

Essential Tennis Podcast #128

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: Welcome to the essential tennis podcast. Your place for free experts' tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

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Thank you very much for joining me today on the podcast. I really appreciate the fact that you downloaded this show and you're taking the time to listen to it. I've always dedicated this show to passionate tennis players, and if that describes you, then you've come to the right place.

Every week I put out a half an hour show released on Mondays that answers questions from really enthusiastic recreational players just like yourself and my goal is always to put out the best possible solid fundamental instruction so that you guys can take that advice, go and apply it to your own game and improve your tennis. And every week that happens all around the world as people listen to this show and then go and apply the simple suggestions that I give you guys. Never anything fancy or complicated here. Its things that all of us can get better at. And as a result improve our games, myself included.

Real quickly before we get to today's topics from my listeners. I want to let you guys know about another great tennis podcast that you guys can get on iTunes. It's one of the most popular tennis podcasts on iTunes and it is created and produced by the people over at tennis.com, the same people that do Tennis Magazine, and it's basically a round table discussion. The discussion is led by the editors and writers over at Tennis Magazine and tennis.com. It's all about tour news so if you really like following professional men's and women's tennis, definitely head over to iTunes, just type in tennis and you'll see the tennis.com podcast. Definitely suggest that you check it out. Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

IAN: Alright, let's go ahead and get to our first question on today's show and it comes to us from Zack in Cincinnati who has listed himself as a 4.0 player. His question is a little bit lengthy here, but bare with me guys as I read through it. It's a really good question and a question having to do with competing against a game style that most recreational player really struggle against. You guys will start to recognize this right away. I think the advice I give today is going to be definitely helpful for most of you guys out there who compete on a regular level anywhere between a 2.5 and a 3.5 level and probably most of you 4.0 players out there as well. So, Zack wrote to me and said:

"I play weekly with an older player, about 65, in his prime he won many local tournaments in the 3.5 level. Because I am not a member at a club or part of a league I am subjected to playing a lot

of different players who are scattered along the lines of ranking. He is among the lowest level players I play yet I seem to play worst against him. Most of it is due to the fact that he hits junk balls mostly with little to no pace and very little spin or angles. I have to rely on myself to generate my own pace on each and every shot. He has never "beaten me" but rather I beat myself. I do not want to resort to just hitting his balls back with nothing on them because that would be no fun for me and also set my game back. This experience is very frustrating because I seem to play like a 3.0 player when facing him yet, if I face a 5.5 or a 6.0 player I seem to play much, much better, almost feeling like a 4.5 player because they use pace and spin. And spin, it kicks the ball up into my strike zone and I can use their pace and add a little of my own for my own shots. What are some ways to generate my own pace and spin on a ball with absolutely nothing to work with? This problem is extremely exaggerated on my forehand side."

I wrote an email to Zack to get some clarification and just one follow up coming from him, he said:

"My problem with this particular player or at least on most days is that my game doesn't seem to click at all. It's really not a question of keeping my shots in consistently but keeping them in at all. It's really hard to describe this problem because, for instance today, I didn't get mad or upset, I was just simply lost out there. Nothing is more demoralizing than just seeing any shot you try to hit with pace goes straight into the net or out lawn. Maybe he just has my number and I have to accept that but I refuse to quit." Zack.

Well Zack, there's so many people all over the place, all over the world listening to this right now that are not in their heads in agreement with you and they totally understand where you're coming from. Now, I've done a podcast on dealing with pushers already and that's kind of the, you know, the phrase or the word we use to classify these types of players. Players that don't really do anything with their shots besides just get them in play without a whole lot on them. Nothing really special. But, they don't really miss a lot and that's something that most recreational players really struggle with, so, first of all I want you to realize you're not alone here so don't get too frustrated with this. I understand it definitely sucks. Alright? I totally understand that this is hard to deal with but this is the most difficult type of opponent for 99% of players out there that are 4.0 and under. And the reason for that, I wrote down four reasons here why this is so difficult for recreational players to deal with. First of all, the type of person that you're talking about playing here is usually somebody who's very experienced. As a player who's been around for a long time they're very smart. They know how to figure out what really bugs you and they've just been around the block a couple of times. They're usually more experienced than the types of players that struggle playing against them. Secondly, they're usually very crafty. They're very aware of your weakness when you play them. They have a way of kind of picking out exactly what annoys you and this type of player typically will kind of mix things up and not give you any pace to work with but will give you a lot of different looks usually. Now this player that you're describing Zack, you said that this person doesn't put a lot of spin on the ball, doesn't use many angles. You made it sound like this guy basically just hits right down the middle of the court soft and easy. And I'm going to get to that a little bit later. But, typically this type of player is somebody who will put junk on the ball and you used the term "junk baller", I think here, yea you said "he hits junk balls with little or no pace". I might reconsider your use of that term. Junk baller typically refers to a player who puts a lot of spin on

the ball and lots of different types of spin to kind of throw their opponents off. I wouldn't call this player you're describing a junk baller. I would call them a counter puncher or a pusher. I would not call this person junk baller if he puts no, you said "he puts very little spin on the ball". It's just somebody who's just a smart player and very consistent. That brings me to number three, consistency. Number one, this person's experienced, number two, he's crafty, number three these types of players are always consistent and very often it's not pretty. They don't have nice looking strokes, these types of players. But, they can typically make just about everything that you hit in their vicinity and the person that you're describing Zack is no spring chicken anymore not that he still can't play the game well. Obviously he's still competing and I hope that when I'm his age I'm still able to run around and play. I think it's awesome that he's still playing. However, his number one weapon is his consistency. He probably doesn't move around the court as well as he used to. But anything that he does get to he probably misses very, very rarely. Doesn't make very many unforced errors. And that's what really makes this person difficult. You have to force him to make a mistake and that's very difficult for most players around your level to do consistently without making a lot of errors. So that's number three, this person's consistent. And number four I think this is what really bugs recreational players the most about this type of player. Number four I have written down that this type of player is usually shameless. You know what, they could care less if you respect them or not. They don't care if you walk off the court and complain about them and say, "Aw man he's just a pusher." "He doesn't really have any real shots" "He just you know he hits weak balls down the middle every time." You know what, this type of player doesn't care otherwise he wouldn't be playing. This guy's just out there to compete, he's out there to win and that's it. He's out there to enjoy himself and probably loves driving people crazy. And he doesn't care what people say about him. He just loves to be out there and he loves to play and he loves to win. And so that combination, somebody's who's experienced, crafty, consistent and shameless. He doesn't care how he does it but he keeps the ball in play one way or another. This is the type of player that everybody struggles with. Again, I wrote down 4.0 and under is definitely the main level of player that has a hard time with this type of style. But lots of different players do. Even above a 4.0 level. Now, I've got two main ways that you can deal with this Zack. The things I'm going to tell you that hopefully are going to help you out. Number one, and I talked about this in the pusher podcast which is in the archives by the way. I definitely suggest that you and everybody else listening who hate playing this type of player not only listen to this show but go to the archives at essentialtennis.com and download the pusher podcast also. But, number one, you must respect this player is not an option. Respect this player for what's he's good at, for what he's accomplished over his career as a tennis player. Don't put them down in your head or him in your head about his age, about his tactics, about his style of play, whatever. If you start to let that get in your head it will throw you off. It will put you in a negative mood and your outlook on the match will just get worse and worse. And you just don't want to be there anymore. And you'll make more mistakes and your attitude just goes right down the toilet. Now you said in your second email, Zack, that you weren't having a bad day, you weren't getting upset the particular day you were talking about and that's good. Hopefully you continue to keep that. Keep a positive attitude about it. So I guess this is more for everybody else listening. Don't disrespect this player and walk off the court and say, "Aw you know he didn't really beat me." Well, yea he did. He hit more balls in the court than you did. You missed and you don't deserve to win. A lot of you guys out there need to hear me say that and you need to accept it, seriously. Don't walk off the court after playing a pusher and say "Well he didn't beat me, I beat myself." Well guess what? That means that you didn't deserve to beat that player. You

didn't have the game. You didn't have the skills to be able to consistently attack. And so, you lost. You got beat. Whether you're the one that made the mistakes, or whether your opponent maybe made the mistake is irrelevant. At the end of the day your score was less than your opponent. So stop disrespecting this type of player. Again, this is not necessarily directed towards you Zack, but my listeners in general, you guys need to start respecting these types of players a little more. Even though they might not have a pretty game to watch, they get the job done. So, give them some respect please.

Now, let's talk about actually improving your game Zack. This is what you need to do to actually start beating these types of players. First of all, and you know this goes without saying, but I'm going to talk about how to do it specifically. You need to learn how to create pace on your ground strokes reliably. And you're going to do that in three main ways. Number one, you need a solid rotation of your core of your body. Your chest and your torso need to rotate back and then around again as you make contact with the ball at least 90 degrees. On your forehanded ground stroke you need to turn to face to the right perpendicular to the baseline and then at least turn forwards as you make contact to be facing forwards towards the net so that your shoulders are parallel to the baseline. At the very least turning a little bit past that would even be better. And same thing on your backhand side, if you have a two handed backhand. If you have a one handed backhand you don't want to make quite as much of a turn. Well, I take that back, you will still rotate your core but it's a little bit different. You'll turn a little bit farther than 90 degrees initially so that your back is facing towards the net a little bit, but more work is done by your dominate shoulder. You should still rotate forwards. But anyway, in general you need a good rotation of your core on both your forehand and backhand side. That's number one, technique wise.

Number two, you need a long and confident racquet pass. Most players who struggle against a pusher can't generate pace reliably because they have a relatively short swing. And there accelerating the racquet quickly, but they have a harder time controlling where it's going because they accelerate the racquet really fast over a relatively short racquet pass. You should be making a long and relaxed swing at the ball and generating pace more with the rotation of your body than the actual acceleration of your arm and shoulder and forearm and hand and wrist. You should be letting everything from your shoulder down be pretty relaxed. Obviously we want to accelerate the racquet with that part of your body, but really we should be using your core more than from your shoulder down so we can be a little bit more reliable in how the racquet is accelerated forwards.

And lastly number three, I strongly suggest that you learn how to create at least a little bit of top spin to create some margin for error. You should be able to clear the net by 2, 3 feet, hit a solid shot, not necessarily super aggressive but definitely a challenging shot and be able to do it over and over again at that same height at that same pace and be able to hit a good solid shot without

over doing and getting all crazy. And you need to repeat this a million times. Both forehands and backhands and learn how to create, again, repeat a strong rotation with your body, a long and relaxed swing with your arm and with your racquet and good margin for error over the top of the net and be able to do it over and over and over again. And you have to practice until you can do this. There is no substitute for solid fundamental technique. And if you're unable to do this now; I'm going to rephrase that Zack, you're unable to do this now, am I right? You described it in your question to me. And especially in the second email you that you wrote to me you were describing how every time you tried to put pace on the ball you either hit the net or it goes long. And that tells me that you have no curve to your shot. There is no arch in the path of the ball. You're hitting it dead straight. You don't have the margin for error that you need built into your shot so you need to start adding a little bit of top spin making a little bit more of a vertical swing towards the ball instead of just hitting straight through it and trying to power the ball through the court. You need some more margin for error and that's only going to happen by improving your swing technique. There's no magical fix here. You need to improve your technique so that you can create more reliable results and still be able to hit a solid shot. Without doing that you really only have two options to try to beat this player. Number one, you can try to out push or out jump ball this guy, but I don't want you to do that. I want you to move past this level where you're struggling against this type of player. I want you to improve your technique so that when you see a pusher you and look forward to it because he's sitting up on a silver platter, easy ball after easy ball. And you should be able to dominate this type of player eventually. I'm not saying next week just because you listened to this podcast you're going to be able to go and crush this guy. It's going to take some practice. But, I do want you to be able to beat him without resorting to just playing his style of tennis. Which quite honestly is probably exactly what he'd like to see. He'd love to see you step out onto the court and try to beat him at his own game. Because that's exactly what he's probably comfortable with. He'd love to push the ball all day long. So, without improving your technique that's option number one. Or, you can just keep trying to attack with inferior technique hitting the ball the way you are right now and essentially just hope that you have a good day and everything kind of clicks for your that day and everything goes into the court even though you're hitting the ball the exact same way with low margin for error. And you're going to have some good days out there and that's great, but I don't want you to be satisfied with using a low percentage ground stroke on both sides. You said especially your forehand and just waiting until everything clicks one day, and you do awesome that day, and that's great, but, I want you to be able to be more reliable in how you attack. Just one more thing Zack. I also want you to work on your positioning. You need to work on moving yourself to the right place so that you can hit a confident shot. And the reason why I say this is because you described playing a 5.5 or a 6.0 player and being more comfortable. Now, I've got to be honest with you Zack, if that's the case, well you're probably not actually playing a 5.5 or 6.0 level guy not legitimately. If you feel more comfortable against them than hitting against a 3.5, 65 year old guy then I've just got to be real with you here; it's probably not actually a 5.5 level player. But, regardless, let's just say it's a strong 4.5 player and that he with more pace and more top spin. If you're more comfortable against that type of ball because it's got more pace so you don't have to create your own and you said the ball is kicking up more so that's is going more into your strike zone. Well, to be honest with you it should be much easier for you to put yourself in a comfortable place against this weak, spinless ball down the middle. You said he doesn't hit angles. It sounds like he just hits a weak ball right down the middle of the court with no spin on it. And because it's not traveling very fast and it's got no spin, the ball's going to bounce up and

sit in your strike zone where it's easy for you to hit. Much longer than against somebody who hits the ball hard and with a lot of top spin and so the fact that you tell me that you're having a harder time against this guy than against somebody who hits a strong solid top spin type ground stroke, tells me that your forward is definitely lacking. And you need to be able to identify and read that weak shot coming down the middle of the court. You need to react quickly and get there so that you can hit the ball in a comfortable place and so that you can hit it confidently with that good solid technique that you've been practicing. So, Zack this is pretty much it man. First of all again, respect this type player, secondly, you've got to improve your technique and that includes rotation of your body, length of your swing, adding some top spin so that you have some margin for error. That all has to happen. And then working your positioning as well so you can get yourself to a comfortable place where you can recreate those solid swings over and over again. But Zack, best of luck to you. I hope you start doing better against this guy and if I can help you any further definitely let me know.

Before we get to our next question. I want to remind you guys about the official sponsor of the essential tennis podcast and that is Championship Tennis Tours. You guys can find them at tennistours.com. And they put together travel packages and ticket packages and even just individual tickets to all kinds of different professional tennis tournaments. An example of that would be a couple of upcoming events and the US Open series leading up to the US Open. And an example of that would be the Leg Mason tournament in Washington, DC. I live in Maryland. I work near DC and I plan on attending that tournament probably a couple of days or nights. So, go check out their ticket packages for the Leg Mason and if you use the promotional code, ESSENTIAL, you'll get a discount off a purchase of any ticket or package valued at \$175 or more. So you guys will get a discount off your purchase plus it just shows them that you appreciate their support of the Essential Tennis Podcast. That helps them stay on as a sponsor which definitely helps me out, so, help them and they'll keep helping me. And I would appreciate that very much if you guys just check them out and see what they have to offer. And that's tennistours.com, and you're going to want to use the promotional code: ESSENTIAL.

Alright, next up we've got a question from James. He wrote to me and said:

"Hi Ian, I wondered whether you would consider doing a podcast specifically about how to deal with short balls correctly? By short balls I don't mean the easy type that bounce high, but the difficult low ones that are played deliberately to draw an opponent into the net. Yesterday I played against somebody who plays a lot of squash and who basically tried to slice almost everything short, draw me into the net and then lob me. This player simply did not have any top spin ground strokes that had very good placement and consistency especially using a slice backhand. Any of these short low balls were very effective. I was completely unable to play my normal game. But, fortunately came through 6.3. However, I am still very uncertain about where to hit these short balls. Assuming my opponent is staying on the baseline, is it best to play them deep, short, or angle them? Also, is there a way of deciding whether it is best to continue to the net or sprint back to the baseline after hitting these balls? This type of shot also seems to

occur quite often against more regular opponents. So I feel it would be a really good area in which to improve my tactical play. Thanks as always for any help you can offer. James."

Sure James! I'm going to try to get through this quickly here since we're running out of time. I'm probably going to go over time today. Hopefully that will make up for having a little bit shorter of a show last week. Now, you basically have three choices when dealing with a short low ball like what you're describing James. I'm definitely keeping in mind here that this is a shot that's kind of difficult to get to, it's definitely dropping. We're not meeting this ball at waist height or shoulder height and really able to attack on it. But rather it's definitely dropping kind of towards the bottom end of our strike zone. So, you've got three choices. Number one, you can play a slice deep down the line. I'm going to list the pros and cons of each of our three main options here. Most of my options are going to have to do with hitting the ball down the line. If you guys don't know why it's smarter to hit down the line in an approach situation, definitely go to the video section of essentialtennis.com and I have a video showing you guys why it's smarter to go down the line on an approach shot. But I'm just going to mention right now, it's usually smarter to go down the line. It's not always. There's some situations where cross court is a good play. But in general down the line is a little bit better shot to play. So, option number one, play a slice down the line. The pros of doing this, the benefits are if hit well it can stay nice and low making a passing shot are a lot difficult. If you guys are able to hit a nice kind of biting slice that stays low over the net and low to the ground, this can be a really good play to use that slice and taking that low shot and putting back spin on it kind of makes it easier to guide deep into the court and place it easily down the line. I'm kind of getting ahead of myself here. That's pro number one. Pro number two it's easy to aim and direct. In general, that slice shot is just really direct technique wise. You're lining your strings up and hitting straight through the ball towards your target. It's a much simpler shot than trying to hit a drive or top spin. And number three it's relatively high percentage for most people. Most people have a pretty easy time playing the slice. Now if that's not you, if you're not good at putting backspin on the ball and directing accurately, then I suggest that you work on this James. Because it can really help out on a low shot where you're being pulled into the net. Now the cons of playing a deep slice down the line or number one; if you don't hit it well that backspin can cause the ball to kind of check up and sit there and become a kind of sitting easy shot for your opponent back on the baseline. So this is a shot that you need to practice. If you can't keep it low already; if your slice shots tend to kind of float up into the air and kind of slow and just kind of sit there then you're going to want to work on it. I'm not going to go to the technique now but you want to try to play a kind of a biting lower slice. And so that's con number one. If you don't hit it well it's just going to kind of sit there. Number two. A slice in general travels more slowly than a drive/top spin shot. Again I said generally. It is not necessarily true all the time but it's definitely easier to hit the ball harder and more aggressively when putting top spin on it. And I realize that this a low ball so most people don't have that shot. We're going to get to that a little bit later. So, slice is a great option for this shot but, one of the cons is that it's not going to travel through the court as fast. It's not going to be as aggressive of a shot as if you were able to drive it or hit a top spin shot. Alright, option number two. Hit a drive/top spin shot deep down the line. And the pro here and the benefit is that you can hit it with more pace and more aggressiveness than a slice and still be able to keep it in play. Slice backspin causes the ball to float and travel farther through the court. A

top spin shot pushes the ball back downwards into the court. And so if you're able to get below it even though it's a low shot; if you're able to get your racquet below it and hit up on the ball aggressively enough to spin it you can curve the ball back down into the court again and that's going to allow you to hit with more pace and be able to kind of hit right through the court and pressure your opponent a little bit more than with a slice. However, there are several cons to hitting with a drive/top spin type shot. Number one, if you don't really play it well the ball doesn't get hit through the court. The top spin; if you spin it quite a bit and hit kind of a heavier ball; if you don't hit it solidly that top spin can also cause the ball to kind of bounce up right into the strike zone of your opponent, which can give them an easy ball to hit a passing shot or a lob on. Secondly, and I mentioned this before, it's definitely technically more complicated and more difficult to make and in my opinion it definitely takes more skill to take that low ball, hit it with top spin and make it than it does to use the slice. The slice is definitely a simpler shot to make. And thirdly, it definitely takes more confidence to hit, because it's a more complicated swing and because it's a more aggressive swing you have to really feel confident about going for it. Otherwise, you're going to dump it into the net or not put a lot of spin on it and make it float long. So, it definitely takes more confidence than just hitting that slice and directing it deep into the court. Alright, and option number three. Option number one was slice deep down the line, option number two was hit a drive/top spin shot deep down the line, option number three is hit a short ball right back. Just drop shot them as you're running into the net. And this definitely takes some touch. And I'll go over the pros and cons. Pros; it can be thrown in as a change of pace/surprise play. You can mix this in along with some deeper approach shots and catch this guy off guard and give him a taste of his own medicine. Number two, if you do hit it well, it makes passing shots and lobs more difficult as he runs forwards into the court. He's got less room to hit around you because he's getting closer to you and there's less room, there's less visibility around you because you're taking up more of the court from his vantage point as he gets closer and closer to the net to recover your drop shot. So those are the two main pros. Con is that if you don't hit it well you're just a sitting duck. If you try to hit it short and you just kind of pop it up and it's not very short and it just sits up there in the air, obviously, once you just has no ability to hit the ball aggressively and hit it past you you're just going to be sitting there an easy target. So that's definitely the con of trying to hit short right back. So, which one of these three options is best? Well, when trying to select which one is the best play you have to know two things. You have to know your opponent and you have to know what they're good at. Whether their forehand or backhand side is stronger. Whether they're better at passing shots or better at lobs. Whether they prefer to hit lower in their strike zone or higher in their strike zone. How mobile they are. If they can run and hustle and get to a short drop shot. You need to know all these things and you have to take them into account. And really very often you want to mix these options up to keep your opponent off balance and make them have to hit a lot of different types of shots in order to beat you. Number two, you have to know your strengths and weaknesses. So, walking onto the court that day you've got to know, do you prefer to hit a slice? Or prefer to hit a drive or top spin shot? Do you have good hands where you can take that short ball and hit it really short right back and make him have to run into the net himself? You've got to know your own game. And you have to know his game. And then you got to kind of mix those together and come up with a game plan. Come up with a good, solid, tactical plan for that day. And again, lastly I'm going to mention one more time that you should be practicing all three of these options, James. So that based on what opponent you come up against, whether it be this squash player guy or somebody else who gives you a lot of short shots, practice all three

of these options so that when you figure out what play is going to be the best suited for that day against that opponent you can do it confidently and use whichever of these three main options makes the most sense. So, James hopefully that's helpful to you. Thanks very much for your great question. Good luck with this. Let me know how you do.

Alright. That does it for episode #128 of the essential tennis podcast. Once again, thank you very much for spending some time with me. Thank you for listening to the show. I really truly hope that it's been a help to you. I hope that it's been informative and instructional and I hope you're able to take these suggestions, go and use them on the court and improve your own game. And if it does help you, I'd always love to hear back from you. Let me know what's been helpful to you. Maybe wasn't hasn't been helpful. Any suggestions that you might have for the show. You guys can always feel free to contact me at Ian, I-a-n, @essentialtennis.com. Alright, that does it for this week. I will talk to you guys again next Monday. Until then, take care and good luck with your tennis.