

Essential Tennis Podcast #134

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Announcer: Welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast. If you love tennis and want to 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 on today's episode of the Essential Tennis podcast. Hopefully you guys notice a big difference in the audio quality. As I'm speaking to you, I've upgraded my recording equipment again. It's just another effort to try and make this show sound as professional as possible.

And I'd like to thank Cliff Ravenscraft. He helped me figure out what was the best equipment for me to purchase. I'm really happy with how it's sounding. He is the host of the podcast Answer Man podcast, all about being a successful podcaster So those of you listening who might be interested in being a podcaster yourself, or maybe you already are and you'd like some better equipment or tips on how to make your show sound better, definitely check out Cliff's show. That's at podcastanswerman.com. Thanks a lot for your help, Cliff.

Alright, we've got 3 great questions to talk about today on the show. So sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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Alright. Let's go ahead and get started with our first questions. Our first 2 questions today are going to come to us from Megan in New Zealand. Her first question is as follows:

"Hi, I was listening to the confidence vs. arrogance/expectation podcast and it raised a question for me. Dr. Cohn talked about those tennis players that don't have a lot of self-respect that tend to look for respect from others; for example, their coach. This would have to be one of my biggest problems! I was wondering, what if you build up your self-respect and learn to have confidence in your playing ability, but that still doesn't get rid of the need to not disappoint your coach?"

Megan, that's a great question. This is definitely an important thing to work on. It's something that I have very often struggled with in college. I had a hard time mentally in college. Looking back, that was due to several different reasons that I won't get into right now. But my eyes would very often travel up to the viewing area during points, during matches. Very often in between every point. I can remember having stretches of time where I was just constantly looking up there. Basically, I wanted to see who my audience was. I was curious who had shown up to watch that day's match. Were my teammates watching? Was my coach watching? And if I'm honest with myself, I know that I wanted to check out and see, alright. Who can I impress? Who's watching that I can really work hard for, and hustle hard for? If I hit a really awesome shot on this point, who's going to see that?

Basically like what you're talking about, you don't want to disappoint your coach. And this is a recipe for a disaster. It takes your focus off of what is really important during your match. Your #1 task at hand in any match is to win. That's what you're trying to accomplish every time you go out there and compete. When your focus and your attention is constantly being drawn to others, you are constantly thinking about other people and what they're going to think about you. Whether or not you're going to win this match, or even how much you win it by.

You put that pressure on yourself to try to make other people happy. You stop thinking about tactics. You stop paying attention to patterns that are happening right in front of you in the match that you're playing. You stop focusing on your game plan, and you're not very emotionally controlled either. It takes your focus off of controlling all of those things. Your emotions, your tactics, your game plan. [laughter] And obviously that's not a good thing!

When your focus gets taken off all of those things and you start thinking about somebody else instead, and you start worrying about what they're going to think about you, that's just not going to be very helpful to you. You're not going to be as successful that way. As if you keep your focus on the task at hand, and on exactly what's happening right in front of you.

And don't worry about this, Megan. Like I said, this is something I had a really hard time with in college. You'll see professional players that struggle with this as well. It's not uncommon at all to see professional players on TV constantly looking up to their box for emotional support during tough matches. Not that it's a bad thing to want support and encouragement from those around you.

But when you're literally in the middle of your match and have just finished a tough point, and you're looking up towards your coach, your teammates, your friends with that whiny look on your face. It's like, "Oh, come on! What's going on here?" You're basically looking to other people to help try to get you out of the situation. That's not a good sign of mental toughness. The players who are most mentally tough that you see on TV, they are constantly focused, and they're not allowing other people around them to break their concentration.

So I have 2 suggestions for you moving forward. To try and improve this. One is a suggestion on how to improve it, and the other one is just kind of a thought. Something I want you to think about as you continue working at this.

First of all, I do want you to continue trying to develop your on court focus skills. Keep working hard at competing for yourself, and maintaining your concentration as you do compete. I want you to realize that this isn't an all or nothing type skill. You will have to continue working on it. It's not one of those things where either you get it or you don't, [laughter] and it's like a red light, green light kind of thing. And you're either succeeding or you're not. It's a sliding scale. So even though you may feel like you've gotten better at this since you've listened to that podcast with Dr. Cohn.

And those of you who haven't heard that episode, sorry I don't have the episode number right in front of me, but Dr. Cohn. That's C O H N. He's been on the show 3-4 times. He's a mental toughness expert. Really good guest. For those of you who have troubles with your mental game, I highly recommend you go to the podcast archives and download his shows.

But the one that Megan's talking about, I think that's only--I want to say a month or maybe 2 months old at the most. However much time since you've heard that show that you've been working on this, you can still get better, Megan. Don't think that this subject is something that you've conquered and there's no way that you can make this any better. I've got 3 tips for you to continue improving your on court focus, and keeping your attention off of other stuff.

First of all, develop a solid routine to repeat between points. This is something that professional players reference all the time in their post-match interviews. They talk about their pre-points routine, or their routine in between points. This is typically things like--I think one of the best examples of this is Maria Sherapova. She has a very distinct routine between points. She'll walk back towards the back wall of the court while looking down at her strings. She'll think to herself what she wants to do in the next point. She kind of has this little hop up and down that signifies: OK, I'm ready. Let's go! Then she'll walk up to the baseline, and either prepare for the routine of serve, or do her service routine, which is also very distinct. [laughter]

Ever since Novak [inaudible] copied it and kind of made fun of it a little bit, I think everybody's aware of it. But anyway, she's a good example of anybody who has a really solid pre-point routine, and she sticks to it perfectly ever single time. That's a great way to always calm yourself down. Do the same thing between every point, something familiar, and that can help you maintain your concentration. You can use that time to refocus your concentration on exactly what's happening right in front of you, and continue to push out whatever thoughts you might have during the match. About your coach, or about whoever might be watching, etc.

#2. Learn to ignore everything going on outside of your court. This can be really hard.

There's a lot of distractions that could potentially tear our concentration away from the match. It could be other matches going on around us. Could be family or friends that are just outside the court watching us. Could be teammates or coach watching us. It could be something stupid, like a kid running around and screaming who's being distracting. Could be lots of stuff. Somebody listening to a radio. Maybe not even close to the courts, but maybe you're hearing music. Or maybe people playing a different sport outside the courts. Could be anything.

Any of you who have competed at tennis for any length of time know that some days are easier than others to maintain your focus. Sometimes it just seems like whatever's going on outside the court, for whatever reason that day, your attention is getting sucked away from the match, and that's a terrible thing as far as being successful competitively. So continue to work on that, Megan.

And #3 make all of this a habit through repetition. Again, these are things that you need to practice. It's not an all or nothing kind of skill. So keep working at it and you'll keep developing the skill, and keep getting better and better at it.

Lastly, I just want to say: it's OK to want to make your coach happy. Don't think that you should be indifferent about how your coach feels about you. [laughter] I want you to work hard for your coach and do whatever he/she tells you to do as far as during practice time, whatever. Exercises or drills. I mean, always work 100%. From that standpoint, I do want you to work hard at making your coach happy, and gaining his or her approval. Where it crosses the line is when you actually go out and compete for your coach, and that's your main motivation is you really want to make your coach happy with you during competition.

So don't think that wanting to make your coach happy is bad in general. I just want you to be clear about why you're competing, and I want you to play for yourself out there, and like you were saying, have that self-respect and [laughter] I guess love yourself enough to be playing for yourself. Know that ultimately, you're doing this for your enjoyment, and it's exciting to you, and you love the sport. Those are all reasons why you should be competing--not just to make your coach happy.

But wanting to make your coach happy in general is fine. Just be careful about using it as your primary motivation. Using your coach or other people as a crutch during matches. You need to stay mentally tough out there. Fight for yourself and play to win! For yourself. That's how I want you to think about it.

So Megan, great question. Hopefully this is helpful to you. I'm not sports psychologist like Dr. Cohn is [laughter] but those are my thoughts, so I hope that's helpful to you. Thanks very much for being a listener. We'll be getting to your next question in just a second.

First I want to remind you guys about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast. That is tennistours.com. That is the URL for championship tennis tours. I'm going to be

with them in NY this coming week. I'm going to be there Thurs. and Fri. I'm going to be at the matches on Fri. That party that Will Hamilton of Fuzzy Yellow Balls is going to be at it. I'm going to be there. And championship tennis tours is putting it on. It's going to be Thurs. evening. This coming Thurs. is the 9th. That's going to be at the W Hotel in Times Square. If you guys want to go that, you can either purchase a ticket through Championship Tennis Tours and you'll receive a free invitation. Or send me an e-mail and maybe I can hook you up. [laughter]

So shoot me an e-mail: ian@essentialtennis.com. If you're going to be at the Open, or you're just in NYC, send me an e-mail, and maybe I can get you into that party with myself and Will, and Championship Tennis Tours. But definitely check them out for any tournaments you might be traveling to, whether here in the U.S. or even abroad in other parts of the world. They've got great prices, great customer service. Please show them some thanks for being a supporter of the Essential Tennis podcast. I appreciate their sponsorship very much.

Alright. Our second question again comes from Megan in New Zealand. She wrote, and has a question about serving tactics. She said:

"Hi, Ian. I have a question of tactics in the serve. When you serve and you've picked out your target and you're aiming for it, what do you do if your serve goes wide, or the ball hits the net, and you have to hit your second serve? Do you stick with your previous target? Or do you change it for the element of surprise? Or does it depend on how far into the match you are? Or the type of opponent you're playing? Etc. Thanks, Megan."

Well Megan, this totally depends on the opponents, and your strengths and weaknesses as well. As do all tactical decisions. They're all subjective. They all depend on exactly what's going on in each individual match that you're playing. As with all parts of tennis, strategy, there's lots of general rules that you should usually follow. But there will always be circumstances from match to match where you might have to break some of those rules to give yourself a certain advantage based on what your strengths are, and what your opponent's weaknesses are. This is one of those kind of situations.

There are a few things that you should be taking into consideration. I'm going to list 3 different tactical things that you need to keep in mind as you decide where you should be aiming that second serve specifically. This is probably a pretty common thought for most people, because you pick out. Let's say you're serving down the T for your first serve. Maybe you just miss it by a couple of inches, and so your opponent obviously knows where you were trying to aim that first serve. It's possible, maybe they're going to try to get a jump on that second serve, and maybe assume that you're going to serve there again. Or maybe they're going to assume you will serve some place else and try to mix it up. It depends on who you're playing. So there's 3 different criteria, Megan, that I want you to look at as you try to decide where you should aim that second serve.

#1 Does your opponent have an obvious weakness? As an example: maybe their backhand is much weaker than their forehand. If that's the case, do not be bashful about

going to that spot over and over again. I really can't stress this enough. I think too often, recreational players think that good tactics, to be a good person at strategy, they have to be sneaky and trick, and always mixing things up, and never doing the same thing twice in a row. That is definitely not true.

I can tell you guys honestly that I have definitely gone whole matches, either singles or doubles--probably at least 1 of each instance--where I've only served to 1 place to my opponent. Because their backhand was that much weaker. I'm left handed and so my spin serve naturally curves out to the right handed player's backhand. I know for sure in double matches, I've gone whole matches to certain returners. Either on the [inaudible] side or the ad side, only serving to one place. Because I found out early that it worked. I found out that they were uncomfortable with their back hand. So just exploit it! [laughter] Just go there over and over again. [laughter] Don't feel like that's mean. That's just good tactics.

And don't feel like you have to change it up necessarily. If they really have a weaker side, then just keep going to the well. And make them have to make a big adjustment, either in the technique that they're using, or make them have to run around it. Or make them have to try a different type of shot to be successful, or something. But that's one example of choosing the same target, and that can be really good tactics. If you really have a good reason for going to that same place over and over again. An example of that would be a big weakness. So that's #1.

Criteria or thing to think about to consider #2: Do you have a pattern of play that works well for you over and over again? Even if it's not a major weakness of your opponent, a lot of times a certain direction of serve for you followed by another shot can be really successful. I'll give you another personal example of that. Serving and volleying out wide on the ad side in singles has been kind of a go to play for me on hard courts I have a harder time [laughter] Serving and volleying is a lot tougher on clay!

But where I played tennis in college, our courts were really fast hard courts. As I mentioned a second ago, I'm left handed. Usually my opponent's back hand was their weaker side. So serving and volleying to my opponent's back hand, I used to have a really good spin serve outside, as most lefties do, on the ad sign. I would come in behind that pretty often. And you know what? Even if it was my opponent's strength, their back hand, I would still throw it back there pretty often, even on a second serve.

Megan was talking about second serves. I always had a confident second serve. I would very often throw it in there as a change of pace and to keep my opponent guessing and off guard, even on a second serve. So don't be bashful about using patterns like that over and over again. If you know it's a big strength of yours and you're confident in it, even if it's the same serve that you tried the first serve.

In this example, I served out wide aggressively, and made those 2-3 aggressive first steps into the baseline, making it really obvious I was serving and volleying. I would very often just go right back to it for my second serve. Hit a confident spin serve out wide, and

come right in behind it. That just shows your opponent that you're not afraid. You know what you're good at, and you're going for it. And you're playing confidently. That's a message that, if you can send that to your opponent on a regular basis, you know what? Even if they hit a back hand return winner on me, I don't feel badly about throwing that in there once in awhile. Because it's really forcing my opponent to stay on their toes tactically. I force them to have to go for that big return serve.

Whereas if I just kind of spun it into the middle of the box and sat back at the baseline, they're feeling no pressure to even have to hit a great shot. So think about that, Megan. What patterns or specific placements and combinations of shots do you usually use to the best effect? That's something to keep in mind when you think about where to aim that second serve.

Thirdly, have you spent a lot of time developing your aim and your accuracy and your confidence of your second serve. You need to ask yourself this. All of you listening need to ask yourself this, because many of you who are listening to me right now don't have the confidence to actually aim your second serve, and go for a target, and hit to a specific place. Many of you don't feel like your second serve is good enough to try to aim it, and as a result, you're happy to just hit the box in general. You're aiming for very general targets. If that's the case, then I suggest that you stick with whatever your most confident placement is on that second serve to avoid double faults. In which case, your decision is kind of made for you on that second serve. So if you go for a big first serve and you miss it, then your choice is pretty easy [laughter] on the second serve.

If you don't have a very confident second serve, you're going to find yourself going ahead and going with whatever the highest percentage placement is, and highest percentage type of serve is for you on that second serve. Even if it's not the best tactical decision. In other words, if your most confident second serve is just kind of a slow spin serve right in the middle of the box, and your opponent is running around hitting all 4 hands and crushing them, maybe you want to try for a little more on your second serve. But if you haven't spent a lot of time working on it, and you end up just double faulting as a result when you try to hit to their back hand on purpose, then unfortunately you're going to have to go ahead and go with whatever generic target is most comfortable for you on that second serve.

So let me encourage you to work hard at developing a confident second serve. It's really important. You should be able to aim it and place it. If you can't do that confidently already, start working on it, because it can be a really big tactical advantage for you during a match.

Alright. So Megan, that's it. Hopefully that was helpful to you. I want to thank you very much for both of your questions that I used in today's show. I appreciate you being a listener of the podcast. It's always great to hear from listeners in other parts of the world outside of the U.S. So it was exciting to hear from you. Hopefully today's show is helpful to you. Keep working hard on your game.

Before we get to our last question today, I just want to remind you about the second supporter of the Essential Tennis podcast. That is Tennis Express. You can get free shipping for any order over \$75 from Tennis Express. When you use the promotional code 'essential' when you check out, you will support the Essential Tennis podcast by showing Tennis Express your appreciation for helping me out. This is the last week in their trial period. We're going to be reviewing how many purchases got made in the last 4 wks. Sometime this week. Hopefully, we're able to work something out for the future, and I'm going to fight really hard to get you some discounts and special offers, and things like that. So thank you for your help as I continue to try to secure them as an advertiser on the show.

So tennisexpress.com and again, promotional code: essential. I really hope that I work things out with them moving forwards, both for the podcast, and for you as well.

With that, let's go ahead and move on to our last question. This comes to us from Tim in Dayton, Ohio. He's a 3.0 player. He wrote and said:

"My question relates to judging if a ball is going out or not when I'm playing at the net. It happens so fast that I don't much time and I often hit that balls that may have gone out."

So he's got two main questions here. #1. Does the chance of making good contact affect your decision on close calls? What he means by that I assume, is if you can reach a volley easily, does that have any bearing on whether or not you let it go if you think it's going to be a close call. Then the second question is:

"What cues should I be watching to help make this decision? Top spin, etc. Do you have any drills to help with this? I know this is basic stuff, but I think it's a good topic."

I agree, Tim. It is a good topic. I like basic stuff! [laughter] At the core of a lot of my teaching is just fundamental things. This is one of those topics that probably hasn't been discussed a whole lot around the internet. It's how to get better at judging whether or not passing shots, lobs, are going in or not once you do approach the net. I think that's probably one of the biggest areas that tennis players are worried about or apprehensive that can a lot of times keep recreational players from going to the net as much as they should be.

So to answer your questions Tim #1, he was asking about if it's an easier shot to make a play at if I can reach it and it's a relatively easy volley, does that have any effect on my decision to let it go or not? Yes. Absolutely.

An easy volley, if I'm receiving volley from my opponent, or if they're way out of position--or even if it's a medium to tougher skill level volley and my opponent is way out of position of the shot I hit I previously, I'll definitely play a volley that I know might be going out if I'm not 100% sure. If I'm 80% sure that the ball is going out, or maybe if I'm only 30-40% sure that the ball is going out.

And it's not like I'm running these calculations in my head while I'm playing. I'm just using the numbers as an example here. Even if I'm a little bit suspicious that the ball is going out, or I'm pretty sure, either way. If I have an easy volley, or my opponent is out of position, I'll just go ahead and play it and play a really high percentage easy volley to the middle of the court if they're out of position.

Or if it's a really easy shot, that I'm in good position for, and it may or may not be going out--I'm not positive--I'll just go ahead and crush it and put it away. If it is that easy. Because it's just terrible to set up a point well. You hit all those shots that it took to get up to the net. Maybe you even have your opponent really on the run and they're in a tough spot. [laughter] And it's really deflating to go through all of that work and then watch their shot go right by your nose, and turn it out to watch it land out, and it lands inside the lane. [laughter] That's really frustrating. So if it is an easy shot, I will definitely play it. Even if I'm pretty sure it's going out.

Second question, he was asking about cues to be watching for to make this decision of letting the ball go or not. Spin is definitely a big one. You need to watch the shape of the shot and the direction of swing. If your opponent makes a very aggressive upward swing, and you see that the ball is curving in the air, that's a shot that you're going to want to play more often than a shot that's traveling straight, and that they've either sliced or hit flat. Straight towards you. A slice, or a flat type shot, is going to travel farther given that it's the same speed as a top spin shot. So you definitely want to watch for heavy top spin. It can be easy to be fooled by that, so watch for a top spin swing, and watch for a top spin ball path, which is going to be one that's curving back down towards the court.

#2. Cleanness of contact from opponent. Especially at a top spin type spin. When they shank or hit off center a little bit, you should be able to hear that and on a top spin swing, very often when your opponent hits it a bit off center, even if it's really aggressive and they've hit it super hard, that will add more spin and cause a really aggressive curve back down into the court. So listen for that.

Lastly, speed and height. Really obvious things, but those are probably the 2 most important factors that you should be looking at. If the ball is traveling really fast and it's 4 ft. on top of the net, unless there's a lot of spin on it, it's probably going to be going too far. Again, really fast is a relative statement. A lot of spin is also a relative term. When it comes down to it, you're going to have to use your own judgment for this. There's no set rule about which balls you let go and which you let play. This is something that you're going just going to have to build your judgment up on. It takes a lot of repetition and a lot of experience.

Drills to help you improve your judgment, Tim, definitely play as many competitive volley games as possible. I've got 2 main suggestions for that. 1.) You can just start at the service line and feed straight ahead to a base line partner who's across from you back on the base line on the other side. And just play it out. I would set a rule that there's no winners on either of your first 2 shots. So you make that feed. Your opponent can't hit a clean winner off of their first ground stroke, and you can't hit a winner off of your first

volley either. Otherwise you just restart the point again. That way you at least get into the points and you at least 2-3 shots exchanged back and forth every single point. It just makes for a little bit better, more productive practice. So you can play points out that way. Play a game up to 10 and then trade sides, or just stay at the net if you want to keep working on it.

Or you can both start on the baseline, and have one of you feed a short shot, a shot that lands in front of the service line on purpose. The other person comes forward, hits an approach shot, and then you guys play it out. That's a way you can work on your approach shot and your volleys in your judgment up at the net. There's 2 ideas for you for competitive gives. Do it in a competitive environment. Cooperative hitting can be helpful as well. But in cooperative hitting, you're just trying to get everything back and be as consistent and keep the rally going as long as possible. In competitive games, you're actually trying to win the point, so it puts that pressure on you to make the right decision. I think that's where you're really going to develop your skills at judging where the ball's going exactly the fastest, and the best.

So in wrapping up, as I said earlier, there's no real secret to this, Tim. It takes a lot of experience, and a lot of repetition. It's something that can both be developed and lost. It's a learned skill. I can tell you that [laughter] my judgment is not even close to what it used to be! I definitely used to be able to tell within several inches where the ball was going to land across a wide variety of speeds, heights, and amounts of spin. [laughter]

My judgment's way off now. When I go and play a full-speed point and I'm at the net, and I have my opponent hit a 5.0 level heavy top spin passing shot, I definitely let shots go now that land well inside the line. My eyes just aren't adjusted anymore to the same speed of shot that they used to be when I was playing competitively on a regular bases. It's something you can lose, and it's also something that you can develop. So don't be frustrated about it. The more you work on it, the better you're going to get at it. Keep working hard at it, and I know that you can improve.

Tim, thanks very much for being a listener. Thanks for your great question. Hopefully this was helpful to you. And good luck with your game! Keep working hard.

[music] [music]

Alright. That's brings Episode #134 of the Essential Tennis podcast to a close. Thank you very much for taking the time to download today's show and to listen to it. I really appreciate your support just by being a listener and listening to the show. I hope it's been helpful to you. It's always my goal when I record this show. And I hope you guys are enjoying the new audio.

Maybe it's not a big difference for some of you, but for others it probably will be. I'm kind of a techie. I used to be a sound technician way back in high school in college, so it's something I enjoy tinkering with, audio quality in general. So I finally made the plunge and purchased some serious equipment. [laughter] And I'm really with the results so far. I

hope you --I hope it makes the show more enjoyable for you! It should definitely sound of much higher quality. I'm really excited about that.

Alright. That does it for this week. Shoot me an e-mail if you are going to be NY this coming week, Thurs. or Fri. I'd love to meet up some of you guys. I'll be going to [inaudible] on that Fri. Again, Ian@essentialtennis.com. I'm really looking forward to that trip. I'll tell you about it next week.

Until then, take care. Thanks everybody, and good luck with your tennis.

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