

Essential Tennis Podcast #135

Welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast! If you love tennis and want to improve your game, this podcast is for you. Whether its 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 Westermann: 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 Tennis Tours dot com.

Thank you very much for joining me today, I appreciate that you took the time to download today's show and give it a listen; I really hope that its gonna be helpful to you and give you some ideas and thoughts on how you can improve your tennis. That's always my #1 goal here on the show. Before I get started with today's questions and answers, I want to thank a couple people in New York City. I was there this past Thurs. and Fri.

I was there at the matches on Fri. I got to see the Brian Brothers win their 3rd US Open Grand Slam title. So I saw the men's final and I also both women's semifinals, it was a great time. I want to send a special thank you out to [inaudible] on the forums at essential tennis.com. He was nice enough to show me around the city on Thurs., and he went to the matches with me on Fri., and gave me a place to sleep! [laughter] So that I really appreciate that [inaudible] , I'm in your debt for helping me out and showing me around.

Also a shout out to Erin and Ben, two other listeners that I met up with while I was there. It was great to meet both of you guys and speak with both of you, and I really appreciate having both of you as a listener in New York City, it was a great time. And today the final sets of play, after the rain, today is Mon., and unfortunately was put on hold due to weather yesterday. So I'm looking forward to seeing that match I know the rest of you guys are as well.

Alright let's go ahead and get to the show. Sit back; relax; and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

[music] [music]

Alright. let's get to our 1st question, and it comes to us from Masa in Bloomington, Indiana, Masa's a 4.0 level player, and he wrote and said:

"Federer and Nadal are no doubt two of the best players in tennis history. Both of them have a straight arm forehand. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a straight arm forehand or a bent arm forehand? Which one do you prefer teaching? Do you recommend this technique to average club players?"

Alright. Masa, great question, and this is actually something that I have gone over in the blog that I write--at essential tennis dot com-- you guys can go check that out. I don't update it as frequently as I would like. The podcast definitely takes precedence for me every week, but I do have an article in there about the straight arm versus bent arm forehand, and basically gonna give the exact same thoughts and opinions right here on the show. So which one do I prefer or which one do I recommend?

The answer to that is neither. I don't care which one you use, and the reason for that is, this isn't an essential part of becoming a good tennis player, and that's for the title for my website comes from is, the way that I teach and the things that I teach to my students and to you guys every week when I do the show are things that, in my opinion, are essential. They're necessary, they're things that you better be pretty good at or you're not going to improve your game, and I like to focus on just the basics, essentially.

And how do I know that this isn't an essential: straight arm versus bent arm, how do I know that if you pick the wrong one, you're gonna limit yourself, as far as your ability and your potential as a tennis player? Well, because, players in the top fraction of 1% in the world--and that's what we're talking about here: you're talking about Nadal, Federer, I'm gonna use another player as an example as well--we're talking about guys that aren't in the top 1%, they're probably in the top 1% of the top 1% of tennis players in the entire world.

When you look at the USTA --which I think has something like 30,000,000 members, I might be totally off on that, but I believe that's just what I heard recently-- millions and millions of members that are a part of the USTA, the United States Tennis Association, and you look at the spread of players From...I think its from 4.5 and above, we're into your top 10% of tennis players in the United States, 4.5 and above. 5.0 and above, we're talking about the top couple percentage points--I think its around 4%, 3 or 4%-- is 5.0 and above.

Now, myself as a 5.0 player am not even close, not anywhere close to a professional player. And I'm talking, when I say professional player, I mean somebody who's 500 in the world. A player at that level is gonna crush me. I'd be happy to get a couple of games off of a player that's 500 in the world. And that player is no where near a Federer- or Nadal-type player who's in the top 5 or--I guess for those two--top 3 consistently over the last 4 or 5 years.

So we're talking about a ridiculous level of player, and the way that I know that what we're talking about here--straight arm versus bent arm--is not essential is because when you look at the top 5 players in the world, you see different players using different styles. As you pointed out, Masa, Nadal and Federer both use a straight arm style forehand. Djokovic --who's playing in the US Open final today, just beat Federer--uses a bent arm forehand. Now, some of you out there might be saying, 'Whoa, yeah. But Djokovic... He's only got'...what does he have, one grand slam? Well, I probably should have looked that up before the show started.

I'm terrible at stats, but clearly, he doesn't have nearly the success that Federer and Nadal have had. So I'm sure that some of you guys out there are saying, 'Well, obviously straight arm forehand must be better than right? Nadal and Federer both use it; they both routinely crush Djokovic, or maybe not crush him but at the very least they certainly have a winning record. So maybe straight arm forehand is better.' No. That doesn't mean that it's any better or any worse, it just means that it's his style of swing. It's what has come naturally to him, and so that's what he uses. He has a double bend in his forehand.

So because these top level players use different strokes, and are still...not different strokes but different styles, and are still able to get to the top 5 in the world should tell you that it's not essential which one you use. These players are able to become extremely good using either one, and so it's not going to make you or break you either way.

So basically, when it comes to my teaching, I allow my students to feel for themselves, something like this, and then use what comes naturally to them.

I have actually... Thinking back... I'm pretty sure I've never actually talked about a straight arm versus a bent arm while teaching a lesson. Never. Not once. And it's not because I don't know about it, and it's not because I don't understand it, trust me, I know plenty about what is being taught online and not online. I keep up to date with these things; the article I wrote on straight arm versus bent arm was at least a year ago--it's been a while now-- but it's not something that's going to bump up the level of your game dramatically as opposed to other things, and we're going to talk about what other things I have in mind in just a minute.

But the only time that I will instruct a player to do something that doesn't come naturally is when it's something that is just wrong; and it's clearly technique that's not going to serve them very well in the future, it's gonna hold them back in the long run. There are times that all of us have natural tendencies that aren't good technique, and it just won't make sense to continue using that type of swing, or that type of footwork, or whatever.

So I'm not saying that you guys should go out there and do whatever comes natural to you, and that's gonna be the best thing for you, because that's not true. You guys need to make sure that you understand the fundamentals and that you're performing them correctly, but straight arm versus bent arm is not a fundamental, and it's something that you guys can become very good players with either way, and I think your time is better off spent focusing on things that have a much bigger bearing in how good of a player you become.

So some things that I think are essential to your forehand, Masa, I've got 5 different things here that you should focus on, because they're extremely important. #1: the rotation of your body This is something that many recreational players are very poor at, and these are things that are going to sound really obvious to you guys, especially to those of you that spend a lot of time researching on the internet, watching a lot of slow motion video, and filling your heads with instruction from a dozen different online tennis instructors.

You're gonna get a lot of stuff thrown at you, and everybody always says, 'This is super important; this is going to give you a world class forehand. Make sure that you do this...' and you'll hear 10 different pros online say that, and tell you 10 different things, and it can be kind of confusing.

Well, let me submit to you guys that these five things I'm going to list here are most important and you need to focus on these things. Anything outside of that until you become a 4 or 5 player really is not that important, because when it comes down to it, the mistakes that recreational players make that truly hold them back are the basic things. So, again, #1: rotation of the body. Turning yourself to the side, or at least your core and your upper body and then rotating yourself back forward again past through the point of contact.

#2: correct racket path for whatever type of your shot you're trying to hit. Whether you're trying to drive the ball relatively flat, or hit slice, or hit with topspin, it takes a different path of the racket, and you need to know--and when I say, 'path of the racket' that includes the drop of the racket (if you're hitting top spin or drive), the lifting of the racket, the follow through position, the direction that the racket moves is extremely important, and you have to be good at performing that consistently, correctly, over and over again.

#3: correct angle of the racket face at contact. When you guys miss a shot long or into the net, very often its due to the racket face being a little bit too open or a little bit too closed, and that's simply means facing too upwards or too downwards, extremely important. Correct use of the kinetic chain--for those of you that are looking for more power or more spin on your ground strokes, using the kinetic chain correctly is huge, and that simply means how you coordinate the use of your body, and I've talked about that on several podcasts. I'm not going to go in depth on that right now.

And #5: consistently swinging at a speed that's confident, but not out of your control. Some of you guys listening consistently swing at a tentative pace, and you swing scared, and you don't make a very confident swing at the ball. That's not good.

Others of you hit very aggressively over and over again, and make a lot of unforced errors. You make some really sweet shots too, but you make a lot of mistakes, and so being able to swing at a consistent and confident tempo or speed is extremely important. If you put all 5 of those things together: rotation of the body, path of the racket, angle of the racket face, kinetic chain, and the speed of your swing, you put all 5 of those things together, and do them all correctly consistently, and you're gonna be an awesome tennis player.

And along the way, whether or not you use a bent arm or a straight arm on your forehand, I don't care [laughter], and its not going to make a huge difference one way or the other. You guys need to focus on what's most important to your game, and that's how you're gonna make the biggest changes and the biggest improvements. And last thing I'm going to say on this topic before we move on, those 5 things that I mentioned, every pro does

those things. Not every pro uses a straight arm forehand; not every pro uses a bent arm forehand; that's a style decision or a natural choice or path that each player has decided to take.

But those 5 things that I just mentioned, every pro does great and every pro does consistently, over and over again. So its these things that are essential that you guys need to spend the most amount of time trying to copy and improve. Leave the stylistic things alone, and if you guys aren't sure which is which, send me an email, and I'll be happy to help you guys out. So Masa, hopefully that makes sense to you, and hopefully that's a helpful answer to your question. Great question, and good luck continuing to improve that forehand.

[music] [music]

Alright. Before we get going with our next question from a listener, I want to remind you guys about the official sponsor of the essential tennis podcast, and that is Championship Tennis Tours. You guys can find them at TennisTours.com. And they supply tickets and travel packages and accommodations to professional tennis tournaments all over the world. Whether you're into the WTA or the ATP, either way, these guys have tickets and packages to a lot of different tournaments all over the world.

Again, just about any place that you want to go. All the grand slams, they have travel packages for, so thinking ahead to next season, if you guys are planning any trips out of the country or in your own country--I know I've got listeners all over the place.

So if you guys want to go to any of the grand slams or a lot of the ATP 1000 series tournaments, definitely check their website out and when you checkout, make sure to use the promotional code essential, and you'll receive a discount off your purchase, and show Championship Tennis Tours that you appreciate their support of the essential tennis podcast. So, thank you Championship Tennis Tours. I appreciate your sponsorship, and all of you guys listening, please go. At least check them out and see what they have to offer.

Alright next up we got some questions from Chris in Minnesota. He's a 2.5 player; two different questions here, his 1st one is:

'In my matches I have a tendency to start a set focused, but then start to lose focus when the score gets to around 2 to 2 in the set, which allows my opponent to take the set easily from there. Any suggestions on how to keep my mind in the match and not be distracted by things like planes flying overhead, the people playing on other courts, and the pretty girls playing softball in the nearby field?'

[laughter]

Well Chris here, a very honest guy, I appreciate that. And, trust me I'm right there with you man. It can be really tough to keep your concentration, and this is a very very

common mistake and its a very costly mistake.

As you've pointed out, you kind of get into a set, you--I don't know if its just sometimes we get bored, we lose interest, or maybe we just get tired of keeping our mental focus up. It's very common to kind of let your guard down, but you absolutely must keep your focus on the task at hand if you want to be successful, and the task at hand very simply is winning. We're there to win the match; that's why you're competing, is to see if you're gonna win or lose against whatever opponent that you happen to be playing that day.

And the things that you have to be focused on to make sure that you are most successful and that you do win the most amount of matches are things like what tactics that your opponent is using, your opponent's strengths, their weaknesses, what they're good at what they're bad at, and you need to be conscious of your own game that day as well.

What are you doing well? What are you not doing well? And basically what I just outlined is tactics or strategy in a nutshell. You got to be aware of your own strengths and weaknesses, your opponent's strengths and weaknesses, you have to realize what tactics that your opponent is using and then build your own game plan around all of that information, and if you're thinking about the girls playing softball next to the tennis courts, trust me. You're not going to be aware of any of those things, and the chances of you winning that match decrease a ton, because you're no longer focusing on what's most important, and what's ultimately going to decide the outcome of the match.

So how can you improve your match focus? I've got 3 different suggestions for you, and this is a really good topic, Chris and I'm looking forward to talking about it all 3 of these different suggestions. #1: have a set routine. Have a set pre-point group of actions that get you into a rhythm and keep your concentration.

I think a good player to watch as an example of this is Maria Sharapova, she has a very distinct, and very set routine between points. She'll walk back towards the back wall of the court, or back curtain, or whatever you want to call it, back fence, of the court after every single point. As she does that her head is down, she's looking at her strings, and at this point she gathering her concentration and her focus, she also thinking about what tactics she wants to use during the next point.

After she's done thinking and gathering her concentration, she typically does a couple little hops to get herself moving physically, and get herself pumped up and set. She'll turn around and then go and get either into her ready position to return serve, or she'll go into her serve routine, which is a completely different set of actions. You guys all know what her serve routine looks like --I've seen Djokovic make fun of it [laughter] a couple years ago. Maybe not necessarily make fun of it, but copy it at least.

So she has two different routines depending on whether she's serving or returning and she repeats this before every point. Whether she won or lost the previous point, she will always repeat this routine, and this can help you keep your focus. It does not have to be complicated. In fact , the simpler the better, and I want you to come up with something

like this Chris and stick to it and make it a habit.

I think my favorite part--well, my 2 favorite parts of what Sharapova does--are #1: she turns her back to the court, kind of shuts everything out behind her, and then she puts her eyes down, and she looks her strings, and she'll kind of mess with her strings. Its not because her strings have to be straight on the next point. In fact, if you look at them they're usually straight to begin with, so it has nothing to do with straightening her strings. It's just a habit that she does to keep her eyes down so that they don't wonder and she doesn't get distracted by anything else happening around the court.

So come up with a couple of things like that and start to use them between every single point, and a big part of that is developing something that you can keep your eyes on inside the court at all times.

So that's suggestion #1 Chris. Have a set routine, and I really suggest that you come up with one. Again, don't make it complicated make it simple, and make a part of that keeping your eyes inside the court.

#2: suggestion #2 for you, make it a personal challenge, and this is my favorite one.

[laughter] Personally, I'm extremely highly competitive, and so I love competing--not only against other people--but myself as well. I love giving myself challenges and then trying to achieve them and I love seeing how well I can do something.

And so, make a commitment to yourself that you will not be distracted. Period. Make that decision before your matches start and tell yourself, ' You know what. No matter what happens today, I'm going to keep my mind on what's important; I'm going keep my focus on the match, and kind of make it a game out of it..."

And times in which there's something super obvious that's happening and would be easy to pay attention to beside your match, whenever things like that happen when I'm playing--and like you were talking about you give the 3 examples: have a plane flying overhead, I've definitely fallen for that one. People playing on other courts, I think everybody listening has definitely taken their focus off of their own match and watched their teammates or other random people playing. Pretty girls [laughter] that's not one that I'm faced with very often but it can definitely be a distraction.

Other random things like yelling, kids maybe running around playing something else, maybe a crying baby, maybe somebody talking on a cell phone loudly right next to your court. Whenever there's something super obvious like that, maybe even teammates of my opponent actually heckling me and actually cheering against me loudly at times that are maybe not even appropriate.

The more obvious and the more potentially distracting something can be, I just kind of smile at those things, and I think about--it can be really easy for me to pay attention to that instead, and to take my focus off of the match, and I kind of almost make a game out

of it and I'll smile and say 'wow. That can be a really easy thing for me to pay attention to and to break my focus, but you know what? I'm not gonna do it, and I'm gonna be that tough of a player today, and I enjoy trying to be as tough as possible.'

So take this approach to every mental challenge that you're faced with on the court and great athletes have an attitude always that they will overcome their obstacles, no matter what they happen to be. Whether its a physical challenge, or a mental challenge, a focus or concentration challenge--a quote we're talking about, 'no matter what, get in the habit of making it a personal challenge for yourself to overcome things like this, and do it. Start doing it consistently.'

Thirdly, on how to focus better and keep your concentration, keep practicing; and this is just like any other skill in your tennis game. Great mental toughness does not happen overnight nor does it happen the very first time that you try to do your best at it; its a learned skill, and you have to keep working at it.

So the first time you go and try my suggestions, let's say you make it until 3 to 3 in the set, and then you lose your focus and lose the set. That's better. Keep practicing. Keep working on it. Keep putting yourself in competitive situations like this as often as possible, so that you can practice your mental toughness, and practice putting into play these suggestions that I'm giving you. Using the routine, making it a personal challenge to do a better job of staying focused, go continue practicing, doing these things, and you will keep getting better at it. So Chris, great question. Hopefully this is helpful to you.

Alright last question for today's show, and this one also comes to us from Chris in Minnesota. He wrote and said:

'I'm a 2.5 player, maybe a little better, playing in a 3.0 singles league. I have a pretty limited match experience and I'm stilling working on a more consistent game. So I'm losing a lot of matches. In the long run, I know that getting a lot of match experience will help me, but in the short term, how do I avoid falling into a losing mindset?'

That's a good question Chris, and it can be really tough to lose over and over again and not get dejected and not get frustrated and not start thinking, 'wow, is this really worth it? I'm working really hard at this, but I'm still not winning my matches...' and it seems like the main focus should be on your win and loss record, right? After all, isn't that really the top measure of your improvement is whether or not you're winning or losing your matches?

And it seems like that can be logical, but please don't do that. Please don't make it your top priority, and a big reason for that is--you know what, it doesn't matter how good you are, you can always lose a tennis match, and it doesn't matter how good you play, there's always going to be somebody out there who's better than you, and so you can't put all of your eggs in that basket of, 'wow. If I lose today's match, then I'm a failure.'

Because the reality really could be that you could play at 100% of your potential

wherever you're at right now, and whoever you played that day was just plain better. For whatever reason; and so you can't always use that as the ultimate judge of your success. So what you should focus on instead--I've got 5 different things here that I want you to focus on instead of your win and loss record.

#1: the level of your strokes and the shots that you hit in general. If you see improvement consistently, and I'm not talking about huge improvements, but little things here and there, if your technique is getting better, and the resulting shots that you're hitting are getting better, even if you lose, be happy about that. Be satisfied that you are seeing marked improvement in your strokes and in the shots that you hit. #2: the level of your concentration and mental toughness, which we just talked about.

A specific area of that in your last question, if you're able to start being more focused and compete better due to your concentration, be happy about that. Even if you lose your matches, you can be satisfied with the fact that you did a better job with your focus and concentration.

#3: your general comfort level competing when it counts. This is a big one; and this is something that a lot of recreational tennis players start off really poor at because they didn't grow up playing other sports, and they didn't grow up in competitive environments and it takes time to get comfortable competing in general. If you start feeling more at ease and more confident and in your competitive matches you're just able to do things more naturally without worrying about it so much, then be happy about that.

#4: your ability to use tactics and strategy effectively. This is something that again if you didn't grow up in a competitive environment and playing other sports doesn't come naturally to a lot of people. If you're starting to be able to put together game plans more effectively, even just simple things--picking out your opponents weaknesses and making them hit more of shots that they don't like. If you can do that more consistently then be happy about that.

#5: lastly, if your speed, quickness around the court, and your general fitness level becomes better as you continue to compete more and practice longer or harder, be happy about that. So every time you notice small improvements in any of these areas, be happy, and be satisfied, and celebrate a little bit. Give yourself a little bit of a pat on the back and say, 'You know what? Nice job.' Even if you lose those matches, tennis is complicated and all of the things that I just listed, all five of those areas, they all have to be improved to reach your full potential.

Don't expect to get a little better at any one of those areas, and immediately just win all of your matches [laughter], or even win a lot more matches that you're playing.

So take an incremental approach to it, don't take an all-or-nothing attitude or mindset and say to yourself, 'Wow. If I don't win today's match, I'm really just not getting any better.' You have to look at it at kind of a macro level and look at all the small individual pieces that you're trying to improve and remember back, 'Wow, remember three months ago

when

I wasn't even able to play 3 sets without getting really tired, or 3 months ago, that would have totally passed me by. I wouldn't have even noticed that my opponent's backhand was weaker. I wouldn't have been able to put together that strategy...' Take little successes like that and be content with that for now. Now several years from now, I do want you to be winning more matches for sure.

I want you to be playing at a higher level and so all of these little things they should start adding up, and they should start resulting in better overall results, but until that starts happening, be patient, and don't be too hard on yourself. If your win-loss record is not very impressive, appreciate those baby steps, one small step at a time, and make that your #1 focus, and be happy that you're making those improvements.

So Chris, thanks a lot for both of your questions. Hopefully these were helpful to you, that's always my goal of course, is to put information out there that's going to help you guys get better. So go implement these things and report back. I'd be curious to hear how its able to work out for you, and hopefully these suggestions are able to help you improve the level of your play. So Chris thanks again, and good luck with everything that you're trying to improve.

[music]

Alright. That does it for episode #135 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for listening to today's show. I really appreciate having you as a listener, and as I wrap things up here I'm going to try to reward those of you who have listened through to the end of the show here a little bit.

I'm gonna be launching a whole new section of Essential Tennis.com very soon. Within the next couple weeks, probably two or three weeks. And its going to feature a new show. I'm going to be doing a whole other hour of instructional podcast audio every single week. Its going to also include video, and its also going to include a live chat room, and you guys are going to be able to ask me questions or follow up questions on whatever I'm talking about live as I record the show.

And I'm giving away more than I wanted to already, but this section's gonna be available within the next couple weeks. If you would like a sneak peak at this new service, I've actually been doing it kind of secretly for the last--I've already done 10 episodes of this new show, just for members of the forum at Essential Tennis.com. So there's something that you guys missed out on if you're not a member of the forums already, definitely check out the forums at Essential Tennis.com.

Well, if you would like to join them and get a sneak peak and get a discounted rate-- for those of you who contact me this week, send me an email at ian@essentialtennis.com, tell me you're interested in my secret new show, and I will tell you guys how you can sign up and get a discounted rate before I make it available across the entire site and start really

promoting it to everybody, and start making a big deal about it here on the regular podcast, and across Essential Tennis.com as well. So send me an email: ian@essentialtennis.com, I'll tell you guys how you can get more information about that and how you can sign up and this is really going to be geared mostly toward you guys who have really been helped by the show and would like even more.

I'm going to start off at a full hour extra of instructional audio per week, and I'm probably going to increase it from there and start doing a couple hours a week and so you guys can really start getting even more out of the website and getting even more instructional feedback and more personalized feedback as well, since this going to be a membership type deal. Only members are going to be able to ask me questions to talk about on this show.

Alright so that does it for this week. Thanks again everybody very much for your time. Thank you for listening, and I'll be talking to you guys again next week. Until then, take care, and good luck with your tennis.

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