

Essential Tennis Podcast #130

Ian: Thank you very much for joining me today for episode number 130 of the podcast. I have a very special guest today on the podcast and we are going to be discussing all Doubles topics. and I have a very special announcement to make on the show today as well. You'll have to wait and see what that is. But lets go ahead and get to the interview. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

My guest today on the podcast is ATP touring professional Ashley Fisher. He is actually currently coaching and is up in Canada getting ready for a tournament there with his Doubles team. Ashley, just to give you guys a little background, has had a career high ranking in the ATP Doubles tour of number 19. He's played in the main draw of all four grand-slam tournaments, and he's got a best result in the Grand Slams of making it to the semi-finals and the U.S. Open.

Ashley, thank you very much for sending some time with me and to answer some questions from my listeners.

Ashley: Your welcome, Ian. Good evening.

Ian: Well, let's start things off by telling myself, my listeners a little bit more about yourself. I just gave a kind of a really brief overview of what you've done so far, but you're a Doubles specialist, you're from Australia, tell us a little bit more about your background as a player.

Ashley: Well I grew up playing Junior tennis in Australia until I was eighteen years of age at which point I moved over to the U.S. On a tennis scholarship. I played four years of Collegiate tennis at Texas (inaudible) University which was a great experience for me in all honesty if my game wasn't great in the tour I would have been eaten up and spit out very quickly, so it was an excellent opportunity to stay and hone my skills. Turned pro about 1998 after I graduated, and it was pretty evident to me early on that Doubles was going to be my forte and I progressed through the rankings a lot faster than Doubles and Singles. And in 2000 sort of broke into the top 100 and was able to do an ATP World event and I've been doing it ever since. Unfortunately I've had some injury issues the last two years, had four (inaudible), two in each knee which has been frustrating, its set me back, I haven't been able to play at all this year. But the flip-side is it's given me an opportunity to get into other aspects of tennis. I've done some coaching, which I thoroughly enjoy, as well as some commentary for Tennis channel, so it's opened my eyes up to what will eventually have to happen. I can't play tennis forever, so in that it seems its been an excellent opportunity to get some experience.

Ian: All right, great. Well it's an, we're going to talk a little bit about your website as well, it's great that you're starting to get involved in different avenues of the sport. You're my favorite kind of tennis player. You've gone through all the hard work to develop yourself as a Junior, as a College player, you know, you've developed yourself enough to where you've been able to be successful on the professional tour, and you're starting to get to the point where you're thinking about what's next, and you're still being involved in tennis. And you're reaching out to the fans and coaches like myself, and it's just really good to see, so I really enjoy my time talking with you. So let's talk a little bit about your website, which is tennis-update.com. Tell us a little bit about the site and what you are doing there.

Ashley: Well thanks for saying that, Ian. I love tennis and whatever it is, if its playing, coaching, (inaudible), I want to stay involved in the sport that's given me so much. It's nice to try and give something back, it's a passion of mine, I'm a huge tennis fan.

Ian: Awesome.

Ashley: I'd love to stay involved. So this year I've had a lot of spare time on my hands with my injury. So one of my little ventures is to create a website. As you said its tennis-update.com, and it's got a few different purposes, but the main concept is just kind of an inside look at the ATP world tour. I travel a lot to these tournaments, whether its coaching, commentary and these flip-cams that have now come out are incredible so I'm just getting a lot of video blogging, interviews, just inside stuff that fans don't have access to. Whether it's locker rooms, player lounges, player parties and just things of that nature that I see on a daily basis that I want to share with fans. And give you guys some insight into what our lives are like, not just on the tennis courts. Yeah, I'm having some fun with it, it's great experience for me to practice doing some interviews and most of the players are very accessible which helps. Check it out, I think you can have some fun with it. I've got a great interview from the Bryan brothers right after they broke the record in L.A., and like I said the players are very open, they love reaching out to the fans. So have a look.

Ian: Yeah I actually just went through and checked out a bunch of your most recent videos that you've put up there. And for people like myself who just love the sport, and love to watch professional players, I hope you keep doing it and I hope it's successful because it is so much fun to get a behind the scenes look at what the players are like when they're not on the court. How they spend they're time. Another example of a video that Ashley just put up was one in the training room at the (inaudible) in Washington D.C. They had a rain-out day earlier this week, so Ashley is just chatting with some of the players in the hotel workout room room as they are staying active and trying to find something to do. I think videos like that the fans are really going to respond to well, and they are going to love to see the personal side of the tour like that. We don't get to see much of that, so I hope it continues to be successful and I hope all my listeners go check it out.

Ashley: Well thanks Ian, you hit the hammer on the head. A lot of the guys have excellent personality's that often doesn't come across on the tennis court, so its an opportunity for the fans to see that.

Ian: yeah, I hope it keeps going well. So let's move on to our main topic today, and that is Doubles. That's why I have you on, and I actually am announcing today for the first time on the podcast a Doubles product, a course that I have coming out. I'm going to be releasing information about this week and my listeners can go check that out at doublesdomination.com. It;s all instructional having to do with tactics and strategy, having to do with Doubles for the recreational player. And the reason why I have Ashley on today is because he is one of the professional players that I interviewed. He and I talked for a full hour discussing Doubles tactics, and partner relationships, and things of that nature specifically for the recreational player. That interview is going to be a part of the full download of Doubles Domination. I'm not going to go into a ton of detail today about the product. Instead, Ashley and I are going to have another discussion today about Doubles tactics. We are going to be answering some questions today of members of the forums of essentialtennis.com. So, Ashley, if you're ready, we'll go ahead and get going with our first question here.

Ashley: Sure! I like the sound of Doubles Domination. I'm looking forward to doing some domination myself on tour.

Ian: All right lets get going with our first question, and it comes from Steve in North Carolina. He wrote to us and said, 'When do I move up or back when I'm around the service line? I know that I should close in when my partner hits and back-up when the other team hits past me. How does this

work?'. And this is actually a whole section of my product and I refer to this as shading, moving up and back and also right and left with the ball. And Ashley, can you talk about that a little bit and tell my listeners how they should be moving on the courts?

Ashley: Yeah, sure. You always want to move as a team – the Bryan brothers are an excellent example. If your partner shifts left than you shift with him or her, so in that instance you'd be cutting off the middle and you'd be having the sideline. You always want to take away the high percentage shots and give your partner the angle. You can't cover the whole court, you have to give up certain parts of it. As for moving backwards, as a volley, you always want to try to have an aggressive stance and looking to move forward and get closer to the net. The closer you are the more options you have with angles and so forth. So in most instances look to be aggressive and look to be volleying on your toes, not your heels.

Ian: Okay. As a coach of recreational players I'm definitely always trying to get players more comfortable getting closer to the net. It's something that a lot of club players don't like to do definitely first. And that's definitely, it can be a big negative as a Doubles player. Let's move forward. Let's talk a little bit about backing up. When is it smart to back up? Because I think a lot of coaches and pros really preach, 'get close to the net and close in really hard', but a lot of times I think they leave out when its smart to back up. So can you talk to us a little bit about when it is a good idea not to be super close to the net?

Ashley: Well are you talking about retreating to the baseline when you've already made a move to the net?

Ian: Not necessarily moving all the way back to the baseline, but not as close. So let's say that you and I are playing a point, Ashley, you serve and I close forwards to try and cut-off the return, but the return makes it past me and the returner has made a great shot. Do you think I should be staying close to the net at that point?

Ashley: Well, the problem with backing up is you open up the court for your opponent. You give them more angles. It's a lot easier for them to put a ball away if you retreat and give up court. Having said that, it depends how fast you are with your reflexes, how comfortable you are. Do I want to be on top of the net if Fernando Gonzalez is on the other (inaudible)? Probably not, but having said that, that might be my best chance to win the point. To reflex the ball, or if I'm running backwards, then I'm just giving Gonzalez, or whoever it is, that many more options in that big of a court to hit into. So a lot of this stuff just comes down to personal comfort levels and how quick your reflexes are. If they're not quick, then get out there and work on them. There are some drills, that I'm sure Ian you go into in your Doubles Domination product to assist that. But you don't see the pros back up too often in Doubles. You don't want to see the (inaudible) brothers jumping back, they're always taking the most aggressive option.

Ian: Well before we move on to our next question, I just want to mention that if you guys go to doublesdomination.com right now, you'll see an instructional video from myself outlining how you guys should be moving with your partner and with the ball, again which is called shading, and actually give away that whole chapter of Doubles Domination for free. So definitely check that out. Let's go and move on.

Ashley: Just a bit on that point. You almost want to imagine that your partner and you are connected with some rope. So when he moves, you're moving. You're always kind of moving as a tandem.

Because if you don't do that, if your partner moves and you maintain your position then there's a gaping hole in the middle of the court, the easiest part of the court to hit into.

Ian: Yeah, that's a good visual for my listeners to think about. Good stuff! All right, let's move on to our next topic and this question comes to us from THM on the forums. He wrote in and said, 'What are things you consider when selecting a partner, what are some things you do to maintain a good partnership?'. And Ashley, this is a topic that we talked about in our interview for the product. Why don't you give us a quick overview on what you think recreational players should look for in a partner when they are trying to select somebody to play with.

Ashley: Well you want to look and find a partner that compliments your game and your skill set. Not necessarily replicate it. And by that I'll give you some examples. Perhaps your serve isn't the strongest part of your game. So if you can find a partner that is very comfortable around the net and is good at (inaudible) and cutting off balls, then that's going to help you hold serve. So your looking for someone to really aid your weaknesses and assist your strengths. If you're a good returner, then a partner who is very good at being at the net and intercepting volleys off your low return. All will help. So look for a partner who is going to help you with your game and complement and assist the areas that you're not as comfortable. And then as far as - what was the second part? What do you want to do once you have a partner?

Ian: Yeah basically, he said, 'What are some things you should do to maintain a good partnership?'

Ashley: Well, practice hard. Ideally, winning matches.

Ian: (laughs) That always helps.

Ashley: That can go a long way to building team unity. Just practice together. Even just put pen to paper every week or to. Sit down and say, 'Joe, what's been working well for you? What do you think I need to improve on?', because sometimes there's a play you don't see it quite as objectively when it's coming off your racket. And don't be sensitive about it. Look, I've been (inaudible) in the world, and I still have plenty of areas in my game that need work daily, so I want someone to tell me what I have to do to get better. So have that attitude, just be honest with each other and go out there and work on it together as a team.

Ian: Yeah I think that's really key and something that a lot of players can work on. Kind of having more of a humble attitude about it and not taking it personally, and also having the openness to have the sit-down and have that open conversation with the partner and be able to outline things to work on. I think those are huge keys.

Ashley: Raphael (inaudible), has a new coach this week, Paul (inaudible), so (inaudible), he's got every shot in the book but he still feels that some outside resources can help him. Look we've all got things to work on so have some thick skin and the idea is to constantly get better and address areas that need improvement.

Ian: Before we get to our next Doubles related topic, I want to tell my listeners about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast, and that is tennistours.com. You guys can go there to check out professional tennis events, tickets and travel packages. Pretty much no matter where you want to go to watch an ATP or WTA event, they're going to have something available for you. Whether it's individual tickets for just individual days or sessions, or full packages that include travel and

accommodation, they've got really the whole wide range of products available. So go check them out, especially since the U.S. Open is coming up. And I thank them very much for their support of the Essential Tennis podcast. Remember to use the promotional code "ESSENTIAL" when you checkout and you'll receive a discount off your purchase of over \$175. All right, let's move on to our next question. Coming to us from John in Texas, he wrote and said, 'When returning serve in Doubles, what are the considerations when returning serve cross courts versus down the line. What about the lob return?'. So, John lays down three main options for returning serve. What kind of different things are you looking at Ashley, when you're playing or when you're coaching the Doubles team that you're working with now. When should players be looking to use each of those three options?

Ashley: Well you need to pay attention to what your opponents doing. More specifically the net man. If he's moving a lot and cutting off balls in the middle and poaching, you're going to need to go down his line. Also, if he's not a comfortable volleyer and his partner is, than you want to go at him, you want to test him out and make him hit volleys. As far as the lob, it's a very good shot. Again, if you're playing an aggressive opponent who likes to move in the middle or get very close to the net, the lob is extremely effective. It can take your opponent off the net. And always follow it through. If you get the ball over your opponent, than you run in and take control of the net. As far as also going down the line, if your partner is getting you with a volley serve that's hard to generate an angle cross court, then that's often not a bad ball to take straight down the line. Again, just be aware of what's happening with your opponent, the net, and what sort of serve you're getting as well. If you're taken out very wide on the forehand court, than the line is often an excellent option because there's not much court for you to hit back into.

Ian: I think that the best thing that you said there Ashley was the first thing that you said. It depends on what your opponents are doing and you have to pay close attention to that. I think that's so important and something that a lot of times recreational players pass up and it almost seems like its too obvious of a thing to be able to watch them and then base your tactics according to what they're doing to try and beat you. But I know that's something that you and I talked about in detail in our conversation for Doubles Domination. Do you have anything else to add to that, as far as being able to adjust to your opponents and making sound tactical decisions?

Ashley: Well that's exactly right. You want to have a game plan, but you also want the ability to assess whether it's working, and if it's not, make an adjustment. Every sport in the world has pro sport coaches. They'll go out there telling the team what to do, but they're constantly making adjustments. Whether it's defensive, offensive, you just have to be your own coach out there in tennis because we don't have access to on-court coaching. Especially in Doubles, you have the opportunity to ask your partner during a change-over, take 90 seconds, say hey, what's going on out here? Is this strategy of serving to Jones' forehand working or is he maybe getting a little grooved on it – I can see he's moving that way, now we need to serve to his backhand.

Ian: All right. Great Stuff. Next question up here I think is going to be fun to ask you. And actually I haven't asked you this before. Have you ever played the Bryan brothers personally?

Ashley: I have. I beat them last year in the semi-finals of the Sony-Ericson Open in Miami.

Ian: Thataboy.

Ashley: But the Bryan's have got me on a few occasions prior to that.

Ian: Alright, so this will be a great question for you. Gary in Pennsylvania wrote and said, the Bryan brother twins just won sixty-two overall Doubles titles, a history-setting record, of course which you mentioned already Ashley. His question is, 'What makes them so good in your opinion? Are there two or three things that stand out in their play, for example, that your typical club or recreational player, or even weekend warrior can learn from and benefit from?' What do you think?

Ashley: Yeah, there are. Firstly, the Bryan brothers play with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. They love the game. They are constantly bouncing around. And that helps. Being flat in tennis is something that will work to your detriment. You always want to be bouncing around trying to improve your footwork. So that's one thing they do better than anybody on a daily basis. They bring so much energy to the court which is why crowds, amongst other reasons, enjoy watching them. They complement each others game incredibly well. For two guys that are identical twins, they don't play identical, its actually the contrary. Bob has a huge (inaudible) serve, Mike has a good serve, not nearly as big. And then Mike is one of the best returners in the world, just takes the ball so early, and Bob again not as comfortable especially with the backhand. Bob's very good around the net, that lefty, forehand poach, Bob plays (inaudible) courts, and when Mike Bryan gets the balls down, which he does all day, Bob has that forehand volley in the middle of the court. So that's building on the point we mentioned earlier, is finding a Doubles partner that complements your strengths, and the Bryan brothers do that. Then they move together as well as any team I've ever seen. I don't know if its because they were united in the womb thirty-two years ago, they have like that twin telepathy going where they say they don't even need to talk to each other to know what the other guys going to do. And it shows, they're just always moving together, they never seem like they're caught out of position. They're a very aggressive team. You can do this at home regardless of your level of play. You can put yourself in aggressive positions, take the middle of the court and don't be afraid to poach, and the Bryans do that better than anyone.

Ian: Man, that's like a whole Doubles product right there, that two minute explanation you just gave. And this is my favorite part of interviewing you and the other professional players I talk to in preparing for the Doubles Domination course is that all of your guys were able to so well articulate specific things like that, that obviously professional players do better than anybody else in the world. But recreational players can absolutely take those things and apply them to their own game, and you gave four examples there. Positive energy on the court. Absolutely everybody listening to this show can do that right now. They complement each others games. You guys can find partners that do that, that move together well, you guys can learn how to do that. And they're very aggressive. So it's really cool to hear, and especially from somebody again like you, a professional player who has experienced this on the world stage. It's great to hear that we can apply those same elements to our own games, that no matter what level we are. I just think that's really cool.

Ashley: Thanks Ian. And also have a short memory. Don't be concerned with being beaten up a line, or missing a return. Just put it behind you and move on to the next point. The Bryans, they don't give anything away. You walk by and watch a match and you're just assume they're winning just based on they're body language.

Ian: Yeah, that's absolutely true. I actually saw them play at the (inaudible), I saw the match that they lost. That was on Friday. Yeah you're absolutely right. It made absolutely no difference whether they won or lost each point. They reacted exactly the same way. And that's something that most recreational players are terrible at. They'll physically look dejected and it's very easy to tell who is winning or losing a match very often based on body language.

Ashley: Yeah, they win and lose as a team. If your going to get upset about a match that's fine, but do it when the match is finished. Go into the locker room and then smash your racket or swear. You don't want to let your partner's see that they are getting to you.

Ian: let's go to another question. We have time for maybe one or two more here. Here's an interesting one from JR Striker on the forums. He wrote and says, 'what's the best way to decide who plays on which side, especially if both you and your partner usually prefer the same side?'. What do you think?

Ashley: Well one way to do it is, if you play two back, which some people do, I like to do that often as well when I'm returning, most of the balls are going to go to the middle of the court. If I have a better backhand, I might be confusing myself here, yeah I want to be playing a (inaudible) backhand because the majority of the volleys are going to come to my backhand and hopefully my partner has a better forehand. Again he's on the outside, so the middle ball, the middle of the court, we're both hitting our favorite shot. It's the same with a volley. If I have a better backhand volley, poaching, then I want to be on the deuce court.

Ian: And this is assuming right, that both players are right-handed obviously.

Ashley: Yeah, right. If you're a lefty righty, then its a good idea to do it the way the Bryans do because they both have they're forehands in the middle of the court, from the back, and when they're poaching. You typically are going to have a lot more better reach than a forehand volley, you can stretch out to that better than a backhand.

Ian: Okay. And his second questions was if I'm a recreational player and I'm just being put with somebody randomly for today's match what if we both happen to like the same side typically. Is there some quick and easy way to figure out who should go where, or is it not that easy?

Ashley: Well, and that happens on tour as well. Sometimes you kind of get a last minute team together just because that's the only person you can get into an event with and you both play the same side. Someone has to suck it up. Typically the better returner should be on the outside. They're the bigger points love fifteen, fifteen-thirty, thirty-forty. So if you both prefer that side, go with the better returner. And you can change during match. Play one set and if its not working out, have that versatility where you can switch sides, even top teams on the AT World Tour will do that.

Ian: Okay. Last question we are going to go to comes from Charles in California. He wrote in and said, and I'm actually what your answer will be on this Ashley, he wrote and said, 'What is the best way to position yourselves when you're both at the nets particularly regards to covering lobs?'. So maybe you're up against a team that lobs a lot. And he says, ' Should one player be a little further back than the other to cover the potential lob. I'm under the impression that the cross-court player from the person getting ready to lob, should be a little further back.' So should players be staggered against a team that lobs a lot?

Ashley: Yeah you have it right, that's the way we're taught. Typically the vast majority of the time the lobs will go cross-court, yeah you're going to have a staggered formation just like you mentioned. With the cross-court player looking for that lob and his opponent closer to the net in a much more aggressive position looking to close off the net.

Ian: Ashley, do you play on tour teams that are kind of known for lobbing more than others? In recreational Doubles, the lob is unfortunately one of the most feared shots because a lot of the players

don't like they're overhead a whole lot. At the ATP level, are there players or teams that are kind of known for having good lobs or is it just not a shot that is ever effective?

Ashley: It certainly is effective, it's under-utilized. Particularly off your return there's not many (inaudible) has an excellent (inaudible) lob. But Doubles has moved more towards a kind of blasting power strategy technique rather than the old traditional Doubles skills of thinking and using feel and touch aren't quite as predominant. Now players serve huge, return big, but there's still plenty of room for the lob, particularly against aggressive teams (inaudible). It would work well against the Bryan brothers because they are so aggressive it's just the problem is when Bob Bryan serves at 140 mile an hour, it's not quite as easy to chip one over head, but if you can hit it, it will be successful. Typically, if you force a player back, if you hit a deep volley forcing back, that's when a lot of your opponents will go to a (inaudible) lob, kind of fading off in the back foot. So that's something to look for. It's a great shot. You want to hold your opponent accountable to all angles and everything on the court. And even if the lob is unsuccessful, it still sends a message to the opponent that you have that shot in the bag and that maybe he can't crash the net quite as much.

Ian: Sure. I find it really interesting that you would make that comment, that the lob really isn't used enough at the professional level these days. Do you think that maybe there will be eventually a swing back towards maybe more of a finesse touch, you know, angle, volley, and lob kind of game at the professional level?

Ashley: I don't. It's moving the other way, technology, and just the game has become so much more physical. I'm constantly amazed seeing a seventeen year old kid just serving hug and ripping forehands, and it's gone to big serving, big returning. I mean the volleys are still very good volleys, but if you look at the Woodys and compare them to the Bryans, they had completely different styles of play. The Woodys did not have big serves at all, but they so much variety and so much feel and touch, whereas the Bryans have a lot of skills, but different skills. They serve huge, return big, get close to the net, yeah, they still volley real well, but you can't compare the volleys of Mike and Bob to (inaudible).

Ian: Hmm. All right, interesting stuff. Well Ashley, we are going to go ahead and start to wrap things up, and as we do I want to encourage my listeners to go check out doublesdomination.com. Again, I'm giving away a whole chapter of that product this week, on shading. I'll be giving away other parts of it as well. Just to give you guys a sample of what's in there and how useful and helpful the information is. And again, featured in that package is going to be a full, hour-long conversation with Ashley, all about tactics and strategy, and the whole time keeping in mind the recreational player. So it's a great conversation. And Ashley, I want to thank you very much for your time, not only for our conversation in *Doubles Domination*, but today on the podcast as well. It's been great speaking with you, and I know that my listeners are really going to enjoy this conversation.

Ashley: Thanks, Ian. I'm excited to see the *Doubles Domination* product.

Ian: yeah, absolutely. And lastly, everybody make sure you go check out tennis-update.com, it's Ashley's website and he's always updating it with new videos from the tour. Any plans on – I see that you have a member forum there Ashley, obviously the videos are in my opinion the coolest part of the site so far – any other plans for the site coming up?

Ashley: Well there's an instructional blog section which I need to add to, but I'll be getting some fellow players and friends of mine just to give little one minute kind of videos on how they think to (inaudible) has some tips on forehand volley. Yeah, that's a big part of it and there's a forum where you can chat with other tennis players in your area or anywhere in the world.

Ian: Awesome. All right. So go check it out guys, and Ashley, thank you very much for your time I really appreciate it.

Ashley: Thanks, Ian.

Ian: All right. Well that does it for episode number 130 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you very much for joining me today and I hope that you enjoyed my conversation with Ashley. Go check out doublesdomination.com, it's up right now and I'm giving away a full section of the product today, I'm actually recording this Sunday night, it's going to be opened up on Monday. I'm going to be giving away another section of the product on Wednesday, and by the end of the week, you guys will get really a full picture of what Doubles Domination is really all about, and then you guys will have a short opportunity to be able to get in and purchase it and improve your Doubles game. I really believe in this product, honestly, I've put a lot of time and effort into it, I really stand behind my instruction, and the content that I put out there, and this is no exception. So I really urge you guys to go check it out. Again that's doublesdomination.com. All right that does it for this week. Thanks very much for listening everybody, take care and good luck with your tennis.