

Essential Tennis Podcast #123

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

Well thank you very much for downloading today's show and for giving it a listen. I am going to be answering some listener questions today, but before I do, I just want to tell you guys I am really excited for Wimbledon, the kick-off tomorrow. I am recording today's show on Sunday, tomorrow Wimbledon kicks off and I am looking forward to that tournament a lot.

And for those of you who are going to be following along during the tournament, feel free to interact with me as I use both Twitter and Facebook. I am starting to use Twitter more. It's a lot of fun and if you guys would like to follow me and chat with me about the matches and about the tournament, you can follow me at twitter.com/essentialtennis and also at facebook.com/essentialtennis. I look forward to chatting and interacting with you guys there.

Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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Alright, let's get started. And today I am going to be answering some questions for Toby who is a 4.0 player in Atlanta, Georgia. Toby wrote to me and said 'I practiced for a couple of hours today with a friend and came up with a few questions for you.' He's got two questions here, I am going to talk about

His first one is: 'I love to hit the ball on the rise, especially with my two-handed backhand where I don't swing as fast as my forehand, but can generate more power with less swing. And hitting on the rise can give me a little extra power. But it is also somewhat of a riskier shot because the ball is coming at you faster at the contact point so it is easier to miss hits. What is your stance on this? Is this something you recommend for your students to work on? What are some ways to improve [empty]
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Well, Toby, in case you didn't hear Podcast 119, I talked about hitting on the rise the entire show. It was more talking about technique, and how to hit that shot well. Wasn't so much about tactics, etc., which is what kind of more of what Toby is asking for here. It's my opinion on how often the shot should be used.

Well, as you said Toby, taking the ball on the rise is a lower percentage shot. It's definitely trickier than hitting the ball after it has bounced, come up to the top of its bounce, and then is coming back down again toward the court.

As I talked about in Podcast 119, the positioning-- the way that you position yourself on the court and also the timing of your swing have to be darn near perfect. If you are not in just the right place you have almost no time to react to the ball after it has landed on the courts because you are hitting it immediately after comes up off the courts. So positioning is very important and, again, so is the timing of your swing.

So if you are a little early or a little late, it's a very unforgiving shot. And also the swing dynamics change as well, due to As I mentioned a second ago, the more traditional and the easiest way to hit a ground stroke, either forehand or backhand is to allow the ball to come up and then let it come down again and make contact with it at a comfortable spot on its way down again from the bounce; after it has started to fall back towards the court again.

So this is the basically the opposite, the ball is not accelerating downwards, as in falling towards the court. It's instead accelerating upwards, so that changes some things. You have to adjust your swing a little bit because of that. So take into account the positioning the swing timing, and the change in technique.

And by the way, I talk about all those in detail. This is definitely not an easy shot. It takes a lot of skill to hit this shot and even more skill to be able to hit And to be able to try to attack with it, so I think, to answer your question Toby, I think this is a shot that players really shouldn't start to work on til around a 3.5 level or so.

And for those of you outside the US who are not familiar with the NTRP rating system, basically a 3.0 player is around average. The scale goes from 1 to 7; 6.0, 7.0 are basically professional players. 3.0 is around average, 3.5 is a little bit above average.

I want you guys to have a solid foundation of technique hitting the ball at its easiest point before you really start to get fancier than that, and try to hit the ball on the rise very often. So not until you are 3.5 do I really recommend people working on this on purpose.

Now Toby is a 4.0 player, which is a good bit above average. And at that point, Toby, I think you are probably in the clear to go ahead and start working on this shot as even more of a weapon to be able to hit short shots on the rise and be able to attack, and even shots that your opponents hit close to the base line that are really nice and deep in your court. I think this is a shot that you can probably go ahead and start experimenting with

making a nice full swing at a shot on the rise and be able to hit it back towards your opponent with some pace on it, and kind of send it right back at them and try to hurt them right back, right off of a good shot that they have hit to you.

Now as far as how to improve on this shot, just practice it a lot. It's very similar to a regular ground stroke, there is some small changes, I'm not going to go into those here because, again, I just talked about them in a lot of detail in Podcast 119, so go check that out and just practice it a ton, it takes a lot of practice to get good at positioning yourself and timing your swing correctly to be able to hit an effective shot back.

So Toby, keep working at it. Good job with your game so far. It's great that you have made it up to 4.0 level. To make it up to a 4.5, it would definitely help you a lot to be comfortable hitting this shot back in general, and also hitting it back with some decent pace and some topspin as well, and sending it right back to your opponents.

Alright, let's go ahead and move on Toby's second question, which I think is really interesting one and I hope you guys find as interesting as I do. He wrote and said in his second question, 'Sometimes I feel that I get distracted by my vision of how I would like to hit the shot, and can as a result miss it.

For example, I just hit a great backhand the previous shot and I want to hit with the same pace again, but I am not as ready for it this time. Or I just hit a ball out wide and want to finish the point off into the opposite direction, but didn't quite get into position. I feel like that if I didn't have this perceived notion of how to hit the shot and just focused on hitting it back, I wouldn't have missed the shot. Should I resist this urge and decide on how to hit a shot later in this stage when I actually reach the ball, or just plan better?'

So basically what Toby is saying here is he is wondering if the whole reason why he is missing the point-finishing shot. He has got the point set up in his favor and he is trying to finish the point now and end it by aiming for a spot that makes sense. He is wondering if the very act of thinking about it and trying to set up the point in his head is causing him to miss. And this is definitely a topic I definitely haven't talked about on the podcast before, and I look forward to it. Basically, Toby, I have got a question for you.

So let's say that you have gone through that whole sequence of shots. You have set up the point well, you have got that opening after hitting your opponent out wide. If you adjust and you ask the question should I have just focused on getting back in play rather than the trying to aim. Should I just hit it back?

Well, I want to ask you do you think that if you just focused on hitting it back would it magically end up in the right spots? In other words, how successful do you think you would be in the long run if every time you had a point set up in your favor you just focused on just hitting the ball back in play. I mean, that just seems really short sided to me. I'm surprised that you are thinking that that would be a good way to go. by just trying to get it back in play.

On one side of the coin, I see what you are saying I would rather you would just hit it right down the middle of the court and make it and miss the shot and lose the point. From that perspective, I see where you are coming from but certainly you must realize that to be able to advance your game and improve as a player eventually you are going to have to be able to Pick out targets on the court and hit them at will, over and over again.

Regardless of the point situation or whether your opponent is in trouble or not in trouble. If you ever want to become a 4.5 player, certainly a 5.0 player, you have to be able to pick out a target on the court in any circumstance and be able to hit it with a pretty high success rate. And you have to be pretty reliable in hitting your targets.

So having a target is never a reason for distraction or it shouldn't be anyway. I understand what you are saying Toby but I think it's a poor excuse for missing these shots. And I would encourage you, Toby and everybody else listening, to have a specific target as often as possible for every shot that you hit. Never play competitive tennis and just hit the ball just to get it in and just kind of hope for the best.

And say I am going to run to this forehand and I am just gonna hit it. I am gonna run to this back hand, I am just gonna hit it. [laughter] I am gonna get that ball and I am gonna hit it and well see what happens. That is not good enough. Just plain not good enough. I want better tennis for you guys than just running to the ball and just hitting in play anywhere.

I want all of you listening to know the successful feeling and the pride in running down a ball, a tough shot having a specific target in mind, you know if you hit it it's gonna turn out well for you and then actually making the shot and winning the point. Because you are smart enough to aim for a good target and you made it and you executed it and you ended being successful. I want all of you listening to know that feeling of success when you watch that shot go past your opponent for a winner. So you should have a specific target.

Please don't just hit the ball to just hit it anywhere. And you must have a plan to be successful. That's what this really comes down to. You should be planning your points and you should have a reason for where you are trying to hit the ball. Your plan should include aiming some place specific and again for a purpose.

Now we are going to talk a little about that. And to answer your question specifically waiting until you reach the ball is too late. Toby, you said maybe I should just wait longer, wait til I get to the ball and just decide then. You should really have a good sense where your next target will be immediately after the ball comes off your opponent's racket.

That's really important too. You don't want to wait until the last second to choose your target because you'll become rushed and you'll make kind of rash decision You are gonna make decisions that always don't make a lot of sense. Because you aren't thinking them through very well. Not that have you have a lot of time to sit there and think about it

literally. And kind of conversation in your head, well if I go here what will happen? If I go there, what will happen?

Basically you want to get better at making snap decisions early as quickly as possible. Knowing what makes the most amount of sense and being able to stick with it. Now to make these decisions.

There is several considerations you need to think about or be aware of. I have got four here. Four things you need to be aware of to make good decisions as far as your target is concerned on the court. Number 1, your opponent's position and balance on the court. Meaning, are they in the middle of the court and already in a ready position? As you are getting ready to hit your shot. Or are they way off in the corner somewhere, still stumbling around and trying to recover from the shot they just finished hitting? So that is one consideration, you have got to realize and take into account their position and their balance.

Number 2, the quality and difficulty of the shot they just hit to you. How good of a shot did they just finish hitting to you? Is it really tough or over in the corner away from you? Or is it right towards and bouncing at the service line and it is going to be easy to hit back? You need to take that in to consideration as well.

Number 3, you have to know and realize your strengths and weaknesses on the court. What are the shots that you hit best? What are the shots that you aren't that great at?

Number 4, you have to be aware of your opponent's strengths and weaknesses and this will vary for every person you play against. Some people are going like their backhand and not have a great forehand. Some players are going to hate overhands. Other players are going to love overhands and they are going to put the ball away consistently. These are things that you have to pay attention to A lot of you guys are probably saying to yourselves well, Ian that is a lot to keep track of I am not sure that I can have all that in mind and be able to make a decision based on that information all on the fly.

Well, that's what you have to kind of start being aware of are those four things. And you have to start making decisions based on them. If you think that four things is too many to pay attention to at once, then just pick one or two. And if you are going to just pick one or two, I would say that strengths and weaknesses are probably the most important one. Yes, balance and core positioning are very important as well and hopefully that is kind of thing you notice without thinking about it. And eventually it is our goal to notice all four of these things and keep them in mind without literally thinking about it. We want to make this something that happens automatically. But it takes awareness of it first.

But you have to first know what is going before it ever starts becoming automatic. Now let's give two examples, specific examples of this and we are going to talk about all four of those criteria and how this might look during an actual point.

Example number 1, of a specific decision, let's say that your opponent just hit a forehand

from off the court. You hit a good shot previously and there are literally off the singles court trying to recover the shot they make it and they managed to get it cross court but not very deep and not very hard. So they have hit it cross court from their forehand side let's say that you and your opponents are both right handed and it's not very deep or hard.

Let's say it's landing a foot or two that is short of the service line and without a lot of pace. Now you're waiting for the ball to come to you and you're in good balance and in good position. So you are not in trouble here at all. They have hit a relatively easy shot and you're going to be in good balance for this shot and you are going to be in good position. Now let's say that your strength is your forehand and their weakness is their backhand.

So everybody kind of kind of picture this in their mind as I say this it is probably real obvious but these are the types of decisions you have to be able to make. In this situation even though it goes against the directionals this is a good time to change to direction and go down the line with your forehand. It's your best shot you forehand, and your hitting to your opponent's weakness. You are in good balance and they are off balance. So all four of the criteria that I was talking about before points towards going down the line.

Let me say that again, they're off balance and they're off the court in the deuce corner so hitting down the line means that you are going to hit the furthest away from them possible right now.

Also it's their back hand, so even if you don't hit a great shot, they're having to run clear across the court to get to it. It's your strength so if you are ever going to change direction this is the probably the time to do it. And it is an easy shot. They haven't hit it very deep. So everything here point toward going down the line. So I would suggest going down the line here, hit it confidently don't push it, make a full swing, doesn't mean hit it aggressively and crush it but definitely hit a good solid confident swing.

And you should be aiming five feet inside each of those two lines. That might sound like a lot to some of you but trust me, that's plenty close to the lines to be able to win the point with that shot. There is no need to risk missing it. And we are going to talk a little bit more about that a little bit later. But in this circumstance, aiming five feet inside either line is more than good enough if you're hitting a confident swing to be able to win the point right there. And if not you can probably close into the net and put away a volley on the next shot. So that's example number one.

Example number 2, deciding where to aim. Example number two is they have just hit an aggressive back hand cross court from the middle of the baseline so your opponent is in balance in the middle of the baseline and they just hit a good back hand cross court it's going to land deep into your back hand corner. Your strength is your forehand so your back hand is not your strength and their strength is their forehand as well. So what do you do in this situation? They're in balance, you are about to be out of balance and you are not going to hit your strength here it's going to be your backhand.

And we know that if you were going to hit them anything on their forehand side they would probably appreciate that in this situation. So the best target should be a cross court rally ball, 8 feet inside either line should be your target and you should also be aiming four to six feet over the top of the net. And the reason why I give those specific measurements is that we want to make this a safe shot.

The smartest play here is to follow the directionals, go cross court where you have the lowest net the longest court, you have the most amount of court to work with and you should be trying to aim well inside both lines. If we can hit this target it's safe because are clearing the net by a lot. We are staying inside the lines by quite a bit as well. A nice comfortable margin of eight feet.

But keeping it eight feet inside the base line still means that it is ten feet past the service line. So we are not hitting a weak shot here. When you guys here, I know this, when you guys heard me say to aim about 8 feet inside the base line I know a lot of you are saying wow that is a crappy shot! That's weak! It's not! There's 18 feet of space between the service line and the base line. If you can hit 8 feet inside the base line just picture a shot that is landing ten feet past the service line on your half of the court.

That is not an easy ball, it's not a sitter that is landing in front of the service line that your opponent is gonna be able to try to put away. If you can put it 8 feet inside either line.

A nice high margin over the top of then net and keep it cross court you are in great shape here. You are hitting to your opponent's weakness. You'll probably be able to back into that point here. Maybe they'll attack again but at least you put back into play and it was a smart target for you hit. So being able to hit these targets for the reasons and hopefully these two examples can get you guys thinking.

This is the time of critical thinking that you guys should be going through on the court. And at first this might take mental energy. You might actually have to be conscious of this decision making process at first. To be able to make good decisions and pick targets that make sense. It is our goal to be able to do this on the fly eventually without thinking about it. And being able to make these decisions and be smart about it. It's a learned skill. It's not something that you are just born with or not. It's something you can teach yourself or train yourself today.

To be a smart tennis player, so pay close attention to your points and always hit and aim for a specific target with a purpose. Please don't just hit the ball and hope for the best. I want you guys to be better players than that. Alright, in a second we are going to talk about reasons why I think Toby is missing these shots, but first I want to tell you guys about the sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast and that is TennisTours.com.

Since 1987, they have been selling ticket packages and individual tickets to tennis tournaments all over the world, both ATP and WTA events. Both men's and women's professional events and they specialize in the grand slams. So if you guys would like to go to the U.S. Open this year they're offering some awesome ticket packages along with a

lot of other options to be able to customize your experience in New York City and I'm making plans to be there this U.S. Open in August-September so I'm looking forward to it a lot.

And if you make an order with TennisTours.com and use the promotional code Essential when you check out you'll not only get a discount off your purchase but you'll be given an invitation to a cocktail party where I will be I believe Will Hampton of Fuzzy Old Balls is going to be there as well. It'll be a great time kind of mingling together in New York City. It's going to be at Times Square, so you'll get a chance to hang out with me and Will as well and talk about tennis. [laughter] And the U.S. Open. So go check them out I thank them very much for the support of the Essential Tennis Podcast.

Alright, so let's wrap up this question from Toby and I just spent several minutes talking about why picking a target is not the reason why Toby is missing these shots. Or, at least in my opinion, it is not an excuse. It should not be the reason why him taking maybe his concentration and thinking about the wrong thing. A target is exactly what you should be thinking about Toby.

So, why is he missing? And why do you guys miss when you have the point all set up and it's going just the way you want it and you get that put away shot or that opportunity to be able to finish the point and you screw it up. Why? I've got four reasons here why I believe players miss these types of shots and I'm sure that you guys will be able to relate to exactly what I'm talking about. At least in one or two of these areas, if not all four. So, why would you be missing?

Well, number one general lack of focus and concentration. That's the first thing that came to mind Toby when I was reading your, your question as I was preparing for today's show, is you talked about hitting a good wide shot and then wanting to be able to put the ball way on the other side and you just missed it.

Or, you said how you're just not getting into position even though it's not a very difficult shot. But it seems to me that you're probably watching something else and thinking about other things such as maybe how great of a shot you just hit to get your opponent off balance and off the court. You're admiring your shot, watching your opponent scramble and barely get to it. They made it but just barely and you're just enjoying every second [laughter] every split second of this process as you see them stumbling around the court trying to recover that great shot that you just hit.

And I find that recreational players very often lose sight of the whole purpose here is to win the points, and they just enjoy thoroughly hitting that good ball that set them up so well and before they know it they are not in position for the next shot even though it is a relatively easy one and they make a mistake. They make an unforced error. Don't let that happen to you.

Number Two reason why you might be missing these shots is poor target choice. This happens so much so often when I watch recreational tennis players play. They get an easy

ball their opponent is out of position and they aim a foot from the line. And miss it by couple of inches and they think ah I just missed it, that's too bad but you know what it was your mistake for aiming so close to the line.

I don't remember which show it was but I had a conversation with my good friend Jason Coal on a previous show and we were talking about picking targets. Guys professional players don't aim for the lines. They don't even aim a foot from the lines. They're aiming three four, five feet inside the lines. You know on average shot but don't get me wrong there is a time when they don't have a choice and they have to aim and hit incredible shot. But on average they are giving themselves many feet of margin for error and you should be too. Don't get suckered into aiming close to the lines after you have just gone through all the work of setting up a point well. Have your opportunity and your opening and then you hit a perfect shot. Please don't do that. Pick a smart target.

Reason number three while you might be missing these shots is lack of confidence in your ability to finish the point. I see this a lot too where players will hurt one good shot. And just not think they have the ability to or maybe they get nervous or a little bit tight. They don't have the confidence for a good full swing at the next shot if it is a ground stroke. or hit the next volley firmly to be able to put it away.

Whatever it might be, you need to practice combinations kind of 1, 2 punch combination on the practice court when you are practicing your game. Practice a good wide back hand cross court and then hitting a put away forehand down the line. Practice combinations like that, maybe a down the line approach shot. With your forehand and then a cross court volley to be able to finish the point. Practice those types of combinations as often and build your confidence in those kinds of you can set up points and you can put the ball away.

Don't just practice one shot at a time. I mean that is good to do too. But you should practice on purpose putting balls away and doing it over and over again. So that when you get into a match and you have a put away opportunity you take it. And you are able to do it with confidence.

Reason number 4, last one, why you might be missing these types of shots just general poor techniques and stroke production. All of us who play tennis are able to hit great shots at least once. We have all hit that amazing forehand or backhand or serve or whatever. Where it just came off the racket just right and landed just inside the lines for a winner and everybody kind of stopped what they were doing and said wow that's amazing. Well I don't want to somebody who is able to do that and just be able to dot it once I want to play with a partner who is able too hit three of four feet inside the lines several times in a row. That's who I want my partner to be.

And so that's not possible without good technique. And if you struggle with being consistent and you are only able to hit across court forehand two or three times in a row. Nice and deep in the court, before you make an error somewhere you need to work on your steadiness with your technique.

And you need to work on your steadiness with your targets and you need a lot of repetition to be able to put the ball in play over and over again. Toby, you are 4.0 player so this is probably not the area you need to work on the most. Wherever you are making a mistake it's probably in one of those three categories. It's probably not this one.

But I am going to throw this one out there for anybody else listening who might be as not as experienced as Toby and not playing at his level of his play. You need to be able to be reliable with your ground strokes and every other shot you hit as well. Alright Toby that wraps it up Hopefully that makes sense to you. and hopefully that is useful information get out their practice picking targets for a reason for a purpose. Targets that make sense Make sure that you pick them wisely and that they are smart. You aren't going for too much and you practice it. You'll get better at this but please don't think that picking a target is causing you to screw up It's definitely not that I would subscribe to.

But Toby, thanks very much for being a listener. I was happy to answer your questions today on the show. Please let me know if you need any further help.

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Alright, that does it for episode 123 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for spending your time with me today or tonight or whenever you happen to listen to this show. I really appreciate it and in wrapping up today's show I want to send a special thank you out to those of you who have donated to Essential Tennis and to the podcast in the last two weeks or so. And those people are Kim in Texas, Robert in Canada, Jannen in California, Bruce in Florida, Joe in North Carolina. Thank you to you guys for your support.

I really appreciate it and if the Essential Tennis Podcast has been a help to you in your tennis game and you would like to reciprocate, please think about donating to the show. And really help support what I am doing here and can make me get closer and closer to my goal of doing this full time. Which I do plan on doing in the future. Hopefully, sooner than later. So to donate just go to Essential Tennis.com and in the bottom right hand corner of the front page you will see a box that says donate. [music]

Alright. That does it for this week. Have fun watching Wimbledon everybody. I hope to talk to you guys on Twitter and Facebook and take care and good luck with your tennis.

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