

Essential Tennis Podcast #124

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[Narrator] 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.

[Ian Westermann] Hi, and welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast, your place for free expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the Essential Tennis podcast is brought to you by tennistours.com, where you can receive a discount off your next purchase of professional tennis event tickets by using the promotional code "ESSENTIAL".

Well thank you very much for joining me on today's show and I've got a special treat. On today's episode we have master racquet technician Jeremy Plumley back in the house. It's been a while since he's been on the show and so I've had some gear questions kind of stacking up. So we're going to be talking all about different gear-related questions today, having to do with lead tape and racquet balance and creating more spin and more power by altering your frame and all kinds of stuff like that. So if you're interested in improving your tennis by knowing more about the gear and equipment that you play with, today's show is definitely going to be for you.

So sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music] My guest today on the podcast is master racquet technician Jeremy Plumley. Jeremy, it's really good to have you back on the show again. Welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast.

[Jeremy Plumley] Thanks, Ian, it's good to be back.

[Ian Westerman] Well, it's been too long since I had you on the show last, and I've had some gear questions kind of get piled up over the last couple of weeks, and probably months, since I had you on the show last. I'm sorry it's been so long, to both you and my listeners who've been waiting for gear topics and I definitely wait to have you on the show because, while I might know some of the answers to these questions, I'm not able to explain it in the same depth as you are, so I'm really happy to have you back on the show.

[Jeremy Plumley] That's me, Mr. Depth.

[Ian Westerman] Mr. Depth, yes. Well, as I said, Jeremy is a master racquet technician, he is also a certified tennis professional, so he really knows his stuff and so let's go ahead and get started. And Jeremy and I are going to talk about, actually, 7 different questions today, and this is going to get broken up into two podcast episodes, I'm not sure exactly where we're going to draw the line, but we'll be talking about half of them, or so, on today's show, and at some point I'm going to cut the show off and continue it at a later podcast, so we'll get to about half of them today. So Jeremy, are you set to go?

[Jeremy Plumley] I'm ready to go.

[Ian Westerman] So #1, this comes to us from Gavin, and he wants to know--several of these questions are going to come to us from Gavin, by the way-- but one of them had to do with racquet fads. He wrote and said, 'What about racquet lengths? A few years ago, 28-inch XL racquets seemed to be all the rage, as an example the Michael Chang racquets and others. Nowadays XL racquets seem to be much more rare, why the change? Will you recommend an XL racquet to somebody that isn't for example the height of John Isner?' And he also says, 'Again, a few years ago, heavy racquets seemed to be popular, for example, the Wilson Hammer range. I found an old 95 square inch 260-gram racquet in my garage recently, and as an experiment added 30 grams to the hoop. It turned into a beast on ground strokes, much more powerful than my normal racquet.'

Nowadays, all racquets seem to be head-light, why do you think there has been a change in the market? What are your preferences regarding head-light or head-heavy balance? Or are you not even that bothered?' So let's talk about what kind of trends as far as frames are concerned, Jeremy, and he points out the extra length racquets that were popular a few years ago and also shifts in different weights. I'm curious to hear if you think that there's even been trends in weights or if that's just kind of marketing certain ranges of weights within racquet lines from major companies. So what do you think, Jeremy?

[Jeremy Plumley] Well, I think we've gotten away from any real fads when it comes to weights recently. There have been times when, you know, they were looking for ultra-light racquets. I remember back in the early '90s, Yamaha came out with a racquet, and it was the first racquet that was ever 9 ounces, or maybe it was 10 ounces. But whatever it was, it was really light at the time and everybody was like, 'Wow! This is amazing, it's a very light racquet.' Now almost every major manufacturer has something, at least one frame lower than that, and some of them have several, so I don't know if we've ever really been in a trend where heavy racquets were popular.

There was a time when racquets were only heavy, before they got really good with using high-modulus graphite, and then they moved into titanium, and carbon, and all that. I think when Gavin was talking about finding that Hammer in the garage and digging it out of the moth balls and lead taping it up to all get out. That was, you know, the Hammer craze was a head-heavy craze. It wasn't an all-around weight, as far as the racquet went, it wasn't exceptionally heavy, it's just where the weight was put. And that was popular for a while because that really helps people create more power and, if they swung the right way, more spin on their ground strokes.

[Ian Westerman] OK. That was kind of what I had in my own head as well, was it seemed to me that all the major manufacturers really come out with at least one racquet at each major weight class, as it were; 9 ounces, 10 ounces, 11, and maybe at least one at 12 ounces. Is that something that's just come about recently, where the manufacturers have that wide a range of weights, or has that been around for a while?

[Jeremy Plumley] I think more so now than it used to be. The big manufacturers, you know, Wilson, Babolat, Head, Prince, the ones that really have a lot of racquets in their line, just because they have so many options, they're going to have stuff that falls into each category. Some of the smaller racquet companies, say for example, Yonex, they don't really have anything ultra-lightweight. They kind of have more 'tweeners, and then they have a couple racquets that

are like their tour models, that Hewitt uses or Ivanovic. But they don't really cover the whole spectrum the way that Wilson does. You know, Wilson has their Cirrus One racquet which is, you know, really light, extra length added, which was one of the fads he was talking about that we've kind of gotten away from. And then they have that at one end, and then all the way at the other end, they have the KPro Staff, 88 square inches, 14 ounces.

[Ian Westerman] Yeah let's talk about the length. I remember back in the '90s when, I remember, I had a Prince Thunderstick that was longer than a standard length, and it was really popular back then. I remember the ads in Tennis magazine for it. How come they seem to have just about gone away altogether? You just mentioned one specific frame that's longer than a standard length, but how come we don't see much of that any more when it was so popular before?

[Jeremy Plumley] I think it's a couple of reasons. Right now, on the market, about the longest extended length that you can find is about 28 inches, which is 1 inch extended from a standard frame. Much more than that, I can't think of any racquets currently on the market that go longer than 28 inches. I think a big part of that was, when a racquet gets lengthened, it actually increases the swing weight, which takes it a little bit longer to get through, and it can be a little bit more difficult to get that racquet through on your ground strokes. That's one thing, I think the other part of it is a lot of people were seeing those racquets as an ultimate game improvement. Give me a 2 inch longer racquet, I just went from 5'8" to 5'10". But they didn't take into consideration that added weight, also, you know, it doesn't seem like a lot, but that extra 2 inches also changes your footwork a little bit. You can really talk to that as a tennis professional, but 2 inches can be the difference between a good shot and getting jammed.

[Ian Westerman] Sure.

[Jeremy Plumley] And I think a lot of lower, intermediate and even beginner players picked up these racquets and they found it a little harder to play with than their standard length racquets. And maybe the benefit of that extra length, more reach at the net, more leverage on the serve, maybe didn't outweigh the negatives.

[Ian Westerman] OK. All right, let's move on to question #2 in our line of 7 questions here, and this one also comes from Gavin. In this question he said "There are lots of different types of strings out there, polys, synthetic guts, multifilament strings. Ivan Lendl recently commented that he thought the biggest change in the game since he was a pro were the strings. What do you personally play with during coaching and matches and what do you think are pros and cons of each type of string? What type of strings would you recommend for an intermediate, say, 3.5 level player?" So lots of stuff we could talk about in there.

First of all, I'm curious what your opinion is on this statement that he quoted Lendl on, in saying that he thought that the biggest difference between when Lendl was a pro and the modern game-- and I don't know when that quote was taken from exactly-- but apparently Lendl thought that the strings were the biggest difference between when he was a pro and whenever this quote was taken. What are your thoughts on that, Jeremy?

[Jeremy Plumley] I tend to agree with Lendl--

[Ian Westerman] Really.

[Jeremy Plumley] If you had known me growing up, I despised Ivan Lendl. But he's not the only person that thinks that, there's a lot of former players out there that have really said that the string technology has been the biggest jump. And not just string technology in general, they're talking about the polyester. They're talking about the Luxelon, the new hot string that everybody's talking about that Nadal is using, RPM Blast. That is, you know, the biggest thing in string technology for as long as I can remember. And those who aren't familiar with polyester, you've probably heard it if you've been watching Wimbledon or the French Open before that.

Polyester is a very stiff dead string that allows the players to swing through it pretty much as hard as they can and, because they're not getting a lot of launch off of the racquet string bed, they're able to control the ball and keep it in the court. And what it's basically led to is people like Nadal running 6, 7 feet outside of the court behind the baseline. They're able to produce these massive shots with tons of spin that allow them to stay in the point, or even win the point with just one massive swing.

[Ian Westerman] So if we took Nadal and the athleticism and the stroke technique that he brings to the table currently and we gave him, let's say, T-2000 with whatever string Jimmy Connors would have put in that racquet, back when he was playing with it in the '70s and '80s, are you saying that you don't think Nadal would be able to produce the same amount of topspin and the same basic resulting shots with his ground strokes?

[Ian Westerman] I don't think he would right off the bat. The T-2000, you know, that's kind of a different animal all in itself. If you want to go back--

[Jeremy Plumley] Let's say a stick that--not wooden racquets, let's not go back quite that far, but let's say an early aluminum or metal frame, an early metal frame.

[Ian Westerman] Possibly.

[Jeremy Plumley] ...which is Lendl's era, correct? Am I right on that?

[Ian Westerman] Yeah, Lendl, I mean, he had a long career. He started off with a woody, went into the metal stage, and then when he finished, he was pretty much in that kind of high-modulus graphite with some fiberglass. He used a Mizuno racquet that I think had a good amount of fiberglass in it, which allowed them to keep the weight down, but it was still pretty stiff; but nothing like the Aeropro Drive that Nadal is using now. I think, you know, the racquet that Nadal's using isn't extraordinarily heavy. It's a pretty powerful racquet. It's probably much stiffer than any of the rackets that Wendell used even late in his career. That would definitely help Nadal with his power.

I think Nadal gets so much then from his racket head acceleration and you know he just swings at such a vertical angle that he imparts so much spin on the ball. He could do that with any racket. I don't think the materials, the frame would make that big of a difference. I think it would

be more of the weight that he would be able to generate that type of racket head acceleration like you said with the T2000. Probably not right off the bat but you know the guy is pretty strong [laughter] . He can put it through there at a decent speed.

[Ian Westerman] Well before we continue our conversation on strings, I just want to remind my listeners about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast and that is Championship Tennis Tours. You guys can find them at tennistours.com and there specialty is selling professional tennis event tickets. Whether it be WTA or ATP tour events and also they put together great travel packages including accommodations and transportation to and from hotels and your event, put together some awesome packages and some upcoming ones are having to do with the US Open and I really encourage you guys to check that out. In fact, if you purchase a travel package with them to go to the US Open and you can't check out with the promotional code, Essential with a capital E, you will not only receive a discount off your purchase but you will also be invited to attend a cocktail party in Times Square that will have both myself and Will Hamilton of Fuzzy Old Balls there. So definitely really cool stuff that they're doing and I really appreciate their support. of the Essential Tennis Podcast by being a sponsor. So go check them out-- tennistours.com

[Ian Westerman] Well, let's talk about a bit more about strings. Gavin asked us to--or asked you--to kind of go over the pros and cons of each general type string and you just talked about the polys and you talked about the pros essentially of it being dead and stiff for big hitters to help them control the ball a little better. What would be the cons of a polyester string and then let's go into synthetic gut. What would be the general pros and cons?

[Jeremy Plumley] Okay, well first off, the cons of polyester are what is possibly a pro for a high level player would be a con for your everyday recreational or club level player. A very stiff string bed is pretty uncomfortable. You're not getting a lot of help from the string so you are going to be using more of your arm. So arm fatigue is going to be a little bit higher with a stiff string like that that you aren't getting a lot of bounce off of. The other part of it is the polyesters, because they are basically just one thick string, they loose tension very quickly. They "go dead" and I said it was a dead string before but they become just terribly loose a a lot quicker than a standard synthetic string. So basically it just comforts and actual life of playability for those strings that are on the low side. Another pro of them is if you're a pretty high level player and you can handle it, they are very durable. They don't break quickly, they just lose their resilience.

[Ian Westerman] Okay now how about your basic, generic synthetic gut, what would be the basic pros and cons of synthetic guts string?

[Jeremy Plumley] Just the basic synthetic gut would be like a Prince [ph] or a Wilson synthetic string. They are good because they don't really shine in any particular area. They are not the most durable string on the market. But they don't break real easily. They kind of fall some where in the middle. They tend to be a little bit crisper feel because they tend to use little bit different material for it. They are also pretty cheap. Normally they are like, 4, 5, or 6 bucks for an entire set so you are not breaking the bank. They don't really have a lot pluses or minuses. You know it can go in either direction there. They place decent but not great.

They just kind of fall in the middle.

[Ian Westerman] Okay, and lastly, how about multi-filament strings.

[Jeremy Plumley] Multi-filament strings basically are at the opposite end of the polyester. A multi-filament string is several different fillaments [laughter] wrapped together to make a softer string. Normally they also have more grab on the ball. So you might get a little bit more dwell time in the string bed with your swing.

[Ian Westerman] Okay.

[Jeremy Plumley] Like I said they tend to be softer which means they are easier on the arm. They do not tend to be as durable because they are you know several strands rather than, you know, one thick strand. So with each shot they break down a little bit each time. But they hold tension very well because it is not just one giant string. They are woven together and they slowly unravel throughout time. They hold tension better than some thing that would be solid.

[Ian Westerman] Okay and then lastly he asked for a recommendation for an intermediate level player. What I am curious about is, as you answer this Jeremy, is in your opinion from your perspective how much, when you recommed a string to someone how much of it has to do with their ability level and how much is personal preference? I mean can a lower level player prefer polyester? And is that okay? And can an upper level player prefer a softer multi-filament string as an example?

[Jeremy Plumley] Absolutely, I don't like to think of recommending strings in terms of somebody's playing level. I like to think of it as more of their style of play.

[Ian Westerman] Okay.

[Jeremy Plumley] If you go out to a park and you see ten different 3.5 players, you might see ten different styles of play. And, you know, each string while it has the you know has it good points and its bad points, it takes the right type of player to bring those out. Some top level players do prefer that softer feel. Probably not the guys on the pro tour. But you'll find a lot of players that prefer that softer feel of a Wilson NXT or a Gama Professional string because maybe that's just what they have been used to. Maybe they have an arm injury. So they can't use something stiff. On the other end of the spectrum, if you are a lower level player but you use a lot of top spin, then maybe a polyester at least in a hybrid, you know, it might suit you. And it is a personal preference for some people. Some people prefer a very stiff string bed, I think you are one of them.

[Ian Westerman] Yep!

[Jeremy Plumley] So it doesn't necessarily break down to, ah well, you are a 5.0 player this is the string you should be using. It really is the style of play and your personal preference.

[Ian Westerman] Okay. He also asks what we play with and I play with whatever Jeremy puts in

my racket. I think over my last five string jobs I have had five different types of string in my racket. And I teach and play with the same string by the way. Currently, I have got full polyester [laughter] in my rackets that I teach with, you know, 30-40 hours per week and that is what I play with as well. I don't, which string did you put in there Jeremy, one is all white and one is all black?

[Jeremy Plumley] That was a head sonic pro..

[Ian Westerman] Okay, yea!

[Jeremy Plumley] It is a polyester, it's a softer polyester because had wanted to make a string that could give you the benefits of a luxilon [ph] But make it a little bit more user friendly, It is still not recommended for every body. But it is I would almost call it an entry level polyester. Not because it doesn't perform well but because it is a little bit more comfortable. You have been my guinea pig for trying new strings all the time and letting me do funky tensions and stuff like that [laughter] So I have appreciated that.

[Ian Westerman] I am not picky. Well I'll take that back I don't like soft strings and you have always known that and you never put you know, I remember you putting natural gut in my racket at times but you strung it at a pretty high tension. You have always stayed within basic parameters that I enjoy. But beyond that I am not picky at all. How about you what do you have in your rackets right now?

[Jeremy Plumley] Well right now I actually have that very popular RPM black string.

[Ian Westerman] The black stuff, right?

[Jeremy Plumley] I had gotten a sample string from our [inaudible] rep a few months ago and I put it in and honestly I was out hitting yesterday with my wife and I was noticing it's pretty dead. It's been awhile [laughter] . It is time to get some new strings in there. But like you I don't, when I teach, I don't use anything different than I normally play with.

[Ian Westerman] Okay, let's move on. Looks like we have got enough time for one more question in this show segment and then the next question that you and I answer will be put over on another episode. Let's answer from a question from Chris in Wisconsin. Chris good to hear from you from the mother land. I am from Wisconsin. [laughter] Jeremy appreciates it as well since he is from Ohio, right.

[Ian Westerman] So Chris put himself down as a 4, 5 player and he said what does the balance of the racket influence? I am currently using the aero pro light and it is a very light racket so it is slightly head-heavy. I am searching for more top spin but also more power butt I cannot buy a different racket. Where should I put lead tape in order to produce more top spin and a little more pace. Jeremy what do you think?

[Jeremy Plumley] Um, 4, 5 player aero pro light There's been a lot of discussion about the aero pro light and also the pure drive light online. Some people find them to just kind of be a blank

canvas. [laughter] Where you don't have a lot of weight on the racket as it is. So you can, you know, really customize it without going past a comfortable weight. If you are looking for more pace on your ground strokes you want to add weight in the head of the racket. The higher up on the racket you put the lead tape, the more it's going to increase your swing weights.

[Ian Westerman] Okay.

[Jeremy Plumley] The important thing to remember is you don't want to go t crazy. I know Gavin added 30grams of lead tape to [laughter] his head-heavy hammer racket [laughter] . And I don't think he is still playing with that. It's fun to experiment with that kind of stuff but what you will find is you know want to go to much in one direction because it is really going to throw off the balance of the frame. Now you can add more at the top but then bring a little bit down. Also put some down maybe underneath the grip or in the throat of the racket to maybe balance it out. But you don't want to go crazy in one direction. 4.5 player, if he is staying back on the baseline, you know the whole time. If he only comes up to the net to shake hands then you know bump up in the head, add a little bit down in the grip but you'll see you'll get more racket head acceleration at it's going to swing a little bit heavier. It's gonna sacrifice some maneuverability up at the neck. And also might take a little bit of adjustment when you are swinging up to the ball on your serve.

[Ian Westerman] Now what about the subject of top spin? I am curious to get your thoughts on this, and I know how I would answer this question but I am wondering what you are going to say as far as adding lead tape to one part of the racket or another to increase top spin? Is that something that's possible?

[Jeremy Plumley] Well ultimately it comes down to how you are swinging at the ball. If you add weight at the top at the top and you swing through it, you're going to get more mass going through the ball so the chances of getting more top speed by adding weight there are better. But you are not going to get more top spin just by adding weight.

[Ian Westerman] Okay.

[Jeremy Plumley] You are still going to have to swing through it. All things being equal if you have got more mass going through the ball at the same angle as you do with the racket with less mass, you are going to be able to impart more spin. Is it going to be a lot? Maybe not. I don't have the type of equipment to measure that but you are going to give yourself the possibility of adding more spin to it by adding weight to the head of the racket.

[Ian Westerman] Since Chris is a 4.5 player I am assuming that he is already hitting with top spin on the baseline. But just for clarification for the rest of you listening, and Jeremy correct me if I am wrong in how I am stating this, but what it sounds like you are saying is if you are not already swinging at your ground strokes in such a racket path that is creating top spin already adding lead tape to one place or another is not going to create top spin or make it more top spin where there wasn't some already. Is that correct?

[Jeremy Plumley] Absolutely, yeah and the same thing will go with those textured and hexagon shaped strings. If you aren't already putting spin on the ball, that alone is not going to add spin to

it.

[Ian Westerman] Okay, anything else to add on those three topics that we just talked about? We talked about the fads, the racket fads, the different types of string, just talked about lead tape to create more power, more spin anything else to add on these three, Jeremy?

[Jeremy Plumley] Maybe just a little something on balance. We spent a lot of time talking about head heavy. But head light rackets, while you are not getting as much of an addition, a possible addition of top spin and power on your ground strokes. You are going to have a more traditional feel where the weight is going to be in your hand. It is going to be a more maneuverable frame. So if you're a volley player or your playing a lot of doubles you might want to look at something that's you know more head light rather than head heavy. If your net game is important part of your game then you should probably be looking at head light rackets so that is kind of the opposite end of the spectrum we are talking about. But I thought we should probably throw that in.

[Ian Westerman] Okay, alright. Well Jeremy and I are going to wrap up this segment and this is going to be Podcast Number 124 but we will continue our conversation right now. You will just be able to hear us on a future episode.

So definitely stay tuned if you want to hear the rest of our conversation and if you're listening to Podcast 124 and you want to hear the rest of our talk other topics are going to have to do lead tape. We have another question different application having to do with lead tape not having so much to do with balance. We are going to talk about let's see, racket weights in general; lighter rackets vs heavy rackets. Also racket head sizes and talking about strings and what gauges make different changes in results coming off the rackets. So those are going to be the next topics we are going to talk about. But for now we are going to wrap it up episode number 124. Jeremy thanks a lot for your time. And my listeners and myself always appreciate you dropping by.
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[Ian Westerman] Alright that does it for episode number 124 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for joining me today and for listening to my conversation with Jeremy and our conversation will continue in a near future episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Not sure which show exactly but we did continue our conversation and it's going to be coming up soon. Not sure which show exactly but we will continue it and finish with a couple of questions that we had. That does it for this week and, before I wrap things up, I want to tell you guys that I have got something new coming your way soon or at least an offer. I am going to be starting to do some more audio content each week. it looks like I will probably be adding an extra hour of audio, tennis instruction. It's going to be really focused on a couple of special listeners who decided to join me and if that is something that it sounds like you would be interested in, send me an e-mail and I'll give you some advanced notice on that. Shoot me an e-mail to ian@essentialtennis.com [music] and I'll let you know when I have more details.

Alright that does it for this week. Thanks again everybody. Take care. Good luck with the tennis.
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