

## Essential Tennis Podcast #132

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

**Ian:** 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](http://tennistours.com) and [tennisexpress.com](http://tennisexpress.com).

Thank you very much for joining me. I appreciate you downloading this episode of the podcast and for listening to it. I don't know about you guys, but I am really looking forward to the U.S. Open. I'm always excited about the Grand Slams coming around, and it's always just an exciting time in tennis in general, but I'm hoping to make a trip up to New York City this year and I'm tentatively planning to be there September 9th, 10th and 11th. That's the second week of the Open, that Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

If you guys are going to be around, if you're going to watch, or if you'll be in New York City in general, let me know. It would be cool to meet up with some of you guys and you can let me know by sending me an email to [ian@essentialtennis.com](mailto:ian@essentialtennis.com). I'm probably going to try to hand out some stickers and some bracelets at the Open if [laughter] they let me. If I don't get kicked out. Not actually inside, but just on the entrance, coming into the tournament, and I'm probably going to go watch on that Saturday the 11th. I'm going to spend a couple of days in New York City. So shoot me an email, and maybe a couple of us can get together.

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

Alright, let's get to our first listener question, and it comes to us from Adielo in New York City. And Adielo and I are planning on getting together during the Open so I'm definitely looking forward to that. He wrote to me and said, "Right now I'm using a kick serve on both first and second serves. The difference in my technique between the two is a much faster racket acceleration and more aggressive leg drive from the trophy pose on my first serve. The ball travels faster through the air and jumps forward much faster after the bounce compared to my second serve. My second serve travels slower through the air, but bounces higher with similar speed before and after the bounce. Both of these can reach the back fence, but at different trajectory and speed.

What differences should I be seeing between my first and second kick serves? Should I be adding pace to the second serve while landing it further from the service line for safety? Should I be trying to add more height to the bounce of my first serve? Should I add the right to left movement of an American twist serve, or is it just time to move on and add slice and kick serves to the mix?" Adielo.

That's a really good question there, Adielo, and I want to say that first of all, excellent job developing

this type of serve--this kick serve. I'm really happy that you've been using this and you've learned how to do this first. Spin is the best way to develop both consistency and confidence in your serve. Just in general, I think all too often recreational players go out and they try to figure out how to fit that big, booming, flat serve first, and that's not the best way to go in my opinion. I think Adielo has done a great job of doing this first.

And spin is so important first of all because it gives you better margin for error. It gives you more margin for error, because you're able to curve the ball. Just like top spin can make your ground strokes more consistent, even when you attack and try to hit the ball aggressively, hitting with more top spin or even just spin in general on your serve can make your serve more consistent even when you're being aggressive by putting that curve into the path of the ball.

And specifically in this instance, Adielo is talking about curving the ball with top spin, with a kick serve, and that's the best kind that you can hit as far as making the ball consistent, as far as making your serve consistent, because it causes the ball to curve back down into the box after you've hit it up over the top of the net. So that's the first reason why this is really good.

The second reason is it allows you to sustain racket head speed. You don't have to slow your swing down to still have a really high margin for error. And again, that curve is what makes it consistent, and by spinning the ball, you can still maintain a very high rate of acceleration with the racket, and that spin is going to help you stay consistent.

And the way that most players typically start off is they try to hit the ball really hard and really fast on their first serve. You guys all know where I'm going with this [laughter]. And then on the second serve the racket slows way down. The acceleration slows way down, the pace of their shot slows down, and they do that so they can be consistent. When you learn how to spin the ball on your serve you're able to make a high percentage of your second serves without having to decelerate your swing and lower the aggressiveness of your shot. Now just because you're hitting aggressive doesn't mean it has to be flat. It doesn't even mean it has to be really hard as far as the speed of the shot is concerned. Aggressive-- when I say that you can still hit it aggressively, I am talking about the speed that you're actually accelerating the racket towards the ball.

So I'm really happy that you've started off with the spin serve, and that's usually what I recommend for players to learn first as they just start off with their tennis game. And if you're listening to me right now and you don't already have a confident second serve that's a spin serve, a serve that you don't really have to cut the acceleration of your racket down on, start working on that now. It's very, very important.

Now, Adielo is already hitting a spin serve on both his first and his second serves and that's great. That's usually what I recommend for players to do who haven't learned how to hit a spin serve first. Even if they already have a good flat serve is to hit a good aggressive spin serve on both their first and second serves so that they can really develop it as quickly as possible. And develop confidence and consistency

in hitting it. So I'm glad that you're doing that already, Adielo.

And now he's asking kind of about the next step--he wants to know specific answers to questions having to do with trajectory and bounce and depth and type of spin. He's starting to think about mixing things up. Well, once you're able to start controlling these types of elements, and again the depth of your shot, the type of spin, the type of curve, all these types of things I want you guys to start making your choices based on your opponents. And things that you can consider are first of all, how well does your opponent read differences in the type of spin and-or bounce that you are starting to hit towards them. If the person you're playing just has a hard time reading the differences between when you hit a kick serve or a twist serve or a slice serve, and they just don't even know that it's coming until it's already bouncing, and it knocks them off balance and they have to try awkward shots, then mixing things up between your first and second serve and mixing things up just on your first serve or just on your second serve is a great idea. And altering the depth and the type of spin and all those types of things is going to be a great thing to do Adielo and everyone else listening.

If they're able to read your spin easily and the difference between a slice serve and a kick serve doesn't really phase them very much, and they're able to hit either one just as comfortably, then you're going to want to move on down the list and try to find other things that make them uncomfortable rather than mixing up the depth and the spin and all that kind of thing. Some people are--you're going to find that it's not very effective to try different types of things as you were describing, Adielo.

The second thing to consider--does your opponent have a much weaker side? If so, which of your serves is going to be most effective to that spot. In other words, if they have a backhand that's much weaker than their forehand, are you able to hit your kick serve or your twist serve or your slice serve most effectively to that spot. And which one of those three serves puts them in the most defense position or makes it most uncomfortable for them to hit their weaker side back. And that's how you're going to choose what type of serve to hit to them and exactly how to aim it and with how much pace and how much spin, etc.

In general, you should be trying different looks and you should be mixing up your serve to give them different types of serve to see what works best, and then stick with whatever is most effective.

So basically what I'm saying, Adielo, is it's great that you're already starting to control these types of elements. Which one is going to work the best, in other words, more spin or more pace or a higher bounce or more curve right to left-- all of those types of factors--it's going to vary based on who you're playing. So continue to practice mixing those things up, but as far as which one is best to use is really going to be specific based on who your opponent is and what they're strengths and their weaknesses are.

Just two last thoughts for you here. First of all, make sure that you always use your most confident and highest percentage serve for your second serve. So whichever one of those types of serve that you're describing is your most confident, that's what you should be using for your second serve most of the

time.

Now, as I mentioned a second ago, if you find a particular serve or placement combination that really is effective, if you're able to do that relatively confidently on your second serve, definitely try that and see if you can do it consistently. But in general you should not need to slow your swing down. And you described in your question that currently your second serve travels slower through the air. You said that you have much faster racket acceleration and a more aggressive leg drive on your first serve. What I think you should be working on is maintaining the drive of your legs and how aggressive your trophy pose is, and the acceleration of your racket. You should be trying to match those elements on your second serve to what you do on your first serve.

Now you change up the direction of your swing to make it be more of a spin serve based on the direction that your racket is traveling and how much spin you're imparting on the ball. But I want you to use your body just as confidently and just as aggressively on your second serve in terms of acceleration and confidence and how you're moving your racket up towards the ball and moving your body towards the ball. I want you to try to match as closely as possible those elements between your first and your second serve. We want to have a confidence second serve. That's very, very important.

Last thought here, since you already have good control over your spin serves, I do want you to start developing a flat serve. In fact, I would take a pretty good chunk of your practice time right now that you're spending on serves and start developing that flat serve, rather than spend more time on mixing up different types of spins and different depths and different speeds on your spin serve. Not that that's not important.

I do want you to spend some time on that. But at this point, if you could add into that mix a flat serve as well, a shot with very little spin that you hit at a much faster pace. It's going to be a lower percentage serve, but one that you should start to work on to throw into your mix. Another tool in the tool belt, so to speak. Another pitch for the pitcher. We want to mix up your delivery, and by having that wildly different--I mean after hitting all of these types of spin serves, throwing in a hard flat serve is a huge difference. And so if you could start to throw that into the mix as well during your competitive flight, that would be a huge benefit for you, and it would be a big, big weapon.

So Adielo, keep up the great work on the spin serves. Nice job starting with that. I'm glad that you've been using your spin serve on both your second serve and your first serve. Now that you've developed it, really pay close attention to your opponents. See what they dislike the most. Use the spin serve that makes them most uncomfortable. That's what you should be trying to do in every match. And during your practice time start to develop that flat serve as well.

And also make sure that you start developing more confidence in your second serve so that you can use your body more confidently and use the same aggressive swing you use on your first serve for your second. Just make sure that it's a spin serve so that you maintain your consistency.

So that's my advice. Let me know if you have anything further on that, Adielo. Thanks very much for being a listener, and I look forward to spending some time with you in New York City.

Before we get to our next question, I want to remind you guys about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast, that is Championship Tennis Tours. You can find them at [tennistours.com](http://tennistours.com), and you can receive a discount off your next purchase of tickets to professional tennis tournaments by using the promotional code ESSENTIAL, and you can get a discount off any purchase of \$175 or more. And if you make a purchase of US Open tickets before the Open starts, you will also receive an invitation to an exclusive cocktail party in Times Square. It looks like that's going to be Thursday, September 9th. Thursday, September 9th, is when that party is going to be. I'm going to be there. I'm making plans to be there. Hopefully [laughter] , I follow through on that.

Will of Fuzzy Yellow Balls is going to be there, and a bunch of fans of FYB and fans of Essential Tennis are going to be there. So it's going to be a great time. You guys can hang out and watch the matches on TV there and just talk tennis.

So make your purchase at [tennistours.com](http://tennistours.com). Again, use the promotional code ESSENTIAL and you'll get your discount and invitation to that cocktail party in Times Square. I thank them very much for their support of the Essential Tennis Podcast.

Alright, our next question comes to us from Chris in Wisconsin who's a 4.0 player. Chris, good to hear from you from the motherland. [laughter] I'm from Milwaukee originally so great to have a listener there in Wisconsin. He wrote to me and said, "I normally always play with my brother who is about the same level as me, but when we play we normally never play matches; it's just feed and rally. He tends to not feed very courteously and is always high and low and out of my strike zone so I always have to play a defensive shot just to get it in. When I feed it right to his strike zone so he can take a big whack at it, and puts the ball in play with a lot of pace. The problem is that either whether I'm feeding or he is feeding, I'm always put on the defense and he is always right on offense. He is always pulling off great shots because of this, and I'm just trying to keep it in, because I am in a defensive mode. I don't feel like this is helping me at all. What should I do to change this? Is this benefitting me at all?"

Well Chris, good question, and I can definitely tell [laughter] that this is frustrating you. And I don't blame you for feeling frustrated. There's two main ways to look at this: And the first way--we're basically going to look at this from two different points of view. And the first point of view we're going to take a look at is the honorable tennis player's point of view. We're going to take the standpoint of an honest, honorable tennis player and there's kind of an unwritten code among tennis players, and especially tennis players of a certain level--I'm just going to say upper-level players--there's kind of a code of ethics when you're out on the tennis courts, and I've got five different things here that in general, if you're a decent person and [laughter] you're a nice guy or a nice girl, and you're a competitive tennis player, and again especially over a certain level, I'm not going to assign a certain level to that. But it has to do with experience level-- amount of experience for sure. There's kind of an unwritten kind of code, and I've put down five examples that are in that code.

#1, when warming up before a match you are expected to rally nicely [laughter]. And I once heard a comment about a certain player in college. Somebody on my team exclaimed that somebody on the other team was undefeated in warmups [laughter], meaning that they went out with kind of a competitive mentality and just beat the heck out of everything, hit really aggressively, would hit winners during warmup, you know this is the time where players on both sides are trying to get into a rhythm and have nice rallies back and forth. Some people just don't get that. But there's kind of an unwritten rule or there's an expectation that during warmups you're supposed to be courteous, you're supposed to be consistent, and you're not supposed to be aggressive. So there's code-law #1.

#2, when you hit a net cord or shank winner, you put up your hand, even if you don't mean it [laughter]. And listen, I've put my hand up and apologized for net cord winners even when I don't mean it. I'm going to be honest there. Not everybody means it, but it's the courteous thing to do.

Unwritten law #3 is that when you hit somebody with a tennis ball you also put your hand up. And you may or may not actually verbally apologize and say I'm sorry. Same thing with the net cord or with the shank winner. But you at least just put up your hand. It's a gesture of say, you know what, my bad. And again, you may or may not mean it, but that's not really the point--it's just kind of a traditional part of the game. I think as tennis players we should all treat each other with respect and that doesn't always happen out there, but again, I'm just giving you guys examples of things that in general, traditionally, tennis players will typically do, just as a courtesy. So that's #3.

#4, when there's a call that is super close or a player is unsure about a call, usually the benefit of the doubt is given, and the call is made good. And hopefully you guys do that. When you're unsure of a call, I hope you guys give the benefit of the doubt to your opponent, and you don't just call it out. And [laughter] everybody complains about that player who's a cheater or maybe we don't use the word cheater but they always make bad calls. And yet nobody ever says [laughter] wow, I had a close call the other day, and I called it out. And I don't care what the other person thought. I'm just going to call it out. I wanted the point. You've never heard anyone admit to that, and yet everybody talks about the cheater that they played. So listen, my point here is if give somebody the benefit of the doubt. When you guys plan and you're just not sure, or it was very, very close, practice giving them the benefit of the doubt. It's just the honorable thing to do.

And #5, when playing a baseline game, you should hit a courtesy feed and Chris used that expression in his question. Courtesy feed means a shot that you hit to your opponent that's easy on purpose. And this goes for cooperative rallies or competitive points, when you guys are making a feed, just to get into the points and to begin the point and you're not playing with serves and returns you should be starting the points off with an easy shot to your opponent. And that doesn't mean you give them a sitter, and it's high and short and weak. But you should hit something to their strike zone so that you can get the point started.

Now this is unless you have--you're working specifically on hitting difficult shots and then playing the

point out, this should be the case. And on the other side of the coin, when you receive a courtesy feed, it's good manners and its good etiquette to hit the ball back down the middle again. You don't take the courtesy feed and take advantage of it and hit winners off of it, because that's just a [laughter] crappy thing to do. It's just taking advantage of the courtesy that your opponent showed to you. So you should hit that first ball down the middle.

If there's a bad feed, it should be redone, and a winner off the feed should be redone. I've done both of those--I've extended both of those courtesies to my opponents during baseline games. I've made bad feeds and said, you know, listen, my bad, I wasn't trying to hit that good of a shot off the feed. And I've also hit winners inadvertently off of a feed and said, you know, here, let's replay that--that really wasn't fair. You gave me an easy shot and I just put it away. That's just not really a fair thing to do.

Now, not everybody is aware of things like this, and you should cut them a break, alright [laughter]. Chris, this goes for you and everybody else listening. Not everybody knows about these courtesies--these unwritten rules of tennis, and some people are just going to be ignorant of them. And they're going to break all of these rules within an hour of play. And just give them a break. Don't worry about it. Many people just don't play very often, they're not very experienced in tennis, they haven't played for very long, or they're just completely unaware of these courtesies.

Now, other players are completely aware of all of the five examples I gave, but they choose to completely ignore it. They choose to ignore the code, and they break these unwritten rules, and they even do it on purpose. Now, this is your chance to work on your mental toughness and kind of make your skin a little thicker on the court. Just let it go. Focus on what you can control. And don't let it affect your temperament on the court. Don't let it get you down. Don't let it annoy you. This is just a good chance to practice, and Chris this goes for you playing against your brother. Just do your best, work on your own game, and that's my next point.

That was standpoint #1, just purely from a kind of unwritten tennis code point of view, all of these things can be annoyances, but not everybody is aware of them, and not everybody chooses to follow them. And that's fine. You're going to play different people with different codes of ethics and that's just kind of life in general. You guys are going to come across people all the time that just don't agree with you about what is nice, what is acceptable conduct. You're going to get cut off by that person in traffic, or that person in front of you is not going to hold the door for you, even though they know that you're there. And that's just how it goes. Don't let it bother you--that's just life. And you guys are going to be better for it if you can just ignore it and not worry about it.

Now from another perspective, I want you to think about this as well, Chris, and that is from a game improvement standpoint. Not only do you get to improve your focus and your concentration during this time with your brother, but you get to work on your positioning and defensive skills. So rather than sit back there on the baseline and sulk and have a negative attitude about it, and say this is just crap, this is totally unfair. I'm giving him easy shots on the feed. He's taking advantage of it. When he feeds to me he's giving me difficult feeds. I'm barely able to get into the points. Well, guess what, why don't you play

at a higher level. Learn how to move your feet a little bit better so you can take those shots and still beat him. Wouldn't that really ultimately be the most satisfying thing is taking his crappy feeds and figuring out a way to get them back consistently and still win? That's ultimately the attitude that I want you to come at this from, because this is good practice for you.

Now, since you guys are going out with the purpose of practicing, this isn't--while on the one hand this isn't the best practice, because you're not getting into a rhythm, you're not maintaining a rally back and forth, but on the other hand, you need to practice difficult shots too. And so if you're really serious about improving your game, you shouldn't spend all of your practice time with your brother; find somebody that you can rally with that is going to give you a consistent shot, that's not going to take advantage of the feed, and somebody that you can really get the most out of your time on the court with. And then go practice with your brother too. And practice against somebody who's purposely giving you difficult shots. Because you know what, that's real life. Real life is that your opponents are not going to care whether or not you like it. They're going to do whatever they can to try to win. And so this is a good thing for you to practice.

When I am running junior clinics at the club where I teach, myself and the other pros don't let kids complain about the feed unless it's just super blatant. I mean, we outline before baseline games start, you guys need to hit a courtesy feed to start each point. The second shot should be down the middle. It's understood that those first two shots should be down the middle of the court to get the rally going, and so that nobody is taking advantage of the other person as they're trying to get a rally going. However, we don't like to hear a lot of whining about bad feeds. And what we'll watch kids stand there and watch the feed bounce up out of their strike zone without even moving for it and then go, "Oh, that was a bad feed. Refeed it," and they didn't even try to back up to let it come back down into their strike zone. Don't be that person, because you're not bettering yourself at all by practicing that way.

We do let kids redo feeds, but only if they make an honest effort to get to the ball and hit the best shot that they can. And if at that point the shot in the ball is still way out of their strike zone and they can't even barely get a racket on it, then we allow them to refeed it. We say fine, that obviously wasn't courteous. You gave it your best chance, your best shot. You know, you gave it an honest effort. Still weren't even close to getting it in play. So go ahead and refeed it.

But in general, Chris, I want you to come at this from a game improvement standpoint. Bust your butt, try your hardest, let your partner-opponent offer to redo it if they see fit. And if they don't, you know what, even if you complain to them and say, listen, that's just really not nice, [laughter] they're probably not very likely to change their mind anyway. In fact, they're probably just going to respect you less for whining about a feed that was a little out of your strike zone, and you weren't able to feed comfortably hitting it back.

So bottom line here, control what's in your own hands, control what you're able to control-- that is your effort level, your hustle, your footwork, and concentrate on improving your effort level and your mental concentration and your focus. And if you go out with your brother everytime with that kind of mindset,



you're going to keep getting better and you'll benefit from your time together. But if you let it bother you, chances are you're not going to get a whole lot out of your time together. So work harder and keep mentally tough, and you'll get the most out of your practice time.

So I tried to come at that from two different angles, two different perspectives. Hopefully that's helpful to you, Chris. So, I mean, while on one hand I don't agree with your brother for hitting tough feeds, especially if it's on purpose--on one hand I don't really agree with that, and that's not something I would do if I was practicing with you, but on the other hand, not everybody is aware of courtesies like that. Not everybody knows about them, and even if he did, he might not even care, even if you talk to him about it.

So just do what you can do to continue bettering yourself, and let him do whatever he's going to do. And if at the end of the day you feel like it's just not worth it to you, and he's just taking advantage of your time, then find somebody else. I'm sure there's other people you can find to practice with. So Chris, hopefully that's helpful to you. Send me an email. Let me know what you think. And I really appreciate you being a listener.

Before I wrap up today's show, I just want to remind you guys about [tennisexpress.com](http://tennisexpress.com), a huge online retailer where you guys can buy any of your tennis purchases that you might need: strings, grips, rackets, bags, shoes, clothing, accessories, string machines. Anything you might want, they've got. And I'm working really hard to get them to be a sponsor of the podcast. They're skeptical, and we're just kind of doing a trial period.

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Alright, that does it for Episode #132 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. I want to thank you guys very much for listening to today's show. The show is completely dedicated to you guys, the listeners, the recreational players, the weekend warriors, you guys out there fighting every week to improve your game as much as you can. This show is recorded all for you guys. And if you have a specific question that you'd like me to answer, go to [essentialtennis.com](http://essentialtennis.com), [music] click on "podcast," click on "submit a question," [music] and I'll use your question here on the show. [music] Alright. That does it for this week. Thanks again everybody. Take care [music] and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music] [music]