

Essential Tennis Podcast #119

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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 is technique, strategy, equipment or the mental game tennis professional Ian Westermann is here to make you a better player. And now, here's Ian. [music]

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. Before we get into today's questions that I'm going to be answering I want to talk to you guys briefly about a feature at essentialtennis.com that truthfully, I don't think you guys are taking advantage of nearly enough.

Now the forums at essentialtennis.com have grown and I'm really happy about that. I'm really proud of the community that has been growing over there, but I think more of you guys need to go experience for yourselves and start taking advantage of it. Its not just a place to go and burn time and you waste time on the internet. Its really a place where you guys can continue to help improve your tennis game. And one way that happens is through professional feedback. I spend a lot of time there posting, answering questions and giving my two cents. There are other professional, certified USPTA tennis pros as well, that are friends of mine.

Royce is one, he's been on the podcast a couple of times, he's spends a lot of time there as well giving feedback. So its another way that you can get value out of Essential Tennis, by getting feedback from myself and other pros. Also as I mentioned a second ago, the community and support aspects of the forum are incredible. People post their experiences during league matches and tournaments. They post their problems that they're having with their mental game or their technique or their strokes and other members give feedback, or just give support, they say "Hey, you know stick with it don't worry about it," or "Hey, I've got that same problem, this works for me." and it's just a wonderful place to go to stay passionate about tennis and continue getting ideas and just kind of give yourself a kick in the pants when you need it, to continue working hard at your game.

To give you guys some extra incentive to go check it out, if you are one of the first seven people this week to sign up for a free account and introduce yourself in the top forum there, at the forums, which is the introduction forum. All you have to do is sign up for free, introduce yourself to the community there and I will send you a free copy of Mental Tennis by Vick Braden. Which is an amazing book about mental tennis, totally free of charge I'll send that to you. All you have to do is go to the forums, sign up, introduce yourself and I will send you a free book. So please do go check it out, again its completely free, I'm not trying to trick you guys here, or anything. As with all of the different parts of the website, I want it to continue to grow, I want more people there and that will continue to make it a better and better place for everybody to continue working at their tennis games so go check it out. Alright lets gets down to business! Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [silence] [music]

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Ian: Alright, so lets get started with today's show. And the first question that I'm going to discuss comes to us from Tony in Georgia. Now, this is not Georgia in the United States of America, but rather Georgia, the country in far eastern Europe. Which is pretty cool, Tony I'm pretty sure you're the first Georgian listener that I've heard from. It's really nice to hear from you. He wrote to me and says he plays three times a week and he groups himself within the top five Georgian tennis players under the age of 18. Tony, keep up the good work and I hope that you continue to work at your tennis and hopefully in the near future you can maybe do some international competition etcetera.

His question was "How exactly should I hit a strong attacking shot on the rise? I don't get a lot of these types of shots because I usually just let the ball come back down again and I want to make a slight change in my playing style this way." Well Tony, that's a good question, and Andre Agassi kind of made this type of shot popular. Back in the early and mid '90s he really stayed close to the base line and took the ball earlier than most professional players had up until that time. There's no doubt in my mind that players before Andre Agassi did take the ball early and did hit the ball on the rise. There's no doubt about that. But he kind of used it more exclusively as a playing style and really stayed close to the baseline. Unlike a lot of players back in the '90s that were starting to get farther and farther away from the baseline and hit with more top spin and more power.

So, anyway I am going to be talking today Tony about, not only how to hit this shot more aggressively but I want to take this opportunity to tell you and the rest of my listeners about how this shot works in general as well. I want to make sure everybody on the same page about this shot, about taking the ball on the rise and how to do it correctly, before I start talking about hitting it aggressively. So my first couple of topics here are going to have to do with the shot in general. So lets just give a little bit of background information about the shot. First of all, it's an excellent tactic to learn. It takes time away from your opponent when you hit the ball right after its bounced, you take away time, you're closer to the ball, to where its bouncing than you normally would be when you would've let the ball come up to the top, to the top of its bounce and then come down again before you hit it like you described Tony.

By taking it earlier you give your opponent less time to react to your shot. It also keeps you in a better position on the courts, as I mentioned a second ago, to take the- to hit the ball with a ground stroke on its way back down from the bounce, you need to be farther away from where it landed on the court in the first place. So by taking the ball on the rise, you have the advantage of staying closer to your opponent and you get to keep yourself in a more offensive position, a little bit closer to your opponents. And closer to the net. Now, on the rise basics as I mentioned a second ago, it is hitting while the ball is coming back up from making contact with the court so its exactly what its title says, its hitting on the rise as its rising up off the court after its bounced.

The easiest way to hit a ground stroke is on its way back down again, it gives you the most time to react to the bounce after its hit the courts and its just the easiest way to do it period. However, hitting on the rise is useful in several situations and I've outlined three of them here. First of all, its useful when your

opponent has hit a very deep and high bouncing shot. An example of this would be a shot that's crossed the net by a wide margin, maybe four or five feet over the top of the net, with a lot of top spin and the ball is about to land within a couple of feet from the baseline.

Now this type of shot from your opponent if you were to let it get all the way to the peak of its bounce then let it come back down again to your strike zone, which is somewhere about waist height, that's where you typically want to make contact with a ground stroke. In order to allow that to happen, and hit it in kind of this more traditional way, letting it come back down again, you're going to back way up behind the baseline. Sometimes, there's not even enough room behind the baseline to let it come down to your strike zone again and which means that you're going to end up backing up way behind the baseline and hitting it in an awkward position, at shoulder height, or even above shoulder height to try to get it back.

This is not a situation that you want to be in especially if you want to hit an aggressive shot. Which is what Tony is asking about. Second situation where hitting on the rise is very useful, is when your opponent has hit a high, floating and weak shot that you want to attack on. This is a ball that has also maybe crossed the net by five or six feet, but is not traveling very far into the court and its landing somewhere around the service line. Maybe even a little shorter than that, or deeper, but definitely not close to the baseline.

This is a shot that you're going to move forward into the baseline to be able to hit early on purpose. And very often you'll follow up that shot with a volley, by coming up to the net. The third situation where you're going to want to consider hitting the ball on the rise is when you've been caught off guard and in the middle of the courts by your opponent. Maybe you had a hard time recovering back to the baseline after a tough shot from your opponent that landed short, or something, maybe you're serving in volley and the balls been hit right at your feet. But some way or another you've been caught in the center of the courts, not necessarily literally the center but inside the baseline, and the ball is coming right towards your feet.

That's another situation where you might want to consider hitting the ball on the rise. Instead of backing way up to allow the ball to come up to the peak of its bounce and then come back down again. So, those are kind of the three main situations that you're going to want to try hitting the ball on the rise. When your opponent's hit a really good deep shot, when your opponent has hit a high and weak shot, or when you've been caught off guard inside the baseline and the ball is coming towards your feet.

Now let's talk about the technique of actually hitting a ball on the rise. And we're going to get into some technical details about how this actually works. And there's three main elements here that need to be done correctly if you guys want to be successful in hitting the ball on the rise. The first one is foot work, positioning when you're trying to hit the ball on the rise is incredibly, incredibly important. The reason for that is the ball is coming up right off the court.

And you have a very small window that the ball is actually in your strike zone. It's not going to be at waist

height for very long, also you must read the bounce perfectly. You have zero time to change your position after the ball has landed. When you hit a ball in a kind of more of a traditional way, a ground stroke, and you allow it to bounce, come back up to the peak of its bounce and then come back down again. You have time to make adjustments with your position after the ball has landed. Often time recreational players and sometimes even professional players misread a bounce maybe there's some more spin or some different kind of spin than they thought was going to be on the shot in the first place. Maybe it even hits something on the courts, this happens all the time in clay court tennis. When the ball bounces a little bit differently than you expect.

And when you're allowing the ball to come up off the bounce then come back down again, you have extra time to be able to reposition yourself and make an adjustment. When you're hitting the ball on the rise you can't do that, you don't have the time to make an adjustment. And so putting yourself in just the right position is incredibly important to be able to actually hit an effective shot. Most recreational players are still trying to get in the right place after the ball has bounced and so trying to hit the ball immediately after it's bounced usually presents, you know, some problems for recreational players.

A lot of you guys listening are not going to want to use this tactic a lot, however, it's something that I do recommend you work on. And see if it comes quickly to you, see if you're able to develop it pretty fast. And you can add it into your repertoire. So, that's foot work. You've got to position yourself in the right spot. Secondly, out of three here, for technique elements, is timing. As I mentioned a second ago, the ball moves through your strike zone very quickly and you have very little time to make adjustments.

That means that, not only does your positioning have to be great, but the timing of your swing also has to be perfect, in order to make contact where it's comfortable. If you start your swing a little bit too late, the ball's going to be really high. If you begin your swing too early, it's going to be really low, and just barely coming off of the court. And there's not a whole lot of time, like actual, physical amounts of time, in between those two timings being early or being late, or being just about right, where you're making contact around waist height. There's not a lot of margin for error there because the ball is coming up off the court so quickly immediately after it bounces. Now, this means since the ball comes up off the bounce so quickly and goes through your strike zone so quickly, usually your swing should actually begin before your ball even hits the court.

And so, you want to have your racket prepared obviously before the ball gets to the bounce and you want to kind of drop your racket and begin your forward swing before the ball even hits the court a lot of times. Not always, it depends on the speed that the ball is traveling at and where you are on the court; how aggressively you're trying to hit it, how big your back swing is, all kinds of things, but usually you're going to want to begin your ground stroke swing before it actually hits the courts. And when recreational players mis-time an on-the-rise shot, like 99 percent of the time, they're too late and they've begun their swing past the window where it would've been appropriate so that they're making contact in a comfortable spot. They begin a little bit later than they should which means that the ball comes up out of their strike zone and it ends up being too high. If you guys are going to go out and try this for the first time more than likely, at first, you're going to position yourself too far away from the

ball.

And more than likely, you're going to be late and the ball is going to be up too high. And this is just from experience. Teaching this to people, teaching this to kids, this is a really valuable thing to teach to kids because a lot of times childrens strokes are kind of beyond their physical attributes. So you might have an 11 or 12 year-old kid with great top-spin ground strokes but their only four feet tall, or maybe even less. And so they've got to really position themselves in the right spot. And a shot thats been hit high and close to their baseline, sometimes is just un-returnable when they try to let it come back down again from the bounce because they're just not tall enough to get a racket on it.

So I very often taught kids how to hit on-the-rise to be able to combat a high deep shot from their opponents. And in my experience when they're first starting off trying to learn it they don't get themselves close enough, they don't position themselves close enough to the bounce. Or they position themselves in the right spot but they wait too long to start their swing and the ball gets up way too high outside of their strike zone. So, for those of you going out and you're going to try this for the first time, swing early. Probably earlier than you think you're going to have to.

Now lets talk about actual technique and changes and adjustments you're going to have to make to your technique in order to make this shot. Hitting on the rise is different than a more traditional or standard ground stroke because the ball is actually coming upwards, its accelerating upwards off the court, as opposed to accelerating downwards back towards the courts again and falling back down after its bounced. This means that closing your racket face a little bit more is usually necessary. I'm talking about a top-spin ground stroke here or a drive ground stroke, a low to high type swing. When you combine your low to high swing with a ball that's coming up off the court and accelerating upwards towards your racket it means that the ball is going to combine with the upwards traveling ball, with your upward traveling racket very often causes the ball to travel farther than what you were expecting and rather than shorten your swing up and get tentative and start just pushing the ball in play, and Tony this is for you, since you want to hit this shot aggressively.

You're going to want to close your racket face more, so we want the strings facing down towards the courts a little bit more than normal. And when I say a little bit I'm talking like a couple of degrees. When you guys hit a standard, top-spinner drive, type ground stroke you want your racket face to be just about perpendicular right about flat, 90 degrees to the court surface. When you're hitting on the rise your going to want to close it just a little bit more than that as you continue to make a full swing, to be able to keep that in the courts. And I want you guys to, and Tony you especially, since you want to hit this aggressively, continue to exceleerate upwards as you normally would. You want to create top spin, this is going to help keep the shot in play more consistently. Don't decelerate and push it in play, unless it's a really tough shot and you just want to block it back into the court. I want you guys to try making a full follow through at the ball. And again, if you miss long, close that racket face a little bit more.

If you're having trouble this guys, if you're going on trying it for the first time, you can try just shortening up the swing. And you guys will see pros do this from time to time, especially in in the third example of a

situation where you guys are going to want to use this. When you guys are caught off guard and you're in the middle of the courts you can just simply block the ball back in play and use this as more as a defensive type shot. That's not what Tony asked about, but you can use this as a way to stay in better position just keep the ball back in play, nothing fancy and hope to get back into the points and regain control of what's going on in the points. Now let's talk about actually hitting it aggressively which is what Tony asked about. Let me tell you what you better practice it. And Tony, this goes for you and everybody else listening. Again, your timing, your positioning and your swing technique, all have to be just right. And there's very little margin for error here.

I talked earlier about how the positioning and the timing are so delicate and you've got to be just right. If you're a little bit off on any of these things it becomes a very awkward shot, very quickly. And so if you guys want to be able to use this in match play, start practicing and practice it a lot. Have a friend or practice partner hit you high, deep shots and practice taking it right off the bounce, making contact at waist height and making a full follow thru. Tony it sounds like you want to use this as an attacking shot. So I would recommend that you practice moving forwards and hitting the more aggressive type shot where you're moving into the court and taking a shot that's landing a little bit shorter on the rise. That would be a great shot for you to practice.

Start off at a moderate pace. Tony, you and everybody else as well. And once you start getting consistent and you get comfortable with the positioning and the timing, go ahead and start to speed up the swing a little bit, but I would really caution you guys from doing that right away. Make sure that you're getting comfortable with the important technical elements [inaudible] of the shot first, before you start to really speed up the swing and try to hit it aggressively. Well Tony thank you very much for your question, I appreciate it. Great question and it was really nice to hear from you in Georgia. It's always great to kind of put a pin in a new country on the map. So thanks for being a listener. And hopefully my description here was helpful to you. [music] [music] [music] [music]

Ian: Before we get to our next question, I want to quickly tell you guys about this sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast. And that is Championship Tennis Tours and they're located at tennistours.com. These guys put together ticket travel packages and hotel and accommodation packages for professional tennis events. Both the ATP and WTA. They provide tickets and accommodations to all of the four grand slams along with many, many other professional tennis events all over the world. So if you're planning on going to a professional tennis event in the near future, please definitely check them out. And you can get a discount just for being a listener of the Essential Tennis Podcast. They have coming up a couple of great packages for the US Open where you guys can choose between hotels, types of tickets. Also tickets to a Broadway performance, to a baseball game, to a city tour, limousine shuttle, all kinds of excellent choices. Ways to really make your trip memorable and an exciting experience. So definitely go check them out at tennistours.com.

If you use the promotional code, Essential, with a capital 'E' when you check out, you'll receive a discount off your travel package. And if you do that in conjunction with purchasing a package to the US Open you'll also receive an invitation to a Championship Tennis Tours and Essential Tennis Podcast

cocktail party at the W Hotel in Times Square. Which is pretty awesome, and I'm trying to make plans to be there myself and meet some of you guys, the listeners, who help support the advertisers of the Essentials Tennis podcast. So please show them your support by making a purchase. Doesn't have to be a package, you can purchase individual tickets as well. So go check them out at tennistours.com.

I thank them very much for their support of the Essential Tennis podcast. Alright next up we got a great question from Noam in California. He came out to the Essential Tennis clinic in Palm Springs earlier this year. Good to hear from you again. He wrote us, and said, "You always here and read about placement of the serve, but can that really be done? I'm sure some players are able to do that, like professional tennis players but if this is something that can be developed by them then why do the key elements to change when you're goal is to change the placement of the serve from one serve to another. Would it be positioning of yourself on a different spot of the baseline? And keeping the same service motion, or is it more of controlling the shot by changing the grip, arm, back, wrist movement, etcetera?"

Hopefully this question makes sense, and if it does I am sure you can supply a practical answer. Thanks again, Noam." Yes, it is possible, and no, you don't have to be a professional player to be able to place your serve. Absolutely not, I teach players how to do this every single week while I'm at work. I've actually been working with one student, just on her serve a couple of times a week. And we've been working really hard on , we've totally broken down her technique and rebuilt it to be better. And more solid, technically, and we've worked a lot on exactly on what you're describing, Noam, being able to place the serve and vary its placement on purpose in different places in the box. Now, to answer your question directly. In order to place a serve in different places, no, don't change the grip, don't change your technique, the type of serve, your positioning on the courts, on the baseline, or anything else if you want your serve to be aimed in different places.

You don't have to change any of that stuff in order to control where the ball is going. So what is it? It's all about your racket face at contact, where the strings are actually facing when you make contact is what is going to determine where the ball goes, period. Now that probably seems, that sounds incredibly obvious, incredibly simple and it is. But that's exactly what it comes down to. Where the racket is facing is determined by the timing of your pronation during the swing. There's going to be a big disclaimer here, this is assuming that your service swing is a traditional type swing and technically sound.

Meaning that you follow all the main elements and fundamentals of a good, solid service swing. When you guys break down the service technique of high level players, whether they be professional or college players. Basically a four or five player and above you'll see several key similarities between these types of players and how they swing a tennis racket. And one of those similarities is pronation. You will see all top level tennis players pronate. Pronating I've talked about on the podcast before, I'm not going to get really into it. But basically its the rotation of your forearm and your shoulder from inside to outside. If you face your palms together, if you put both your hands in front of you, face them together so that they're parallel and your palms are facing each other and then you rotate your hands so that they face down toward the ground you've just pronated both of your arms.

And again that rotation occurs, really pronation refers to rotation of your forearm. Rotation of your shoulder also aids in getting that rotation, that acceleration of the racket towards the outside of your body. So what does that have to do with actually aiming your serve? Well if you look at slow motion video, lets talk about a right handed player here. When they were, after the racket has dropped back, behind the player, after they've taken the racket up and prepared their body after their arm has bent and the racket has dropped, this is called the racket drop position. Usually when you guys watch instructional videos online the players palm and the racket strings that are going to be used to hit the ball are facing to the left, your palm is facing to the left. And so are the strings, the side of the racket that's about to get used to hit the ball.

As the racket starts moving upwards on edge towards the contact point, up towards the ball, they will begin to pronate and their hands, their palm and the racket will rotate towards the right and meet the ball facing towards the target. And this is kind of the magical point in time that's going to determine where the ball goes. Depending on where the strings are facing in this point in time will determine what target area is about to get hit by the serve. Or maybe what target area is about to get missed if they're aiming some where different than where the strings are actually facing. As contact is made the racket continues to rotate and will finish with the palm of a righty-players hand facing to the right.

So there's a 180 degree rotation of the forearm from left to right. Facing to the players left if they are facing forward towards the net and then finishing facing towards the right shortly after contact. And this is the pronation element of the serve. And so depending on the timing of this pronation and exactly when during this 180 degree rotation contact is made, is whats going to determine the direction where the ball goes. For a righty-player the longer that they hold the racket on edge as it moves up toward the ball, the more to the left the ball will go. Because their hand will, if they wait a long time, if they wait longer to unwind their hand to the right the strings will be angled more to the left. If they begin that pronation process a little bit earlier contact is made with their palms and with their strings facing more to the right.

And late and early here are relative terms. We're talking about a couple of degrees in rotation between hitting the left corner of a service box and the right corner of a service box. I don't know what the measurement is exactly but I would wager it, its probably ten degrees or less between those two targets, the extremes, the left side and the right side of the box. We're talking about very small changes in the racket face that make a big difference in where the ball goes. And so, Noam, where exactly your racket faces, facing at contact, as you pronate, the split second that the ball meets the strings and where the strings are facing determines where the ball is aimed and you should be able to stand anywhere on the baseline.

Literally anywhere, and use the same grip, use the same technique and be able to hit any corner of either box. Just by varying the timing of your pronation and where exactly the strings are facing when you make contact. Now for those of you who are still listening to me, because I know that listening to audio instruction of details that are really detailed like this is not everybodys cup of tea. So thank you guys for baring with me through that. For those of you who are more visual learners when it comes to

this I just did a video explaining this fully. I mean I went through the entire process on how exactly this works. And with visual examples, I used myself as the example and I hit two serves from the ad sights since I'm left handed. I used the same grip, I stood in exactly the same place. I used the same service motion, I used the same type of serve, it was a spin serve. And I compared two swings.

One where I hit right down the T and I hit the central line, as left as i could've possibly gone in that service box and another serve, all the same mechanics. And I hit the other corner, I hit the right corner of the box. And I compared my techniques between those two service placements and I show you guys how in that video, how all of my technique was exactly the same except for right at contact where my strings, you can see on the video, slow motion video, where I captured right at contact and you can see the difference in angles between my serve down the middle and my serve out wide. Go check that video out. Its really good, if I can say so myself. Its really good comparison and should explain to you guys fully about what I'm talking about in a more visual way. It's a ten minute long video. And it really explains it. So Noam and everybody else listening who has an interest in this go check that out, just go to essentialtennis.com click on video and as I'm recording this, it's the one all the way at the top. And its called "Pronation and Aiming your Serve." So go check that out. [music] [music] [music] [music]

Alright, that does it for episode 119 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you very much for joining me today and I hope that todays show has been helpful to you. If you would ever like me to answer your question on the podcast, feel free to send me an email to ian@essentialtennis.com Ian is spelled, I A N. I'd love to hear from you. And before I wrap up today's show I want to let you guys know that somebody recently dropped their spot for the upcoming essential tennis clinic in Galveston , Texas, in July.

So if you're interested in working with me over a whole weekend and mental tennis expert David Grumpin for an incredible instructional experience please shoot me an email to ian@essentialtennis.com. This event was sold out and unfortunately one of my listeners had to pull out, something came up and she's no longer able to make the event. So if you would like to join me and seven other Essential Tennis listeners and working on your game over a weekend, please shoot me an email. Also at ian@essentialtennis.com. Alright, that does it for this week. Thanks again everybody for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music] [silence]