth them, and say well, you know, play the game, you have to hit strong shots, and anyway, in my opinion, it is just not a legitimate complaint.

So, my lecture is over. [laughter] Let us move on to more of the instructional part of my outline here. I am going to be going over 4 main elements of effectively covering the lob and being a well-rounded player up at the net. The first section, the first out of the 4 areas is going to be about court positioning. And you talked about this a little bit in your message, saying that you guys tried to mix it up and play 2 back a little bit and also just come in just a little bit in front of the service line. It is good that you guys tried to make some changes, but I am going to talk about this and make sure that everybody is on the same page, and has a good understanding of how they should be positioning themselves during a doubles match. You do not want to oversell your position when you come forwards to the net.

Coming to the net is an excellent tactic. It pressures your opponents. It forces them to have to try to hit a good shot, and it puts you in an offensive position to be able to try to put the ball away. So, coming in is excellent, but you do not want to overdo it. You want to pressure your opponents without leaving large spaces of court open, and that includes behind you. Now, where exactly on the court you should position yourselves depends on your opponents, and this is the really really important part of this. How often your opponents lob, and how well they lob is going to determine exactly where on the court you put yourself from point to point. And you have to pay close attention to your opponents to be able to figure this out. And I wrote 'PAY ATTENTION' in all capitals on my outline. I wrote a couple of things in all capitals during this outline and this is one of them. You have to pay close attention to what your opponents like to do during your doubles' match, and And Michelle, obviously, I do not think this was a problem for you. You guys obviously figured out early that your opponents like to lob, and you guys did try changing up your positions on the court.

So I do not think this is where your problem was. I just want to make sure that everybody understands that this is very very important. You do not want to position yourself the same way for every opponent. That would just be poor tactics. And some examples of that would be like what Michelle said. She and her partner figured out that their opponents liked to lob, and so they started playing different positions on the court, and the 2 examples she gave were playing 2 back and also being a little bit farther back than she typically would be. It sounds like when she normally plays the net she likes to get close and put the ball away, but during this particular match she and her partner were coming up to the net just inside the service line. So these are 2 good examples of ways that you guys can vary your positions on the court in order to more closely cover that lob against a team that likes to lob.

You also want to try experimenting with a staggered position at the net with your partner, meaning that 1 of you is a little bit closer than the other. When you guys watch professional doubles on TV, you will usually see this. When you are watching a team that serves and volleys and returns and volleys, watch just one-half of the court. Watch 1 team and see how they position themselves. Rarely will you see both

players even with each other when they are both at the net. One will be a little bit farther back and 1 will be a little bit closer. Now, again, this depends on your opponents' lobbing tendencies. As with everything tactically, when you guys are playing doubles, if they never lob at all, then you can stay pretty much together, and go ahead and close into the net and get really close and really pressure your opponents.

If they lob a lot, then you want to leave several feet between you and your partner in terms of your depth. Meaning, 1 of you should be several feet closer to the net, and the other 1 several feet closer to the baseline. This puts 1 of you in a slightly more aggressive position, and the other person, your partner, in a slightly more defensive position. This is good because you guys can kind of have your cake and eat it too a little bit. And exactly how much space to leave between yourselves, and exactly how close both of you are again is going to depend on how much your opponents like to lob and how good they are at it. But, in case you have not tried that before, Michelle, try doing more of a staggered position. That will leave your partner close to the net to try to put the ball away, or you close to the net, and the other player a little bit farther away so that she is ready to go back and cover behind that close person in case a good lob goes over her head. So that wraps up my first section on court positioning. Just a couple of really important things to understand.

Next up I want to talk about anticipation and preparedness when you are up at the net. You need to be read, and I am going to start off this section by saying again you need to notice your opponent's tendencies closely. Pay close attention to what your opponents like to do, and this is of the utmost importance. You need to know. You need to pay attention to this. And so many doubles' teams just do not. And they just continue playing the way they always play their doubles. They do not make any adjustments. And it is because they are not paying attention to what is going on. Once you have been inside the service line for several shots during a point, you need to start looking for the lob. You need to anticipate it.

Do not close in inside the service line to try to put the ball away, and assume that everything is going to be just fine, and you have nothing to worry about and you are about to close out the point. Once you have made it in front of the service line, and you have hit 1 or 2 volleys and you have not finished the point yet, start looking for the lob on purpose, especially if the ball is traveling towards somebody who is on the baseline. If your opponents are still on a 1-up, 1-back position, and you and your partner are at the net, and especially if 1 or both of you are well inside the service line, just go ahead and expect that a lob is going to come.

Assuming you are not putting the ball away. Now if both of your opponents are also at the net hitting a good lob volley or a half volley lob or any lob really from at the net over another net player is a really tough shot, but if they are playing 1-up, 1-back and you or your partner hit to the back person and you or your partner or both of you are both inside the service line, pretty much expect that they are going to lob. And Michelle and everybody else who plays at a 3.0 or 3.5-level, this is going to happen a lot and you guys know it. Those of you who are playing at a 5 level or below, you know that your opponents very often like to lob so do not be surprised by it. Look for it. You need to start anticipating it and paying

closer attention.

Next up under anticipation and preparedness, read your opponents. Read their position on the court. So, again, going back to being 1-up, 1-back. If the ball is going towards the back player, look for that lob. Swing technique and racket face. Look at how they are preparing their racket and look at the angle of the strings. If they turn themselves to the side, and they take their racket up at shoulder height, and the racket face is closed, look for a drive. They are about to hit a strong drive to try to pass you or your partner or both of you, obviously. If they are facing the net and the racket just gets taken back low and the racket face is open, it is facing up towards the sky, they are about to lob. And you need to watch these little details. The closer you start to watch your opponents, the more of these types of cues you will start to pick up on, and they are very important, because they will help you anticipate what is coming next so that you can be ready mentally and physically to be able to cover whatever shot they try to hit.

Lastly, under anticipation and preparedness I would like to talk about the use of the split step and also your initial reaction to the lob when it does go up into the air. The split step is incredibly important in all aspects of tennis whether you are a single's player, a double's player, whether you are at the net or at the baseline, it is of the utmost importance that you guys do use the split step to support yourself, to balance yourself and to be ready to move for anything. I very often see doubles' players close into the net, and as their opponent hits the next shot, they are still in mid-stride and still moving forward. They are still actively moving forward and taking steps towards the net as the ball goes up into the air. And that is a huge mistake. Your balance is leaning forwards towards the net and your feet are actively moving in the wrong direction. That cannot happen if you want to be able to cover the entire court effectively. So, what you need to do is make your split step right as they are making contact with their shot no matter what it happens to be so that you are ready to move in any direction. If it is a lob, you are balanced, if it is a drive, you are balanced. If it is to your right or to you left, you are prepared. Please do not make the mistake of not split stepping, and just running into the net without being ready to move. So, that is the split step.

Secondly, after you have made your split step, your opponent has made contact with the ball, and it is going up into the air as a lob, move immediately. This is another thing that I have in my outline that is in all capitals, and, you know, this seems incredibly obvious. [laughter] I mean, yeah, sure, I need to move right away. But recreational players, there is kind of a disconnect [laughter] in reality in my experience between how hard club players think that they are playing and how quickly they are reacting and what is actually happening. I so often see a lob go up into the air when both players are at the net in a doubles' point and I watch the net players watch the ball go into the air, see the lob get to about, its apex--its highest point in its path, and then kind of go, oh crap! And then turn around and start to run.

And it absolutely too late. The split step should prepare your feet to move, and as soon as you see that racket face open up and as soon as the ball comes off the strings and it goes up into the air, both players need to move immediately. It is extremely important. And once they start to move back towards the ball or wherever it happens to be going, both players need to start to communicate and talk. This is another

very important part of covering the lob is communication, and I could definitely do a whole other section just on the communication part of it. But suffice it to say for right now that both players need to move and then start to talk and work out as early as possible who is going to cover which shot. It is extremely, extremely important.

So that brings us halfway through. We have talked about court positioning, and we have talked about anticipation and preparedness. Two more points to go. Before I get to those last 2 points I want to tell you guys about my sponsor of the show today on the Essential Tennis Podcast, and that is Championship Tennis Tours. They can be found at tennistours.com. Since 1987 they have been putting together individual ticket sales to professional tennis events, as well as complete travel packages to go watch professional tennis players play, which is an amazing experience. If you appreciate the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you have learned from it, please go check them out, and show them that you appreciate their support of the podcast.

They help finance my time here. They are a paid sponsor of the podcast, and if we can keep them happy [laughter] and keep them as an advertiser, that will absolutely help me to continue to do more of what I am doing here at Essential Tennis, and to continue moving me towards doing this full time. So go check them out. And what I have been talking about recently that they are offering is their U.S. Open packages, and you can choose between 2 different hotels: a 4 and 5-star hotel, you can choose what ticket you would like, courtside or promenade, and they also throw in a Broadway performance, tickets to a Mets or a Yankees game, which is pretty cool, or a city tour.

And you get a limousine shuttle to the U.S. Open and back to your hotel, which is pretty sweet. So, go check them out. Check out their packages to the U.S. Open. If you are going to the U.S. Open anyway, you have no excuse. Go check them out right now. You can buy either individual tickets or 1 of these incredible packages, and as an extra bonus, if you use the promotional bonus Essential, they will give you a special invitation to an Essential Tennis Podcast, and Championship Tennis cocktail party in Times Square during the U.S. Open. I will have more information on that in the near future, but I thank them very much for their support of the podcast. Please go check them out and thank them by making your next purchase through tennistours.com.

Alright, let us finish up by talking about the last 2 elements of moving back and covering a lob effectively in doubles. We have already talked about court positioning and anticipation. Next up we are going to talk about foot work. And the way that you actually physically move back to cover a lob when you are at the net. And this is going to apply for you single's players, as well. It is extremely important. You need to move back sideways to the net, meaning that, let us say that you have made a split step, and that means that you are facing forward, and your shoulders are parallel to the net. You are facing forward towards your opponent.

Once they put that lob up and you realize you are going to have to move back, or even (actually, I take that back), no matter where you need to move you need to turn yourself 90 degrees to the side and get yourself sideways to the net. Now, if you are a right-handed player, you are going to do that by taking

your right foot and pivoting it around, sliding your right foot around back behind you and getting your stance closed so that your body is sideways. So if you are a right-handed player, your right foot will go back so that your left shoulder is pointing forward towards your opponents. If you are a left-handed player, it is the opposite. Your left foot will slide around and pivot around your right foot and go back behind you to get yourself turned to the side. This is extremely important for a few reasons, and this is a huge recreational player mistake when trying to move back. A lot of recreational players move back towards the baseline to recover a lob with their heels first meaning they will stay facing towards the net and they will back peddle with their heels first back towards the baseline, and try to move back to try to cover a lob that way to try to hit an overhead, assuming that they are not actually turning around and running back towards the baseline. This is a big mistake. First of all, it is slow. It is not an athletic position to move in. There are times when back peddling is an appropriate way to move around a tennis court, but not in this circumstance. It is much slower than the alternative, which I will talk about in a second.

Secondly, it is dangerous. I have seen multiple people move back in this way with their heels first and get tripped up, because it is very difficult to balance when you are back peddling quickly. We are just not designed to move that way guys. I mean, we do not have toes back there to keep our balance. When you are on your heels and moving quickly backwards, it is very easy to trip up and fall back, and I have seen people whack the back of their head behind them after tripping and falling. I have also seen people break their hand that way, tripping and trying to brace themselves with their hand. So, honestly it is dangerous trying to move back that way.

Nevermind that it is slow. And thirdly, when you move back that way, it does not turn your body to the side and that is a problem, because it does not allow you to hit as strong an overhead. Think about your serve. Hopefully, you do not face forwards and hit your serve while facing towards the net. You turn sideways first, so that you can rotate your body forwards toward your target and create power by using the rotation of your core. We want to do that on every overhead possible. So by taking your dominant foot. Well, the foot of your dominant side. A right-handed player, your right hand. Left-handed player, your left foot, and by moving it back and getting sideways, you avoid all of those things, and obviously that is a good thing. Now, the way that you should move back is with either a side shuffle or by crossing over. And actually usually a cross-over step. Either 1 if fine. They are both faster, and they are both safer. They both get you turned to the side. Cross-over step take a little bit more athleticism, but it is faster. I see some players use a combination. Maybe they will cross-over their first 2 or 3 steps and then go to a shuffle to kind of fine-tune their positioning on the court. But no matter what, make sure you get to the side and then use whatever footwork is comfortable for you there. But if you can work out a side shuffle, or a side-step, a cross-over step, you are going to be in much better shape than moving back heels first. Alright, so that is footwork.

And the last element here of being able to cover that lob effectively is your actual overhead, and Michelle, I want you to work on your overhead so that it becomes more of a weapon. If you want to continue advancing as a doubles' player, and if the rest of you listening want to continue to improve your doubles' game or just your net game in general, you need to make your overhead a priority during your practice time. Spend time practicing your overhead. And all too often when I am running team

practices during the week where I teach, when it comes time to work on the overhead, everybody is like oh, no, not the overhead. I do not want to work on this, because players are not comfortable or confident with their overhead. Well, how do you think you are going to get comfortable and confident with it. You have got to start hitting it a lot. You have got to practice it. Take a few lessons. If you have got time and money go to your local club and get a couple of lessons from a professional about your overhead technique. You can improve your overhand throwing motion to get more power and to get better placement, and have a more effective overhead.

So, take some lessons if you can. Also, I want to point out that the goal of the overhead should be to finish a point. When you get an overhead in the middle of a doubles' point, you should be looking to close the point out. It should be aggressive shot whenever possible. It is not always the case. When a lob is hit really well and you are having a hard time just to get to it, sometimes it is not practical or even possible to try to hit an aggressive overhead, but you guys should be working towards a goal of having your overhead be a weapon so that you enjoy getting lobbed. [laughter] I tell students this all the time when they complain, when they come back and have a story much like Michelle's, when I introduce this topic and my students tell me, wow, I had a doubles' match, it did not go very well. I was coming up to the net just like you always tell me to, Ian, and they lobbed every time. And all of their lobs hit right on the back of the line on the baseline, and it was incredible, and I do not buy it. First of all, average level players are not great lobbers.

It is a tough shot to hit a really good lob deep in the court. Now, it will happen. Do not get me wrong. But most of the time when we are talking about recreational players and a team that lobs a lot, a team that gets beat by a lobbing team, usually it is due more to poor foot work, poor communication skills with partner, poor positioning and just the missing of overheads in general that is the ultimate reason for losing the match, not a slew of perfectly hit lobs. It can happen, but very rarely. And so you guys need to continue working on your overhead. Develop it so that eventually in the future you enjoy getting lobbed, you know, not if it is on the baseline--that will happen sometimes--but you should enjoy getting a lob over you that you can hit an overhead on, because it should become a weapon to be able to put the ball away. So, Michelle, hopefully I have answered your question, and Michelle, by the way is coming to the Baltimore Essential Tennis Clinic, coming up in just a couple of weeks. And Michelle I look forward to working with you in person on this.

We will be covering these types of topics at the clinic in Baltimore, so I will get to see you in person and work with you on all of these different aspects. Again, we had 4 main aspects of covering the lob well, and those were court positioning, anticipation, and being prepared, correct footwork, and improving your overhead and having a more solid overhead. If you guys can work on all 4 of those areas, you will get beat by the lob much less, I promise you. So, Michelle, that is it. Hopefully, it was helpful to you. Feel free to send me an email with any followup questions, and thanks very much for being a listener. Thank you for your excellent questions that I could talk about today. [music] [music] [music] [music]

Alright. That does it for Episode 118 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for joining me today for downloading the file and for giving it a listen. Hopefully, it was helpful to you. If you ever have

any questions of your own, you can feel free to send me an email at lan@essentialtennis.com, or if you go to essentialtennis.com and click on contact there is a form that you can fill out that also goes directly to me, and I have a running list of podcast topics that I am going to be getting to in the future. And I answer those in the order that they were received. So sometimes it takes a little while for me to get to people's questions, but I do always talk about whatever topics people send me messages about which I enjoy doing. If you enjoyed today's show do me a favor and go to Itunes and rate and submit a comment about the Essential Tennis Podcast.

That helps my ratings over there at Apple, the Itunes music store, which is the biggest source of downloads for the podcast, so if the show has been helpful to you, do me a favor and spend a couple of minutes an rate the show, and also leave a comment, and I would appreciate that. Alright, that does it for this week. Take care everybody, and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]