

Essential Tennis Podcast #129

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: Hi, and 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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Well, thank you very much for joining me today and especially if you're a new listener. Last week we got a whole bunch of new listeners; a lot more downloads than normal. I think it was probably due to the topic. Last week we talked about pushers and being more successful against pushers, always a very popular topic. So, if you are in fact new to the show I want to welcome you and I hope that you came back to listen to this week's episode. If you are new to the show make sure to check it out on iTunes. That's the fastest and easiest way to get the podcast every week you can click, "subscribe", in the iTunes music store and automatically get the show every week when I come out with it on Mondays. So definitely check that out.

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

Alright let's go ahead and get started with our first game improving topic and that always is my goal here on the podcast is to bring you guys information that can help you become a better tennis player. That's what this show is all about. And today is definitely no exception. Let's go ahead and start with our first question, which is from Christian in Ecuador. Christian wrote to me and said:

"I have been practicing tennis since about a year ago. I took some tennis lessons with a couple of instructors and all of them have told me that I have to improve my footwork. Sometimes I do not bend my knees enough and I also let the ball get too close to me. Could you please describe some drills to improve my footwork and place my body at the right distance from the ball?" Best regards, Christian.

Christian, good question. This is a great question because first of all, footwork is so important to tennis and it's definitely one of the most important parts of the game. Yet I think it's underrated among recreational players and I think probably especially modern day recreational players who really get caught up I think especially those of you who spend a lot of time online looking around for instruction and for video. I think a lot of you guys get too caught up in technique. Not that technique is not important; obviously it's crucial for you guys to have solid technique to be a good tennis player. But, one of the easiest ways to tell the difference between an average level

recreation player and a higher level one, let's say one that's 4.5 or 5.0, is footwork. Without even looking at stroke technique it's very easy to pick out players who aren't as high in level because they just don't do as much with their feet. And by the way, if you're listening to this podcast you're probably aware of the great video that Will, over a Fuzzy Yellow Balls came out with. Will and Adam; I should make sure to mention Adam's name in their as well. But, they both came out with a really good footwork video just about a week ago and it's been getting a lot of attention over there, so check that out. There are some things in the video that I don't agree with but I think that most of it is really solid and it's something that you guys listening, really could stand to spend some more time focusing on to make your games better. You can only be as good as the position that you give yourself to be able to hit the ball solidly. Now Christian, let's talk about your problem specifically, which is getting too close to the ball. And in my experience teaching, this is something that's very common. A lot of recreational players misjudge the bounce and they misjudge their distance from the ball after it's bounced and they end up kind of overrunning and overplaying their position and they put themselves too close to the ball and end up getting jammed up at contact. The result is usually poor swing mechanics because your core, because your body, your stance, and all of you because all of you is so close to the ball. It makes it impossible to extend your arm out towards the ball as you make contact and when you get jammed up like that and your arm remains too close to your body it's really difficult to make a fluid, loose and long athletic swing towards the ball and most players end up just kind of pushing the ball back in the play. To be honest with you guys that's really kind of all that's possible. It's really tough to still hit a solid shot once you get too close to the ball. Again, this is something that is not uncommon at all. So, Christian don't feel badly about it. I'm going to give you two drills that you can do to help you get better at judging where the ball is and also where you're body is in relationship to the ball and where the ball is landing and coming back down to.

The first drill I'm going to describe to you guys I have titled simply, "the catch the ball at the hip drill". Very uncreative, I know, sorry. It does just what the title says. You and your partner; you're going to need a partner to do this and not just Christian should be doing this. I want all of you guys to go out and try this drill. It's a really good one to find out exactly how good you are at judging, again, the bounce and where you are in relationship to the ball. But you guys should go out with a partner and both of you guys should start right in the middle of the service line and neither of you guys need a racquet, so leave your racquet over on the side of the court. Both of you should go to the middle of the service line, one of you will start with a tennis ball in your hands, and the other person will not. So you just need one ball between the two of you. The person who starts off without the tennis ball is going to put his or her hands on each hip, so at your side, not in front of you, but at your side right at hip height with your palms facing out. So, your hands should be facing forwards towards the net and you want your wrists to be touching your hips. Kind of right at your side with your hands facing forwards. Now, from that position with each of you on either side of the net, one person with their hand at their hips, the other person with the ball, the person with the ball is going to toss it up into the air so that it lands

inside either service box on the other side of the court. The person who just had the ball tossed towards them; their goal is to catch this ball after one bounce without taking their hand off their hips. So that means that this player must move their feet quickly and efficiently and very accurately, I might add, to be able to reposition their entire body without, again, their hands cannot leave their hips. So that means that in order to catch the ball after one bounce this person must position their body perfectly so that after the ball bounces and comes up into the air it comes back down again into either the right or the left hand of the person trying to catch the ball. So, again, this person cannot move their hands at all. They have to stay essentially connected to their hips; their right and their left hip one on each side and must catch the ball after one bounce. Not two bounces, not on a fly, but after one bounce.

And a couple of notes on this:

In order to do this correctly and to do this successfully, you need to be able to move effectively right and left and up and back. You have to be able to move anywhere and judge where the ball is going to end up within a very small margin for error. Your hands don't take up a large amount of space and so you have to be very accurate with how you're moving your body up and back and right and left. And that's the whole point here is to build some greater awareness of where your body is in relationship to the ball. One more thing, kind of a little rule here, you must catch the ball with the hand that is on the side that the ball bounced on. So, in other words, if you're receiving the ball and the ball lands on the deuce half of the court, on the deuce side service box, so the service box to your right you must catch with your right hand. If it lands on the left service box you must catch with your left hand. And you guys can make a little competitive game out of this as well, which can actually be pretty fun. I've played this with students and it's a good workout and really, really good to develop your guys eye hand coordination and your awareness of where your body is in relationship to the ball. And the way that you play is you both start off in the middle of the service line and one person tosses the ball to the other side; it must bounce inside either service box, the other person must catch on one bounce and without taking their hand off their hips and then after you've caught the ball, you toss it again back to your opponent and you can take one step. So you can take, kind of like in basketball after you catch the ball, you can take one pivot step in any direction you want and toss the ball to your opponent's side of the court. And so, you can kind of work each other back and forth trying to win the point by causing your opponent to drop the ball or to not be able to get to the ball. Now, you want to be fair with this. You can't use an overhand you know throw and just kind of whip it over right at the court; it's on the other side. So, create rules that are fair for both players. Rules such as, the ball must travel upwards, out of the hand you can't throw it down, it must be an underhand throw, etc. Or maybe you could create a height requirement; the ball must travel over the net 2 feet or 3 feet over the top of the net, whatever, but, you guys get the idea. And this ends up being a good workout and a great way to develop your judgment. So Christian, I suggest that you try this. Everybody else listening try this as well. It's a great competitive drill or cooperative drill, whichever way you want to do it. And one variation on this; once you get good

at doing this from the service line, have one player go back to the baseline and the second player remain around the service line and actually feed shots. So, take their racquet using open racquet face, a continental grip; just feed kind of high deep shots, but vary the depth, vary the width and have the person receiving the ball still keep their hands on their hips and move their feet to be able to catch it right at hip height, right where they're leaving their hands, right on their hips. Now, this is a lot harder than you guys think. If you're just listening to me describe this and you've never tried it before, either on the service line or on the baseline, it's a lot harder than you think. Alright. Even if you consider yourself to already have really good footwork. This is like a whole, this is like next level type stuff. You really have to be extremely accurate with your footwork and with your judgment. When you first start doing this, you will screw it up. And you're going to like run at the ball, and it'll bounce way higher than you thought and it's not even going to be close and it's going to like hit you in the forehead and you thought you were in the right place to catch it at your waist. You'll be surprised most likely, I mean if you're not, write me, please. If you go and do this for the very first time and you never screw up and you catch it without moving your hands every time, good job. You're a really good athlete and you've got great eye hand coordination. You guys will be surprised at how difficult this is, and especially when you go back to the baseline. And so, it'll help you realize how much you should be moving your feet because recreational players all too often stand in one place on the baseline as far as depth. And they'll move right and left because they have to get the ball before it goes past them. But, too many recreational players don't move up and back with the ball very well and once you start having to catch the ball at waist height without using your racquet and without using your hands off of your hips you'll start to realize exactly how little you've been moving your feet up until now unless you're already a 5.0 player. But, if you're a 5.0 player you're probably not listening to my voice right now anyway. So, I really suggest that all of guys try this and if it's easy first try let me know, seriously, and I'll respond and tell you "good job".

Alright, let's go on to the second drill here. I've got another one to help you guys work on your positioning and to work on your footwork. And this one has to do with varying your contact point. And this is something that I do specifically with players who have a hard time giving themselves enough space between themselves and the ball. I use this specifically for players who jam themselves on either of their forehand or backhand side over and over again. And it's a definite pattern. And that's something that I definitely see quite a bit of. I really haven't ever seen a recreational player who consistently stops early, either men or women, you know regardless of level; I don't think I've ever seen a player who has plenty of time, but stops, misjudges where the ball is going and ends up being way too far away from the ball and you know, kind of like **hesto(15:06)** fall over and swing at the same time because they didn't put themselves close enough. However, I very commonly see players that overrun where they're supposed to be and end up trying to hit with the ball way to close to them. So, this is a drill that I've kind of developed to help players break away from that pattern and break away from that

habit. So in order to complete this, we need one person who is hitting, and one person who is feeding. And the person who is feeding, ideally, you guys really want somebody who can hit you a consistent shot over and over again. And we're looking for a ball on either of the forehand or backhand side, whichever side that you want to work on. That's about three or four steps away from the center of the baseline. And the feeder, again, this is important, if you guys have a ball machine that would really be ideal. If not, we want somebody who can give you a consistent height, a consistent speed, a consistent depth and a consistent width. And to be a consistent feeder you have to control all of those things. That's why it's not easy to be a good feeder. That's probably something I should talk about at some point on the podcast, or maybe I should do a video about that; about how to feed correctly. But, you guys want somebody who can give you a consistent ball. And once you have that you want this person to feed to the exact same place over and over again. And I find that most players have problems being too close to the ball on the forehand side. So let's say that the feeder is hitting you shots out to your right if you're a right handed player, again about three or four steps away from the middle of the baseline. And I want you guys who have problems being too close to the ball to go through this sequence of shots. First of all, I want you to hit five shots in a row on your forehand side off of these consistent feeds that are way too close to your body. Alright? Now, maybe you already do this and so this probably will be very easy for you but, I want you, and even if you don't have problems being too close to the ball but you just want to improve your footwork and your judgments I want you guys to try this.

So, hit five shots in a row that are clearly too close to your body and too jammed up. I don't care if you make this shot or not or where the ball goes. Just make an attempt to hit a ball after you place yourself too close to it. Next, hit five shots in a row that have a contact point that are definitely too far away from your body. Too far away; and I'm talking clearly too far away where you plant yourself, you get ready to swing and you can't even hit the ball unless you just totally lose your balance and have to kind of fall forward towards the ball in order to reach it. Because it's just way too far away. Now, if you do have a habit of putting yourself too close to the ball, this is probably going to be hard for you. And in my experience, after I have my students hit five shots in a row that are too close, and then I say, "Okay, I'm going to give you that same feed. I want you to hit five in a row where you purposefully position yourself too far away from the ball." And usually the very first time they try it or maybe even the first five or ten times they try it they actually position themselves just right. And they're thinking to themselves in their own head, "Alright, I'm going to stop myself too far away." And they stop themselves to what seems like too far away to them but it actually ends up being just right. And then I say, "No, that wasn't too far away. In fact that was just about perfect." You need to double that distance away from you and just make it obvious that you're too far away from the ball. Again, the whole point here is not to practice being in the wrong place and making your swing. The point here is to break you guys away from the habit of being too close. Christian, specifically here in Ecuador, but anybody else who's listening who is consistently too close on either side. The point here it to break your habit and to kind of get away from that muscle memory of putting

yourself too close and feel what it feels like to actually make the opposite mistake. After you've done that five times in a row, meaning if you do four in a row that are, "Alright that was way too far away." And then the fifth one, it's comfortable or too close, start over again. Do five in a row that are too far away. And then finish it up with five in a row that are just right that are in a comfortable place. And I suggest that you guys go through this sequence a couple of times. If this is an area that you struggle with, keep going through that sequence. Five shots in a row that are too close. Five shots in a row that are too far away. Five shots in a row that are just in the right place. The point here is to judge where the ball is going and purposefully mix up how you position yourself in relationship to the ball. So that you guys can get away from whatever habit you have, that's assumedly incorrect here, and learn how to judge and put yourself in the right place. So we want to break away from your habits, feel something different and then learn what it feels like when it is in fact correct. So, Christian that pretty much wraps it up. Those are my two suggestions for drills to improve your positioning and to improve your judgment of the ball and to improve your footwork. All three of those things will get better if you practice these two drills and find a partner to do them with and hopefully this is helpful to you. I'd love to hear back from you. Let me know how it goes when you attempt these drills for the first time and the rest of you listening, if these drills are helpful as well, definitely let me know. I'd love to hear how it was helpful or even not helpful. If it doesn't make sense feel free to shoot me an email and let me know.

Before we get to our second question on today's episode of the essential tennis podcast, I just want to remind you all about the official sponsor of the podcast, and that is tennistours.com. They are kind enough to support me in what I'm doing here on the podcast financially by being an advertiser and so I ask that you guys return the favor since they are helping me continue to do this by at least checking them out. At least go see what they have available. You'll probably be surprised at the wide range of different tournaments that they have tickets for and also the different kind of wide array of packages that they also have available. Ranging from hotel to limousine or shuttle service. Other tickets in the example of the US Open. A lot of times they package together kind of a freebie for like a Yankees game or a show on Broadway, etc. So, they have all kinds of different packages available or if you just want to purchase individual day tickets as well for a lot of the bigger tournaments, they have that too. So, go check them out and see what they have. If you're going to a tournament soon, please give them a shot and use the promotional code: ESSENTIAL, with a capital E, and you'll get a discount off of any purchase over \$175. I thank them very much for their support of the essential tennis podcast.

Alright, let's go ahead and get to our second question on today's episode on the podcast and it comes to us from Nicole, in San Francisco, California who's a 3.0 player. She wrote to me and said:

"My question is about shots you do as your running to the net. I tend to get a lot of these because as a 3.0 player with fairly good baseline hitting, my opponents sometimes just barely return the ball back over the net. You'd think this would be great because the short approach shot allows you to go for a winner but normally these are short wobbly shots that make it over the net and I need to run and hit it back. Sounds easy enough, but sometimes my racquet isn't turned right, my balance is off and I can't decide if I should hit the forehand or backhand side. Setting up for these lame shots that come over the net is hard and I end up losing the point because the ball flies out of the court or into the net. Can you give some tips on how to hit these shots?"

IAN: And then she says, " P.S., I don't have problem getting to them, I'm very fast on the court. It's just the movement that flusters me."

Well, Nicole I definitely feel your pain and I think just about everybody listening does as well. It really really hurts to get a short, weak, easy shot. And to get there quickly you say that you move around the court really well. It sucks to get that short easy shot. To get there quickly and then to just miss it for not good reason. And I'm going to talk about both main elements here. The movement and the technique of actually hitting this shot. I'm going to try to get both in quickly. First of all, movement wise, I've got two main things here that you need to work on. First of all you must make a choice immediately about which shot to use. Either forehand or backhand. And if you get a lot of shots that land right around the center of the court that are slow and weak. Or if you're really fast, even if it's not right in the middle of the court, it's very possible you could easily hit either shot. Even if it is a little bit to the right or to the left of the center of the court. I suggest that; this is probably the most obvious statement of the podcast; I suggest that you use whichever you're most confident with and use that shot as often as possible. Either your forehand or your backhand. Even if it means running around your weaker side. So, if your forehand is more confident in general and you on average hit it better than your backhand, I want you to get better at making kind of a snap decision to hit a forehand as often as you can. Even if it means running around to the left, three, six, or maybe even ten feet to get a really easy forehand and to move around it. I'd rather that you have a shot that you prefer and you make a quick decision on which shot to hit than to be really wishy washy about it and kind of wait to the last second and not really commit to the shot and you'll end up making a lot of mistakes that way. Now practice on this is going to build your confidence and skill. And as I said a second ago, we want to start making this an immediate decision during your match play. And so that means you have to practice this during your practice time on the court. Now, if you happen to be one of those people that likes both shots equally as well, and I don't think I know more than one or two people who can honestly say that they like both their forehand and their backhand just as

well. They hit them both with pretty much equal results. They feel just as coordinated, and just as confident on both sides. If that happens to be you or anybody else listening; since you're having trouble with this, honestly I would spend a bunch of time maybe the next couple of weeks really drilling one or the other exclusively on the short shot so that you can kind of go to shot on this short ball. It's not that I want you to have a weaker side and to lose confidence in one side, but it sounds like you're really making a lot of mistakes due to indecisiveness and just not really sure which one to go for and as a result, your movement and your positioning is suffering. So I want you to get more confident in either your forehand or backhand side and start making that kind of your go to shots so that anytime you get kind of a floater, short, easy shot, you know, alright, I'm going to hit a forehand on this for sure no matter what and it's going to be solid. I've hit a ton of these and you can go for it with confidence rather than being unsure of yourself. So, that's the first part. The first part having to do with movement. I want you to start making a choice immediately about which shot to use. Secondly, your balance and your positioning, etc.; both things that you mentioned. This will start to come as well with repetition during practice. You have to practice this shot on purpose. Get somebody to feed you short easy shots or get a ball machine to feed you short easy shots. And you have to learn how to be an athlete and hit an effective shot while moving dynamically at the same time. And that might be just moving forwards quickly to get to a shot that's really low and short, but still a relatively easy shot. It might mean moving around a backhand to hit a forehand while you're moving forwards, whatever. But a lot of times these short balls, we don't give them enough respect because they're supposed to be easy and yet, we don't practice them enough to be really good at moving and hitting the ball at the same time as we move into kind of try to put the ball away or finish the point. It sounds like you've got plenty of quickness which you've said in your question, you've got plenty of quickness. Now you need to learn to hit these shots with balance and that takes practice. So, another reason to practice this shot a lot. Not only do you have to learn how to take one shot or the other probably more or often and make that decision more quickly. But you have to develop some more balance as you do so. And everything will get better when that happens. And that's going to come through repetition and practice. Now real quickly here let's talk about the technique of this shot because this is a really really common shot for recreational players to screw up. The short easy shot. And it's crappy because, again, it's an easy ball, it's a shot that everybody thinks, "Oh I should be able to put this away just like on TV and finish the point." And when you miss that shot it's really kind of deflating. And it's terrible to miss it. Now, the biggest reason in my experience why this shot is missed by recreational players is because they hit the ball too straight and too flat with a very little margin for error. Believe it or not, even when the pros hit this type of shot, they're still hitting the ball with top spin. Now, it might not be as much top spin as a ball that's struck from behind the baseline and hit with a big loop in it up over the net to make it safe and come back down again. But they are still hitting the ball with top spin most of the time. Once in a while they get one so easy that they literally just hit flat right at their target over the top of the net. But most of these types of short balls are still hit with top spin by the pros. Assuming that they're driving it and it's not dropping so low that they're

playing some kind of slice or backspin shot which can be effective as well. But I can tell from your question here, Nicole, that you're talking about a ball that's easy and you're trying to hit with some aggressiveness. So, you want to start adding some more top spin to this shot so that there's more curve in the path of the ball. And that's going to give you more margin for error and make it safer for you to attack without making so many mistakes. Both into the net and lawn. And there's two main technique elements that are going to make this possible. Number one, we need an upward swing pass. That's what's going to lift to the ball to get it over the top of the net safely. Number two, we need a flat racquet face relatively speaking. We don't want the racquet face tilted upwards towards the sky because if we combine that with an upward swing pass you know what's going to happen, the ball is going to go too far. And that's what happens when players miss lawn. So, basically, anytime you miss a lawn, during your practice when go to practice this shot, anytime you miss a lawn I want you to close your racquet face more. Don't change your grip just take your hand and turn the racquet face, turn the string bed so that it's more closed and make the same swing that you just made a second ago when you missed lawn. Don't take anything off of it; hit it with the same amount of confidence. Every time that you hit the net I want you to accelerate upwards more, not forwards, but vertically upwards. So we need to balance these two things out. The upward swing and the closed racquet face. Anytime you hit the net do your best to leave the racquet face the same but hit upwards more aggressively. Every time that you miss lawn, do your best to keep the swing path the same but close the racquet face a little bit more. And so we need to find a good balance between how fast you're accelerating upwards with exactly how closed the racquet face is. And practice this again and again so that you can clear the net by a good foot or two feet and still keep the ball inside the baseline by four or five or six feet with a confident swing. Once you can do that and you put in enough repetitions that you can also get better balance and get better at moving quickly and making a more decisive choice right away about which shot to hit, you're going to start crushing these Nicole, and you're not going to be a 3.0 player for long. Once you're able to hit these consistently and start to put them away with confidence. So, best of luck with this. Thank you very much for being a listener. Nicole had some kinds words about being a listener of my show as well early on in her question so thank you for that Nicole. Thank you for being a listener and good luck with this. Let me know how you do.

Alright. That does it for episode #129 of the essential tennis podcast. Thank you very much for taking the time to download and listen to this show today. I really appreciate it. Make sure that you tune in next week. I'm going to have a special guest with me on the show. He is a professional tennis player. Not anybody who's like a big name, you know, house hold name or anything, but somebody who makes their living playing tennis professionally in the ATP Tour. He's going to be answering some questions about doubles and I'm also going to have an announcement about something that I'm going to be releasing next week that I'm really excited

about. So make sure to listen to next week's show to catch that. Until then, take care and good luck with your tennis.