

Essential Tennis Podcast #131

[music] Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you love tennis and want to improve your game, this podcast is for you. Whether it's technique, strategy, equipment, or the mental game, tennis professional Ian Westermann is here to make you a better player. And now, here's Ian. [music]

Ian: Hi, and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast, your place for free, expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by tennistours.com and tennisexpress.com. Thank you very much for joining me today. I appreciate it. Before we get to today's listener questions, I want to remind you guys about the doubles tactics and strategy product that I was talking about in last week's show, episode number 130. I am releasing doubles domination today.

Today is Monday, August 16th, and it's only gonna be up for sale until August 20th, this coming Friday. So if you're listening to this right now, and you're a doubles player, and it's not yet past Friday, August 20th, go to doubles domination right now, and at least check it out. I know obviously not all of you guys are gonna purchase it, but I really strongly believe in the content in this product. You will receive over 5 and half hours of instructional doubles content having to do with tactics and strategy, a 45 page e-book, and also an hour long strategical video webinar. That only purchasers of doubles domination will be able to participate in. So go check it out. It's all only 47 dollars, less than the price of one lesson. Pretty much any place you guys are gonna go to take tennis instruction. So go check it out: doublesdomination.com. Alright, let's go ahead and get down to business with today's show. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [music]

Alright, let's go ahead and get started with today's show. And we have 2 really good listener questions to talk about. The first one comes to us from Darren in Toronto, Ontario. And Darren, I wonder if you got to go see any of the Rogers Cup this past week. Hopefully you did. That just wrapped up yesterday, good match between Federer and Murray. He wrote to me, and he's got a question about his volleys. He said, "I have been having a lot of trouble with my volleys lately, and think I have found the problem. I think the problem is that I try to change the direction of the ball too much. For example, when I am at the net on the deuce court, and my opponent at the baseline returns one of my partner's serve, sometimes I try and poach the ball and hit it towards the opposite net player. When I do this, however, my racket face opens up, and the ball goes [inaudible] or I simply mis-hit it. What can I do to improve my change of direction volleys. Darren."

Well, Darren, that's a good question. And this is a doubles question, as you guys could tell based on how he's speaking about the returner and hitting toward the opposite net player. Let's first discuss the merits of this specific target in your doubles play, having to do with tactics, specifically, in your doubles points. And when you're poaching in doubles, the direction that you're talking about trying is actually the easiest and most natural target to aim for. And he's talking about being on the deuce side, so his partner is serving from the ad side. The returner is also on the ad side, directly in front of him. And the returner's partner is diagonal from him on the deuce side, up at the net, over on the other side of the court.

So, if you guys can all kind of picture yourselves in Darren's position here in this situation, playing a doubles point, when you poach from this position, you're moving to your left to poach that cross court return of serve from the returner on the ad side of the court over on the other side. Now, as you move towards that return of serve that was struck cross court, and as you poach--and by the way, I'm really happy that you're poaching and going for the ball. And that's something that I should've added into my outline, but it just came to me just now. I'm happy you're going for it. And a lot of times, Darren, players will poach and they'll go for this type of shot where they're making an aggressive play with their feet to cut off a return of serve, and miss it, and then they'll just give up. And they'll say, "Well, I guess I'm trying too much. I don't want to get my partner mad at me by missing too many of these." I'm happy that you're asking this question, because it tells me that you're wanting to continue doing this. And that's great! Keep it up. You're gonna get better at this. I'm gonna give you some drills later to be able to continue improving at it.

But when you move in this direction, when your partner is serving on the ad side and you're on the deuce side service box and you poach to your left, hitting towards the net player on the other side of the court is actually the most natural place to hit. And the reason is, that's the direction that your body's momentum is heading. You're already moving to your left, your whole body is, so is your racket, and your heading in that direction to cut off the return of serve. And so it's most natural to just hit in that direction. Plus, it's really a great tactical target as long as you keep it low. If you do hit toward that net player--and by the way, this is probably what I recommend the most--when players are poaching, making a move over towards their partner's side of the court--the opposite side of the court--to cut off a return of server, this is the target that I recommend most. Right in the direction you're moving, towards that opposing net player, and then aim it right down at his or her feet to make them have to hit a tough low volley or half volley.

I mean really, tactically speaking, you only really have two other main options. Option number one is to cut it back to your right, cross court, and hit a sharp angle back to your right in the direction you came from. And this is hitting in the opposite direction that you're body is moving. And you're taking a ball that's angling to your left, and then trying to cut it off to the right; moving to your left, and then you're trying to angle it to your right. That's a really difficult shot. And it takes a lot of touch and a lot of concentration to hit it at just the right firmness so that it doesn't go too wide. And it's tough to also not mis-hit this shot and shank it, because you're running to your left, you're aiming over to your right, it's tough to really keep your eyes on the ball and not look over to your right to check out your target. So, that's a tough shot. But definitely, you know, it's a good target if you can make it.

Your second main option would be to try to take this volley that you poached on, and try to place it between the net player and the returner on the other side of the court. And usually, when players pick this target, the volley just ends up going back to the baseliner that hit the return of serve. And the point gets reset. Meaning that the baseliner now has another chance to either hit past you or lob you. And now we're back into a kind of baseline to baseline player rally, and we're right back where we started: with two players on the baseline, and two players at the net. And so you kind of blow your

opportunity to try to put the ball away.

So, my point is here, that it's not your tactics that are the problem. It's your technique. We need to improve your technique so that we can start making this shot. Because as I've just laid out, I think it's a really good place for you to be aiming. When it comes to technique on volleys, in general, they're very much over-complicated by recreational players. Usually rec players, when the ball comes towards them and they're at the net, just simply do too much with the racket. And there's just not as much control as there should be with the racket head and with the strings to be able to consistently aim and place the ball where it should be.

A volley, first and foremost, should be a control shot. And in doubles, it's very often that we do want to add some extra pace to the shot. And this situation that Darren is talking about is definitely one of those. You don't want to cross cut off a return of serve, and then hit a weak volley to the opposite net player, cause they're just gonna, you know, if they do their job they're gonna crush it right back at you, and you're gonna put yourself in a tough spot. So I'm not saying that all volleys should be hit weakly, but just in general, volley technique is over complicated by recreational players.

Now, I'm gonna address the two main mistakes that you're struggling with, Darren. And one at a time I'll tell you what's probably happening and what's causing those two errors to occur. The first error that you identified was hitting off center, miss-hitting the ball, and not hitting the middle of your racket. And this all has to do with focus and concentration. And I did a whole podcast episode about this quite a while ago. It's in the archives. And by the way, those of you who don't know about the podcast archives, I'm sure you've noticed that only two episodes are available on iTunes, and only two on essentialtennis.com. If you sign up for the podcast archives on the podcast page at essentialtennis.com, you'll be able to access all 130 back episodes of the Essential Tennis Podcast completely free. You'll be asked to sign up for my newsletter, but don't worry, it's not spam. I just send one newsletter per week, and let you guys know what's happening at essentialtennis.com. Once in a while I'll send more than once a week, but very rarely. So anyway, go to the podcast archives, and check out the episode about watching the ball. Just do a page search for "watch" or "eye", keeping your eye on the ball. And I'd really talk about it in detail, but in general, hitting off-center is always linked back to not watching the ball carefully enough. You have to really make quality of contact a conscious thing during practice.

And I'm not gonna get into a lot of detail on it today, but just know, Darren, that you need to do a better job of making good contact. And usually there's a pattern involved here. When you cross over to your left, and you go for that poach, next time you hit off-center and you don't hit the ball cleanly, make a mental note of where the ball hit on your racket exactly. And if you don't know, you've gotta start paying attention. And this goes for all of you guys out there. When it does hit off-center, realize it, and then try to figure out where it did hit off-center. Because very often there's a pattern, in my experience. And a lot of times, recreational players consistently hit the same place on the racket that is not the middle. It's not the strings. And once you figure out where that pattern is and where you're consistently hitting off-center, you can help train yourself to get away from that mistake. I'm pretty sure I talked about that in my episode about hitting off-center and watching the ball. But, start working on that and

focusing on that during your practice, your time on the practice court, Darren.

Now, number two: The racket face opening up too much. And you talk about hitting the ball too far due to this. And again, very common mistake. And a lot of times, doubles players say that, "Aw, I hit the ball too hard." when they hit a volley out. When in fact, the actual problem was that the racket face was just way too open to keep the ball in play. As I said a minute ago, there are a lot of circumstances where you do want to hit a firm volley in doubles. You don't want to hit a weak shot back. And when you do hit firmly and relatively aggressively, it's important that you get the racket face angled correctly to be able to keep the ball in play without it travelling too far.

So, this is a simple matter of controlling what the racket is doing. And just because the concept of controlling your racket is simple, doesn't mean that it's easy to do consistently. And this is --as I mentioned a couple minutes ago--this is essentially where most doubles players and most tennis players run into problems, is they do too much with the racket face. It's moving around too much. They're trying to swing the racket at the ball too much, and they lose control of where the racket is facing. And aiming your volleys and being consistent and being accurate is all about controlling where the racket is facing. Period. So you want to keep the technique simple, face the racket towards your target--meaning where the strings are facing--and move your racket firmly towards your target without swinging your racket back and forth supinating and pronating to open and close your face to add pace. It's really tempting to do that to be able to hit a harder shot, but that's where you're gonna run into problems with your racket facing the wrong way at contact. And it's also gonna add a lot of mis-hits to the equation as well, as your racket starts moving around a lot. So, do your best to try to take everything extra out of it, and just keep the technique very simple.

Now, I'm gonna talk about practice drills and how you can improve on this. But first I want to tell everybody listening about tennistours.com. They're the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast. And their specialty is tickets and travel packages to professional tennis tournaments. And the US Open is coming up very quickly. I want you guys to check them out for that. Go to tennistours.com. Check out the individual tickets, ticket packages, and also accommodation and ticket packages for the US Open. If you guys make a purchase through them that is over 175 dollars, you'll receive not only a discount off your purchase when you use the promotional code "essential", at checkout you'll not only receive a discount but you'll get a free ticket--an invitation to a cocktail party in Times Square during the U.S. Open, and I'm going to be doing my best to be there for that.

I know Will Hamilton of Fuzzy Yellow Balls is going to be there, as well. So it should be a good time. So go check them out, tennistours.com. I thank them very much for their support of the podcast. And remember, make sure to use the promotional code, ESSENTIAL.

Alright, so back to the practice drills, Darin. I want you to do this with a partner. You can do this with your doubles' partner or with any other tennis player that's right around your level. I want you to be at the net on the deuce side, just like what you described in your question. And your hitting partner should be across from you--directly across from you at the baseline on the ad side of their side of the court. So

they're going to be down the line from you. Again, exactly like the situation that you described in your question.

I want your hitting partner on the baseline to start with the ball. And I want them to feed a volley to you down the line. You're going to take that volley and hit it back down the line again, back to your partner, and then from there, your partner is going to aim cross-court. So they're going to feed down the line to you, you're going to volley, back down the line to them, and then that next shot they're going to hit cross-court.

Darin, you're going to pouch on all of them. [laughter] On all the cross-court ground strokes that your partner hits, and I want you to set up a target so that this only takes two of you guys. And you're going to set up a target. You can use a plastic cone, you can use a pyramid of balls. Just take four balls, put three on the bottom and one on the top to make a little pyramid, and I want you to place that target right around the service line and right in the middle of the deuce side of the court in the direction that you're pouching towards to your left. So it's going to be cross-court from where you're starting on the ad side.

So I want you to repeat that like 100 times, focusing on your accuracy. So feed to you, volley down the line, ground stroke cross-court, pouch, and then put that ball right at that target. And I want you to start off at like a medium speed with that volley, and work your way up from there. And get a little bit firmer as you go, but only as you can show yourself that you can be steady and consistent with that volley.

And this is going to help you practice your footwork for the pouch, it's going to practice your accuracy for that volley and your consistency for that volley. Nothing fancy here, just repetition, practicing that shot over and over again. And you can do this over on the other side, as well, starting from the deuce side and pouching over to your right.

So Darin, hopefully that answers your question. We talked about the off-center shots, the mishits. We talked about the shots that you're missing long by losing control of the racket face. I gave you a drill there to work on it, and that's the end of my outline. So hopefully that's helpful to you. Send me an email back and let me know how your practice goes. I hope that this answer helps you out and you're able to improve this part of your doubles' game.

Next up we've got a really interesting question from Roger in London, England. He's a 2.5 player. A bit of a long question here, but I think you guys are really going to find it interesting. I know I definitely do. And I'm looking forward to answering it.

He wrote and said, "I've been playing tennis seriously for several years now, have had about 10 group lessons, about 15 individual lessons, and playing around 60 matches. I'm not a natural athlete. Sports have never come natural or easy to me, although I really enjoy watching them. Right now I attend two small group lessons each week, and I try to play a match about once per week on top of that.

Despite this, my progress has been agonizingly slow. This was really brought home to me a few weeks ago when I played a friend from work who had just come back from a tennis holiday. He had never played much tennis before, and beat me in a close match. This guy's a natural athlete, plays for the company soccer team, and generally has pretty good eye-hand coordination.

My question is this, in your experience, do some students never really get tennis, because their bodies just aren't wired that way for the game. Can everybody get to a reasonable level--say 3.5 to 4.0 if they spend enough time and effort on learning the game, or is it just beyond some of us?

I love the game and love the way that playing it, even at my level, helps me appreciate some of the finer points when watching the pros, but I'm not sure I'll ever be any good at tennis and possibly need to accept that. If I'm not going to be disappointed with my progress, I if I'm not going to be disappointed with my progress in the coming years. Thanks very much.

Roger, thank you very much for your brave question. I mean, honestly, it takes a lot of security in yourself and a lot of bravery to ask this. And I assume that you've listened to many podcasts before, and you know that I kind of tell it how it is. I'm a pretty straight shooter, and I'm not going to pull any punches here.

I'm going to not take this question lightly, and I'm going to be as honest as I can with you and with everybody else listening. And I'm going to answer this question based on what I see everyday from recreational players. I see, you know, the average Joe playing tennis hours and hours a day, everyday, and I try to help the average person improve their tennis for hours and hours a day. So I feel as though I definitely have some insights into this, and I'm going to tell you exactly what I think.

Now, let's talk about athleticism and coordination in general. They play a huge, huge role in anybody's ultimate potential as a tennis player. There's no doubt about that. Now I've heard some tennis players argue that with enough practice anybody can be a great tennis player. In fact, I [laughter] won't name names, but somebody on the forums at essentialtennis.com not too long ago made the statement that in his opinion he thought that anybody could become a 6.0 player if they put enough time and enough money into it--to take lessons and to train.

I mean, don't get me wrong, he meant a lot of time and a lot of money. He didn't mean like two years and a private lesson every week or any thing like that. But it was his stand from his viewpoint he felt as if anybody could reach that high of a level if they really took it seriously enough and put enough time and effort into it.

Well, don't get me wrong, practice and work ethic are extremely, extremely important, but everybody does have a limit to how good they can be based on how athletic and how coordinated they are. Some people as you found out just pick it up more easily than others, and that can be really frustration sometimes. And that can be frustrating no matter what level of player you are.

I, in my college career, played with players who were a lot more talented than me, and were able to beat me easily without a whole lot of effort, and they didn't practice nearly as hard as me, they didn't put in as much effort, they didn't hit the weight room after practices or between practices, but they would still beat me without any trouble [laughter]. And, you know, while that was definitely annoying, that's just how it is guys. I mean, everybody has different genes, everybody has different natural gifts. Some of us just pick up sports easily. Others of us can take an awesome photograph and just see things differently than most other people, and are kind of natural artists.

Other people are good at communicating, interpersonal relationships, whatever. Everybody's got different gifts and when it comes to tennis and being an athlete and being able to pick it up easily, it's no different. It's just like any other skill in life. Not all of us can be blessed the same [laughter]. It would be boring if we were [laughter]. We all have different gifts.

Now, I'm going to answer your question can everybody get to a reasonable level next, but first I want to tell you guys really quickly about my new sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast and that is tennisexpress.com. You guys should all be familiar with them. They've been advertising on the Tennis Channel for a while now, and all over the place--on the Internet. They have everything you could possibly want: strings, rackets, apparel, footwear, stringing machines, anything you could possibly want related to tennis. Ball machines, whatever, they have it over there. And they're going to be my sponsor for the next four weeks, kind of just on a test basis.

And because it's just a test, they're not going to be offering any free shipping, they're not going to be offering any discounts. Basically we're just going to see how it goes [laughter]. And to be honest with you guys, they don't think they don't think that there's going to be a whole lot of response. The download numbers for my podcast are not nearly as big as the audience that they're used to dealing with when they buy time on TV or in Tennis Magazine or whatever. So I'm just laying this out there. So they're a little skeptical. So we're just doing a trial period here.

And what I'm asking from you guys is just make your regular tennis purchases over the next four weeks through Tennis Express. I'm not asking you guys to go out of your way and buy a \$4,000 string machine, unless you were going to already, then by all means. But use the promotional code ESSENTIAL when you check out at Tennis Express. That will show them that you're appreciative of their thinking about being a full-time sponsor of the podcast. This is a just a test period. So the next pack of grips that you buy or reel of string, or if you need some shoes, or a frame, go check out tennisexpress.com. They have amazing prices anyway. You guys are going to get a good deal. They have free shipping for orders over \$75. And use the promotional code ESSENTIAL to help me out. And hopefully they sign on as a full-time sponsor.

Alright, so moving on with Roger's question here, and he was asking can everybody get to a reasonable level at tennis, and by reasonable he used the levels 3.5 to 4.0. Well, based on my experience in watching average athletes try to get better everyday, and again is this what I do everyday. This is my job--working with people that are not professional athletes. They're business people and moms and kids every single day. I can honestly say that I've given lessons to a number of people who will never be a 4.0

player, and I feel kind of bad saying that, but it's just the truth.

And if you ask them they would say of course I'm not. I'm more positive than they are. I'm a very positive person on the court. I want to be clear that I'm not saying this because I'm a pessimist or because I like to make fun of people or put people down that don't get tennis right away, because I'm a professional and I make fun of them or anything like that. Listen, I'm a strong believer that anybody can improve their tennis game no matter how athletic they are, but not everybody can improve up to the same point. That's kind of my whole point here. Not everybody has the same potential.

And so I can honestly say that I have taught people that, you know what, even with the best instruction and a lot of hard work on the court, they'll never be able to compete on a level playing field at a 4.0 level. And that's just how it is. I'm sorry [laughter].

Some of you guys are probably going to be offended by that. And you know what, if you are, send me an email. I'd be happy to discuss it with you back and forth. I'd be curious to hear what your guy's reaction to that is. But I'm just shooting straight with you guys--that's how it is.

Now, that's not most people. I would say that the majority of people definitely can be 3.5 to 4.0 players, but there's people out there that tennis just doesn't fit them well. And that doesn't mean that they can't still enjoy it. It doesn't mean that they still can't get better. But it's just everybody does not have the same potential as far as ultimate level of play. So be honest with yourself. Be realistic with yourself about your abilities. It sounds like you are already, Roger. You've already picked out a couple specific examples where friends of yours have gone and gotten better really quickly, where it's taken you a long time to get to that point, and so you're already starting to realize these things.

And I want to say good job for not getting down on yourself, and I'm glad that you're not discouraged by that. Don't be disappointed by this. As I said before, everybody's got different gifts. I'm not sure what yours is, but I'm sure something comes very easily to you that doesn't for other people. And this doesn't mean that you can't still improve and really enjoy the process of getting better at tennis.

And I like that you were talking about (let's see, where is that sentence)--you said that "You love the way that playing tennis even at your level helps you appreciate some of the finer points when watching the pros." I totally agree with that. [laughter] Because I've worked so hard at my own game, even though at my level I'm not anywhere close as good as the pros are, the guys that we see on TV. When I go and watch professional tennis it's awesome, because I know how hard I've worked, and I can't come anywhere near to the same results as what these guys do on a regular basis. So, yeah, it's inspirational and it does help you enjoy the game as a whole more.

So keep working hard, Roger. Keep studying the game and keep your head up. Keep a good attitude. And thank you so much for your question. I hope I haven't been discouraging to you or anybody else today. That was definitely not my goal. Just trying to be honest with you guys. And again, I'm not saying that most people will never be 3.0, 5.0 or 4.0, And I'm not going to give a percentage. But I would say

that the majority of players, yeah, can definitely reach 3.5. Probably a little less than most people are going to be able to reach 4.0. But it's definitely not out of reach for a lot of people to get up to that level. It's different for everybody.

So Roger, thanks very much for your question. I appreciate it. Keep working hard at your game, and thank you for being a listener. [music] [music] [music] [music] [music] [music] Alright. That does it for Episode #131 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for downloading today's show and for giving it a listen. I appreciate your support. And I will talk to you guys next week, where I'm going to answer several more listener questions.

I always appreciate hearing from you guys. If you have a question that you'd like for me to answer on the show, you can go to essentialtennis.com. [music] Go to the podcast page, and then click the button that says, "Submit A Question." [music] Alright, that does it for this week. Take care everybody, and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music] [music]