

Essential Tennis Podcast #121

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

Thanks very much for joining me today for today's episode of the podcast. We are going to be talking all about volleys today and how to practice your volleys, specifically to improve them and make them a better and stronger part of your game.

Before we get to that, I want to remind you about the best way that you can access to Essential Tennis podcast and that is through iTunes which is a free download for the Mac or PC. And through iTunes, you can subscribe to the Essential Tennis podcast and automatically get the episode every week as soon as it gets released as long as you have iTunes open.

So you don't even have to go to the website to download the file. So check it out and subscribe to the show that way and also, as long as you are there, do me a favour and go to the music store, search for tennis, go to the podcast and rate and leave a review for the podcast. I would really appreciate that, that helps with the ratings for the show and will help more people find it on iTunes.

So give me a hand and leave a review for the show. Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] [music] [music]

Alright, let's talk about volleys and the idea for today's show came to us from Eddie who is a 3.5 player who lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. He wrote to me a little while ago and said 'I'm primarily a singles player and I know that I can significantly improve my game if I come to the net more often. I know that I'm missing great opportunities to finish out points. I'm not comfortable at the net and have been playing more doubles to work on my net play. Besides playing more doubles, how do you suggest that a single's player feel more comfortable coming to the net, thanks.'

That's an awesome question and I'm really happy that you are asking it. You are absolutely right, coming to the net more in your single's play is going to improve your tennis game. Especially if you are not comfortable with it now and you just haven't been using it.

So, I really congratulate you on taking this step in your game and I hope you stick with it and you continue to work at your net game. Because as you pointed out, it will give you so many more opportunities to be able to put the ball away. And this was the case yesterday-- Will Hamilton of

fuzzyyellowballs and myself did a live webcast and we were doing commentary during the French Open final between [inaudible] and Nadal. And [inaudible] was hitting some big groundstrokes. Nadal of course as he is known for was playing really good defence and getting to just about everything that was been thrown at him. And [inaudible] had so many chances to move forwards after a big groundstroke where Nadal was on the run in a tough spot, barely getting to the ball, hitting with an open racket face and was obviously just going to push the ball back into play. Now push is a relative term of course, push by a professional standards is just putting it back in play essentially. And [inaudible] was just standing on the baseline or even a couple of steps inside of hte baseline and just standing there watching Nadal run back and forth.

And Will and myself were really pretty hard on [inaudible] about not taking those types of opportunities to move forwards and put the ball away with a simple volley instead of giving Nadal the time that it took for the ball to get all the way back to [inaudible] and then for [inaudible] to setup and launch himself into another big groundstroke.

That's just an example at the professional level of where you guys will have chances but if you are not comfortable at the net and you don't like to volley, you are not going to look for those opportunities and you are throwing away points. You've got chances and you've got to taking advantage of them.

Now playing doubles, one more thing before we get into the actual ways that you can improve your volleys, playing doubles is a great way to practice your net game. And a great way to round out your game. If you've only played singles up to now, it's going to be awkward. It's going to be uncomfortable. You are going to feel like a fish out of water. You are going to think you are a bad player because you won't be able to understand how it can possibly feel so different from singles. And you are going to say to yourself 'well this is just another way to play tennis, right? We are still playing tennis out here. There are just four of us instead of two. How hard could it possibly be?'

Well if you've only played singles, and you go and play some doubles for the first time, you are going to feel really strange on the court. I remember first starting to play doubles when I was still a junior player. I definitely played almost all singles until college but my coach definitely brought me to doubles early on-- or at least go me some experience before I went off to college. And I hated it at first. I was not comfortable with it.

Now when you go to college to play tennis, you have to play both singles and doubles. Very rarely does a player play only one or another. So I really had no choice but to improve to net game.

And once I got into it and I really started getting comfortable with the tactics and the strategy and the tempo of play and communicating with my partner and all those type of things, I really started to love it. There are times now where I definitely enjoy doubles more than singles.

So continue to play doubles and that will round out your singles game. Now let's get down to different ways that you can continue working on your volleys as a singles player. We are not going to talk much

about technique today. I will definitely be throwing in some tips and suggestions on how you guys can do better with your volleys or half-volleys or shots at the net. But I'm going to be focusing mostly on drills that you guys can do and we're going to be talking about seven different volley drills. I've got an outline for each of them, so we are going to get right into it and hopefully get to all seven. There is going to be four cooperative drills, meaning drills that you do with a partner, just one other person and they're drills that you are trying to work with somebody else as a partner on the other side of the net to be able to keep a ball going back and forth for a certain purpose.

And I'm going to be talking about three competitive drills. Drills where you can actually play out points and make it count and practice your volleys within an actual point situation.

Now we are going to talk about the cooperative drills first. And I'm going to be talking about these in progression from the simplest to the most difficult. We are going to talk about the easiest volley drill to do first and as I go through all four, I'm going to progress in difficulty. It's important for you guys to understand this and in my lessons, with my students that I work with, on a weekly basis we very typically go through this whole progression of all four of these cooperative drills. Moving from the easiest down through the most difficult in order to really drill their net game and to get them more and more comfortable hitting volleys at the net.

So, let's go on and start with number one. Cooperative drill number one is a simple volley to volley rally with you and your partner across from each other, half way between the net and the service line. So you guys are probably about 15 feet apart or so which is close. You guys are going to be close to each other. Again, half way between the net and the service line, no closer, no farther away. Both of you guys should be in that same position. And from here your goal is to keep the ball in the air back and forth. And to have each of you continue to hit volleys, both forehands and backhands.

Now in order to do this effectively, a couple of things have to happen. You both have to hit with an open racket face. Meaning your strings are angled upwards towards the sky or towards the ceiling. Why is this important? Because we are not trying to hit these shots at each other, meaning have the ball come off your racket and go directly at your partner. Why? Because that means that the rallies are only going to last about two shots each and our goal here is to keep the ball going as long as possible. We want long rallies.

Secondly, you want to have relaxed hands. Don't hit these firmly. Your hands should be [inaudible] and we're honestly barely holding on to the racket. You should be very relaxed as you hit with that open racket face. And you're really just trying to bump the ball up into the air, we're literally angling the strings up to hit the ball up, and then have the ball come back down again to your partner. So the ball should be falling down to your partner, you're not trying to hit at your partner.

A couple other things to focus on here: Make sure that you start to split step every time your partner hits the ball. And in general, stay on your toes and continue to move your feet. Please do not stand there and rally back and forth. That will be a detriment to your game. You have to practice good

footwork. And those of you listening who were at the latest clinic in Baltimore, know exactly what I'm talking about. We started out that clinic with some short courts, rallies back and forth, nice and swell, and I got on everybody's case immediately about moving their feet. Even when the ball was not coming to them, when the ball was coming to another player that was next to them, I was yelling at people from across 2 courts, "Your feet are not moving anymore." And when you guys get into the habit of this, you'll get in better shape, and you'll have a better habit of continuing to move your feet. So, even though this might be easy for some of you guys, to rally close and soft and relaxed back and forth, keep your feet moving, get in the habit of split stepping, It's going to make your volleys better.

Now, this volley to volley rally, softly, I want you guys to do it with your partner until you've made 20 volleys in a row without any bounces. The ball lands in front of either of you, or if it hits the net, or if one of you guys can't reach one of the volleys, that's it. You go back down to zero again, start again, and keep going until you get 20 in a row back and forth without any bounces. If you can't do that, then this is all you do that day. Alright? With your partner. And you keep working at it until you get 20. And if you can not get 20, do not progress to the next drill. Because this is where you need to work on. This should be the easiest out of the 4 drills that we're talking about. And if you can't do it, don't move on. Alright? Focus on improving this part of your game.

Alright, cooperative drill number 2. Volley to volley from the service line. This is going to be obviously very similar to the first drill that I talked about, but this time you and your partner are going to back up a little further, and both of you will be in the middle of the service line. And you're goal again is to keep the ball in the air back and forth. In order to do this, you still want an open racket face as you make contact with each volley. Don't close your racket and drive to drive the ball, or hit it with top spin to get it to go farther. Keep your racket face open, and hit a simple, traditional volley. [noise] A little bit of back spin should be on each shot.

The difference between these volleys and the short ones, is that we do want to hit the ball a little bit firmer to get it to go farther, because we're quite a bit deeper. If you guys are just like in your car, or you know, in your back yard listening to me now, it probably doesn't sound like a big difference between the first drill where you're half way between the net and the service line, and this one, where you and your partner are both at the service line. But trust me, it's a big difference. It's a lot tougher. Keep a simple technique. Keep an open racket face.

We're just trying to hit through the ball a little more with that open face, a little bit firmer shot, to direct the ball towards your partner, and keep it deep, back and forth. You really should be aiming for about your partner's chest, anything lower than that, and you want to either lower your racket face a bit more, or hit it a little bit firmer to try to keep it in the air back and forth. Just like the first drill, if the ball bounces, then fine. Practice your [inaudible] I'm going to give you guys a goal in a second, but what I don't want to see you guys doing is running in for short shots and then trying to back up again.

Just stay on the service line for now. Keep it simple. Do keep your feet moving. And continue to split step. You can take a step forward to take the ball out of the air if you can reach it on one step, but for

the most part you should just be staying on the service line, and taking the ball as it comes to you. [music] If your partner continues to hit it at your feet, or bouncing it in front of you, they need to work on their control and their depth of their volleys.

Remind them that they should be aiming for your chest and your goal is to keep the ball in the air back and forth. I want you and your partner to get 10 in a row in the air. So again, if the ball bounces, fine. Just hit a half volley, keep the rally going, but start your count again back at zero, and try to get 10 in a row. If you get 10 in a row no problem, shoot for 15 or 20. If you can get 20 in a row without a bounce, with both of you on the service line, without cheating inside the service line, you're really doing an excellent job, and you and your partner are pretty advanced volleyers. That's much easier... I'm sorry, much more difficult to do than what it sounds like just listening to me describe it. So, that's cooperative volley drill number 2, both of you on the service line.

Let's move on to the third one. Another progression here, and this is going to be ground strokes to volleys. One of you is now gonna be on the baseline, the other one in the middle of the service line. The ground stroke player is going to be either on the deuce side, or the ad side. They are going to take one half of the court back behind the baseline. The volleyer is going to be aiming past the service line now. Their target is going to be between the service line and the base line. So they're trying to hit a deep volley and on one half of the singles' court.

So, either the deuce half or the ad half, so essentially we're taking that rectangle called no-man's land, deep in the court between the service line and the baseline and we're going to cut that in half. We're not using the alleys, we're just using half of no-man's land, and that's going to be the target for the volleyer. Put something there, by the way. In the middle of that half of no-man's land put a ball pyramid, or a cone, or a hat, or something. Put it right in the middle of that box that you're aiming for as the volleyer and literally try to hit it. It's good for your concentration, and it's a good reminder of what your objective is. You're trying to hit your target over and over again.

Now, the ground stroke player should be making a full round stroke swing at a steady pace. This player is not trying to hit all out and hit aggressive shots, but make sure as the ground stroke player, that you're not just pushing the ball towards the volleyer as well. You want to be making a full swing at whatever rally speed that you normally hit at, that you and your partner normally hit at. You should be trying to hit the volleyer in the air. Trying to give them as many volleys as possible. If it lands in front of them, that's okay.

They can practice their half volleys as well. And volleyers, you should be remaining on the service line. Don't cheat in. Don't cheat in. You're gonna want to. Especially if you don't volley a lot. You're gonna want to get closer where it's easier to volley. Stay on the service line and practice your volleys from there. Stay on one half on no-man's land until the volleyer makes 20 volleys total. Not in row, but a total of 20 that go past the service line and are on the correct half of the court, either the deuce side or the ad side, then switch over to the other side. Volleyer will stay in the middle of the service line, ground stroke player will shift over to the other half of the court, and the volleyer will make another set of 20.

Alright? So that's cooperative drill number 3.

Before we get to our fourth and final cooperative drill, I want to remind you guys about the sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast, who I appreciate very much for their support of myself and for Essential Tennis, for the podcast, and that is Championship Tennis Tours. You can find them at tennistours.com, and since 1987 they've been selling individual tickets to professional tennis events, both the WTA and ATP events all over the world. And they not only sell individual tickets, but also complete ticket packages, including hotel and accommodations, even limousine service from your hotel to the tournament site, all kinds of different things, all kinds of different packages.

And if you haven't been to a grand slam--and the US Open is gonna be coming up pretty quickly, Wimbledon is next, and then finally the US Open--if you haven't been there before, you should really check out their packages for the US Open this year. You get a choice of all kind of different options, including choice of hotel between the W in Times Square, and Essex Hotel as well. Also in New York City. Both--obviously Times Square is in New York City--but both hotels you get to choose between those two. You get to choose the kind of ticket, how close you are to the action during the matches that you go to watch. You get shuttle service back and forth.

Also, a choice between tickets to a Mets or Yankees game, a city tour, or a Broadway performance, all kind of awesome stuff. Plus, you'll get an invitation to an exclusive Essential Tennis podcast cocktail party at the W Hotel in Times Square. And I'm gonna be making plans to be there myself, so you can meet me, and other listeners of the Essential Tennis podcast who are checking out the action at the US Open. So go check them out. Again, tennistours.com, and when you check out, if you'd like the invitation to that cocktail party, make sure to use the promotional code Essential with a capital E as you check out, for your purchase.

Alright, now let's get to that final cooperative drill to work on your volleys. And this is gonna put together ground strokes and volleys. And as I told you guys when I kicked things off, this is been a progression from easiest to most difficult. This is gonna be the toughest drill here, cooperative drill that you can do with your partner to work on your net game. Now we're going to have both players starting from the middle of the baseline. One player is going to be hitting an approach shot and moving forwards, the other player is going to be staying on the baseline and going to be hitting all ground strokes.

The person that's going to be staying on the baseline is going to feed a short shot-- meaning really anything that's soft and lands in front of the service line on the other side, but the baseline player should feed it short in front of the service line--player across from them is gonna move forwards, hit an approach shot down the middle of the court and then continue on into the net. Now, as with all the other drills, there's going to be a target area. The target area for the approaching player is between the service line and the baseline and also between two other targets. And normally when I do this with my students, I place two cones or two ball pyramids in no-man's land about 10 or 15 feet apart. And so my student will have basically a box or a square right in the middle of no-man's land, and their target is

between the service line and the baseline, in between the two cones that I put out. And so they've got a square right in the center of no-man's land, and that's their target area. Anything that lands outside of those parameters, we start the drill over again and start back from square one.

Now, the approaching player, their objective here is to make that approach shot off of the short feed, and then 2 volleys after that in a row. So we're trying to make 3 shots: an approach, and 2 volleys. And as you hit those 3 shots, as the approaching player, you should be getting closer and closer to the net. By the time you hit your third shot, that second volley, you should be pretty close to the net as you continue moving forwards. If you're the baseline player, again, you should be making full ground stroke swings at a steady pace, nothing aggressive, but you should be trying to hit a good solid shot that makes it all the way back to your partner. Continue doing this until that approaching player has 5 times made all 3 shots in a row--the approach and 2 volleys. If either player misses--either the approaching player or the baseline player--start back again, reset with both players in the middle of the baseline, and start over again.

This is really important guys, and now, before we move on to the competitive drills, a couple of things that you guys want to keep in mind as you do these cooperative drills: First of all, stay on task. And I've given you guys specific targets, specific objectives, and by following those instructions, you will get the most out of this practice time. Don't miss, you know, don't do the first volley drill, go for 20 in a row, miss at 15. You know, it bounces, say, "Oh, that was close enough, keep going". And then get 20, and say, "Alright, great. We got it. Let's move on." Be honest. Don't cheat yourselves, please. Make it as tough as it's supposed to be. Don't make it easier on yourself by cheating or getting closer in the volley to volley rallies, whatever. If you miss a ground stroke, on that fourth and final drill, you put it into the net and your partner just needed one more volley, don't feed in another ball. That kind of defeats the purpose of the drill which is have the approaching player work on moving forwards and hitting volleys at the same time. So don't cheat yourselves, number one.

Secondly, as the volleyer especially, be very aware of your quality of contact. Meaning, pay close attention to where the ball is hitting on your racket, because it will make a big difference, a huge difference, in where the ball goes. Most of these shots that you'll be hitting as the volleyer, you'll be relaxed, and you're not going to be gripping the racket very tightly. And when the ball hits off your frame, or not even off your frame, but just not the middle of the racket and out close to the frame, it's gonna kill your shot. You will not get the same results. I strongly suggest that if you haven't heard it already, go download the Watch the Ball podcast which was just a couple shows ago, and listen to it. It's gonna be really important as you do these drills to pay close attention to where the ball is hitting on your racket.

Thirdly, pay close attention to your consistency of shot, and be picky about this. During the drills where you have a specific target, between the service line and the baseline, etc., really be picky. In other words, if you're only making one in your target area, and then missing 3 or 4, or 5 by a couple feet, and then making 1, then missing 4 again, you're not doing very well. Alright? And pay close attention to this. Honestly, you should be making 3, 4, 5, in a row, in your target area, before you make a mistake. And

then making another 3, or 4, or 5 in a row again. If you're not doing that, focus on the contact and simplify your technique. We're not going to talk about technique right now, but just make it simple, and just make sure you're hitting your target.

Lastly, your target and the ball are the most two important things here. Nothing is more important. Make sure you make good contact, make sure you focus on your target, and do that during all 4 of those cooperative drills, and you'll get much more out of it.

Alright, now, 3 competitive drills before we wrap up today's show. First of all--and this is one of my favorite drills, competitive games, of all time, volley to volley game--both players start in no-man's land, half way between the service line and the baseline. And you're gonna use half of the double's court, or the single's court. You're gonna use either the ad or the deuce side, and you're gonna play straight ahead. So if I'm on the deuce side on my half of the court, straight across from me is my opponent. He or she is on the ad side. I'm on the deuce side, they're on the ad side, and we're gonna play this game straight ahead. You're gonna feed a volley to the person across from you, who's in no-man's land, give them a volley--a courtesy shot, right to them--so that they can play a volley, and then after that anything goes.

It's your choice whether or not you want to make the alleys in or not, you can play alleys in or you can play alleys out, for... they kind of work on different stuff. When the alleys are out, it really keeps you in a very close-quartered part of the court. Really works a lot on hands, there's not really any room for angles, and it's all about, kind of braking the other person down, making more shots than they do. Also good to emphasize closing in to the net. When alleys are in, you have a little more space to use, and you can start to use angles a little bit more than when alleys are out. So, your choice. Whichever one you want to do. Try it both ways.

But both players start in no-man's land, straight ahead from each other. Courtesy feed, feed of volley to the person across from you, and then play it out. This really kind of you can say, is more of a double's drill than a single's drill since it's volley to volley, but it's outstanding practice; to work on your hands your touch, your reaction time, and your footwork, as you move in to the net from no-man's land after that first shot. Don't stay in no-man's land. Close in. And if you miss your volleys on your way in, we've found something that you need to work on and get more consistent at. Again, this is one of my favorite games. There's a lot of fast action. I would also suggest that you guys switch who feeds every point back and forth, or every 5 points, or something like that. Make sure the same person doesn't feed every time. So, that's competitive drill number 1, to work on volleys.

Number 2: Ground strokes to volleys. In this game, the volleyer starts on the service line, and we're gonna use the entire single's court for this one. Volleyer is going to start right in the middle of the service line, the other player is gonna start in the middle of the baseline. The volleyer is gonna feed a courtesy shot right down the middle to the ground stroke player, and then the ground stroke player must hit a shot in return that the volleyer can touch. Now, notice I didn't say it's a courtesy shot. That ground stroke player can hit it hard, he or she can hit it low at the volleyer's feet, he or she can stretch

the volleyer out a little bit to one side or the other, but the ground stroke player just can't hit a winner. He can't hit an outright winner, in fairness for the volleyer, since the volleyer is just feeding in a courtesy shot to the baseline player.

So, that's how it starts. A courtesy shot from the volleyer, a competitive shot from the baseline player, but it has to be touched by the volleyer, and then play it out. Full court singles. Anything goes. And this is putting that volleyer right up there in the middle of the action, and then playing out the points. Now, you can play a game up to 10, then trade sides, have the other person be the volleyer. Or you can play up to 20, and then trade sides when one person gets up to 10. You can format it however you like, but another great competitive game to work on your net play as a single's player.

Lastly, ground stroke to approacher. And this is very, very similar to the cooperative drill that we talked about a little bit earlier. Both players will start in the middle of the baseline, and one player is gonna feed a short ball. Short ball meaning it has to be in front of the service line. The other player is going to hit an approach shot, and then has to move in to the net. And so, now you're going to work on your approach and your volleys together as the approaching player, the other person's gonna work on their passing shots, their ground strokes, and their lobs. Lobs are good as well. Lobs are also good in the first two competitive games I talked about as well. By the way, anything goes in all 3 of these games once the point has begun. So, you can format this a couple different ways as well. You can play a game up to 10 and then trade, the other person hits the short ball and the first player approaches, or you can trade half way through a game, as well. It doesn't really matter. Just make sure you guys keep track of score, and if you can kind of put something on it, and make it even more competitive, I would recommend that.

Lastly, I'd simply like to point out that it was not a mistake that I spent so much more time today talking about cooperative drills, as opposed to competitive drills. I think that recreational players in general, are poor at using and utilizing cooperative drills. Whether it be because of lack of focus, lack of concentration, or maybe they just think competitive games are a lot more fun and a lot more interesting --and I agree, they are-- but if you really want to get the most out of your time on the practice court, find somebody who shares your desire to get better, talk with them beforehand, work out these drills, go over them together so that you both have a good understanding of what's going to be expected, and then stick with it, and keep your focus, and don't deviate until you finish these drills. Give yourselves objectives, and complete them. And that's what good, high level tennis players do, that's what, you know... When I played college tennis, that's what we did, in practices for hours and hours, were drills like this. And that's how you get better.

So, Eddie, hopefully you've enjoyed today's show. And the rest of you listening, hopefully you've enjoyed today's show as well. Continue working at your net game. It's going to improve your single's game and your double's game, whichever you happen to play. And Eddie, keep up the good fight, and I hope that your net game continues to get better so that it can become a stronger part of your single's game. Thanks very much for your great question, and thank you for being a listener. [music] [music]

Alright. That does it for episode number 121 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you very much for

joining me today, and for listening to the show. I appreciate having you as a listener, and other people I appreciate a great deal, are those who donate to Essential Tennis. And I'd like to thank a couple people specifically, who have donated over the last couple weeks here. And they are Bill in Missouri, Charles in California, Charles in Maryland, Steve in North Carolina, Max in New York, Bruce in Massachusetts, David in Alabama, Devin in Pennsylvania, Carlotta in New Jersey, and Gary in Florida.

Thank you to all of you who donated over, about the last 2 or 3 weeks or so, and if this podcast and the rest of Essential Tennis have helped improve your tennis game, I would appreciate your support by a donation, either a small, one-time donation, a big, one-time donation, or you can do a monthly subscription donation as well, in 5, 10, or 20 dollars per month. Just go to essentialtennis.com and in the bottom, right-hand corner, you'll see a box that says "Donate". And I would appreciate your support very much. Alright, that does it for this week's show. Thank you again for downloading the show and for listening to it. I hope it's been helpful to you. Take care this week, and good luck with your tennis.

[music]