

Essential Tennis Podcast #136

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Announcer: 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 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 TennisTours.com.

Thank you very much for joining me today, this episode of the Essential Tennis podcast. I really appreciate the fact that you took the time to download today's show, and give it a listen. I hope that it's going to be helpful to you, and give you some ideas about how you can improve your tennis game, and move up to a higher level of play. It's always my goal when I create each and every one of these shows.

Before we get to today's topics, I want to send a message out there to all of you gearheads, all you guys who are infatuated [laughter] by rackets, strings, grips, and footwear and clothing, and all of that stuff. If you're a huge gearhead, and you'd love to have an outlet for that, I'm looking for a writer to write for my Gear Review blog at EssentialTennis.com. I've had a really hard time keeping a writer for that blog for some reason. I've gone through tons of them. If you feel like you could be reliable, and you would enjoy writing content for that blog, I'd prefer that if you had some kind of certification or experience actually working with equipment. If you're a master racket technician, etc. that would be best, but I'm not going to make that a requirement.

Either way, just send me an e-mail at Ian@essentialtennis.com. I'd love to hear from you if that's something you'd be interested in. This is something that would essentially make you published. You could put it on your resume as being a writer on a tennis website.

So send me an e-mail, and hopefully I can find a new person to start getting some great reviews of rackets and strings, and all other types of tennis gear on the blog.

Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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Alright, let's get started on the first question in today's show. It's a simple one, but one that's excellent, and something that's going to create a lot of discussion here on the podcast. Ben G. in Lexington, Kentucky wrote in and said,

"What do you think about a podcast of the worst habits of the worst habits you see in teaching? As in: what are the things the player should go out of the way to NOT do?"

Well Ben, that's an awesome question. I thought about having a guest on to talk about that's another teaching pro, but kind of ran out of time in doing that. So I'll just go through it myself. What I've outlined here are--in my opinion or in my experience--the top 3 technical mistakes that recreational players make.

And this is just based on what I've seen teaching full-time over that last... I guess it's been about 6-8 years now, spending 30-40 hrs. a week on a tennis court trying to help recreational players just like you guys listening improve. In my opinion, these are in my opinion, the 3 biggest mistakes that will lead you guys down the wrong path as you try to make yourselves better tennis players. These are extremely common things.

So Top 3. #1: a short and tight swing on ground strokes, both forehand and on backhand side. This is definitely the #1 technique issue that I battle with every single day as I'm on the court, trying to get my students to improve. Most often when recreational players try to hit the ball harder on either their forehand or backhand side, their technique gets shorter. This is what I see most commonly. Not all the time. In my experience, it definitely depends on what kind of background players have playing other sports.

If you've already played a lot of golf, or if you've played baseball, or maybe lacrosse or hockey--or some other type of sport or game where a long swing was needed to create really good results--maybe you're lucky enough to go ahead and do it naturally, correctly, which is to make a racket path that goes through the ball with good length so that you can really create the most amount of power and racket speed as possible.

But from what I've seen with kind of average level athletes and just your typical person off the street who has decided that they really enjoy tennis and they want to get better at it, when I see that type of person try to create more power, usually their stroke actually gets shorter instead of longer. This is due to their muscles tightening and tensing up as they make their swing. The result of that is a shorter racket path and less racket speed.

Now even though the racket moves faster because they're trying to accelerate it more, so they to move it real quickly through the point of contact, even though everything might tighten up and tense up, and their overall length of swing might get shorter, it might be that they actually do speed the racket up ultimately.

In other words, compared to an average paced swing or a rally ball where they're just trying to get it in play. It's very possible that, even though they get tighter, the racket might move faster, but in the long-term, that technique is not going to serve you very well. It's going to choke off your potential to continue making your ground strokes better and better down the road as you keep on working on your game.

This reminds me of--I tell this story a lot. I think I've only talked about this one other time on the podcast, and it was quite awhile ago. I was listening to a golf podcast. This is probably 1 yr. ago, back when I was really into golf and trying to improve my technique. I heard an excellent quote from one of the top instructors in the U.S. The person who's interviewing him asked him, "What was the #1 mistake that amateur golfers made as they tried to hit a good golf shot?"

He said, "Amateur golfers too often try to hit the ball." [laughter] That should strike you as odd right off the bat! He said, "Amateur golfers try to hit the ball." That's a huge mistake! This 100% applies to tennis as well, and in my experiences, really transfers over for amateur tennis players as well.

What he means by that is: rather than making a high-quality swing and using high-quality technique, and simply letting the ball be in the middle of that swing. And kind of just letting the ball get in the way of that good technique, and just focusing on the technique, both golfers and tennis players tend to consider the contact point as being all important.

Don't get me wrong. The contact point is hugely important. And what happens just before and just after contact is a massive part of what make a shot successful. But what this instructor was talking about was having the contact point be the #1 focus for a golfer, or in this case, a tennis player. So these players can just focus on that part of the swing, and the result is kind of a bracing for packet.

The racket is being accelerated towards the ball just to make contact with it. And very tennis players have this brace: Here comes the ball and I'm going to hit it! And there's just this quick, jerky acceleration towards the ball. Everything just comes to a halt as soon as contact gets made. There's a lot of tension there. Everything gets shortened up. That is no good! Both on the golf course, and on the tennis court. I'm going to ahead and stop using golf references now. [laughter] Because I know a lot of you aren't big fans of golf. But there's a lot of technique similarities between golf and tennis. Which I found really fascinating as I was trying to improve my swing about 1 year ago.

So that's #1. Worst Habit, Biggest Mistake #1, is a short and tight ground stroke. Do yourself a favor by focusing on having a long swing. A relaxed swing. Being nice and loose, and don't even really think about the contact point. Make sure the racket moves through that area smoothly, like you're just not even really thinking about it. Just focus on the finishing position, your finishing spot of your swing, and accelerate to that point. Don't accelerate to the contact point. Don't accelerate up to the ball and then have that be your goal, and then everything stops as soon as you make contact. Accelerate all the way through to wherever you're finishing your swing, and make that #1 goal on your forehand and your backhand.

Alright, Worst Habit #2 is that recreational players move their racket a lot on volleys. [laughter]

If I could cure 1 technique in tennis across the entire world, it would be this. It just agitates me so much! Volleys should be very simple. They should be very straightforward. There should be no extra stuff in terms of technique. They should be a calm and relaxed redirecting of the ball. That just doesn't happen for so many players. This is definitely in my Top 3.

In fact, this may be #1. I don't know. It's close between this and the short, tight ground strokes on both the forehand and backhand side. It's a close call for me. But this is a huge one.

Two things that you should not do on your volleys. #1: I hate the word "punch" for volleys. Don't punch at your volleys. I mean, just think about a punch. If you're watching boxing or missed martial arts, or whatever, and you see somebody punch somebody else. Or you see somebody punch a heavy bag in training for boxing, or martial arts, or whatever. You'll see a short, abrupt, intense contact between the fist or the glove of whoever is doing the punching and the bag or the body of whoever they're trying to punch.

This is not good technique for volleys. You should also not swing your racket, meaning: your racket head and your racket face is moving back and forth across your body like it would for a ground stroke. That's not something you want to do either. What we want is something in between.

Again, I dislike "punch" a lot. You also should not swing at a volley. That's not a good idea either, because that's where things start to get sloppy.

What you want is a smooth and relaxed guide of the ball. You're trying to guide the ball towards your target. Your racket face should be facing towards your target during most of this technique. Ultimately, what this means is that you want to use bigger muscle grips instead of smaller ones.

Here's what I mean by this. When you move the racket head around a lot, and you move the racket face around a lot, and you're trying to accelerate through the ball and swing your racket towards the ball, ultimately that's from using your hand, your wrist and your forearm a lot. To kind of maneuver the racket, swinging it back and forth like you would on a ground stroke from the right side of your body to the left side or vice versa. That's from using a lots of smaller parts of your body.

If you use the bigger parts of your body: your legs, your core, your shoulder to move the racket smoothly through the ball, you can guide it towards your target very accurately, and still with reasonably good pace. It doesn't have to be a weak shot if you use the bigger parts of your body to tell the ball where to go. You want to take the momentum that's already on the ball. Typically when you're hitting volleys, your opponent or partner has driven the ball towards you. They've hit a forehand or a back hand ground stroke.

Or maybe you're in a quick net exchange back and forth, and there's already pace on the ball. It hasn't bounced yet. You've taken it right out of the air, and you've got some momentum to work with already. You want to take that energy that's already on the ball, put your strings behind the ball, and send it back towards your target. Again, I like the word "guide" for this. To send the ball towards the direction that you want it to go.

This is as opposed to the two biggest mistakes. The #1 biggest mistake on volleys is too much moving of the racket, and swinging it back and forth. A second mistake that I feel--listen. I'd rather that you guys punch at your volleys rather than move your racket around a lot. Alright? That's definitely the case.

So if you guys are going to make one mistake or the other, I'd rather that you're abrupt and short, and you punch at your volleys. I'd rather that by far, than you guys move the racket around a lot, and actually swing the racket towards the ball. So you know, please punch it [laughter] if you're going to do one or the other! But I don't like punch either, because it's abrupt and short, intense, and I don't like that for any shot in tennis. So make it a guide.

Hopefully that makes sense. Hopefully my terminology there is not too vague, and I've explained that well. But that's definitely in my top 2 mistakes that recreational players make on the court.

So let's go ahead and go to #3. This is in my #3 out of my Top 3 Worst Habits that recreational players make. #3 has to do with the serve. And I've done this on purpose. I've done my best to spread this out. I've done one on ground strokes. A worst habit for

volleys or net play. Now worst habit for serves.

In my opinion, the worst habit overall that recreational players have on their serve is serving too straight, or even downwards, towards their target. A good serve is an upward swing. Even on a flat serve, your technique and your motion should be accelerating the racket upwards towards the ball. Upwards. Not straight. Definitely not downwards. A serve is not like a jump serve in volleyball, or a spike. We're not trying to hit the ball down at the net. I don't care how tall you are, you should not be trying to hit the ball down at your target.

Many recreational players hit their serves in that direction. Either accelerating their racket path, the direction the racket is moving, either horizontal, straight out to their target. Or they actually accelerate the racket down towards the target. The only way to make a serve doing 1 of those 2 things consistently is to have a slightly open racket face. So a forward motion and a slightly open racket face. The results, the resulting path of the ball, is a ball flight that travels straight or slightly down. It has kind of a straight trajectory right towards its target. Or as I head, even a little downwards.

It is possible to make a serve this way. So all of you guys thinking about sending me an e-mail right now saying: "Well, the force of gravity and the drag of air, and if you're a 6 ft. player with this reach, making contact from this height..." Yeah, I've seen all the physics reports, and the different [laughter] equations. At what speed, at what height over the nets, and all this stuff. I've seen all that stuff, and I'm totally aware that at a certain contact height, it is possible to actually hit the ball straight, or hit it down and make the serve. I see players do it every single day, especially when they hit with a little slower pace.

I'm not saying that it's impossible to make a serve that way. What I am saying is that when you hit in that direction, the trajectory that the resulting shot travels across, is extremely low percentage. You don't want to hit a shot from behind the base line that has to stay inside the service box, which is 18 ft. inside the base line, and try to hit it straight. That's a problem, because a straight trajectory carries with it a very low margin for error. If you hit just a little bit too high, and you hit the ball across a relatively straight line, it's going to go out very easily. If you're hitting across a very straight line or trajectory towards your target and a little too low, you're going to hit the net.

This is the same thing as with ground strokes, and this is why I always teach players first to make an upwards swing towards the ball so that they can curve the ball back into the court. High level tennis players make contact all the way at the very peak of their technique of their serve. It's an upward swing. In preparation for their service swing, they bend their knees; they drop their entire body downwards; the racket drops.

Those of you who have studied service technique at all on line with slow motion video know that there's a position called the "racket drop." That's to get the racket dropped. [laughter] To get it down below the ball as far as possible. When you watch professional players in slow motion, you will see that the tip of the racket drops well below their waist. They're dropping it way down below where the ball is.

#3: They tilt their shoulders upwards towards the ball. Big servers have almost a vertical angle from their dominant elbow. If they're right-handed, their right elbow. Up through their left hand, their non-dominant hand, as they tilt back and create an angle upwards towards the ball. So all of those things: the knee band, the racket drop, the shoulder tilt to tilt upwards towards the ball--all of that is preparing to launch the racket, and launch

their body upwards towards the ball. All of that accelerates upwards towards the ball, and contact is made at the very peak, at the very top of this technique.

A lot of times I've had players say to me, "Yeah, but they finish low. They make contact, then they come down." Yes, but that's only after contact has been made. Contact is made at the very top of all that accelerating up towards the ball, and then the racket comes down. Then the body comes down. Contact is not made with the racket and with the body coming downwards, it's made at the very top of all of that momentum, carrying up towards the ball. So the serve is an upward hit. Put that into your heads! [laughter] It's true.

So high-level players make that upward acceleration and at contact, the racket face is flat. At least very close to flat. It might be close a tiny bit, maybe a couple of degrees, but it's definitely not open is my point. It's either flat or close to little bit. The resulting shot has curve to it. Whether it's a flat serve, quote unquote "flat serve," which any tennis shot is always going to have some rotation on it. Whether it's a flat serve, or a kick serve, or any other kind of spin serve, a high level player after hitting a good serve creates a trajectory that has some curve in it. Again, just like a top spin ground stroke does. So that curve adds margin for error.

It makes it safer, because you can hit the ball up over the top of that net, and that curve will bring the ball back down into the service box again. That's a huge benefit when you're trying to hit a ball aggressively, and still keep it in play.

Alright. That's a topic I feel strongly about. A topic that recreational topic that recreational players probably fight me on the most. When I have students who just aren't buying into something that I'm trying to teach them, this is probably the #1 thing. A lot of players resist change in their technique to a more upwards swing. It's just not something they're comfortable with or used to. But it's a really big difference between your average recreational player and a high-level player or a professional player.

OK. In review, Top 3 Worst Habits that I see in teaching: short, tight ground strokes; a swing on a volley or a punch on a valley. Again, I don't mind a punch that much. It's definitely a lot better than a swing, that's for sure. And #3: Hitting forwards or downwards on a serve technique.

So Ben, those are my Top 3 mistakes, and Top 3 things all of you guys listening should avoid at all costs. If you're not sure if you're doing these things, get a video camera. You know what? All of you should have a digital video camera. You can get a regular flip cam for \$80-\$90 now. You can get a HD flip cam for \$130- \$140 on Amazon.com. You can plug that right into your computer, and see high resolution video. It's not super fast frames per second or anything, but it's more than good enough so that you can see what you're doing wrong and go from there.

Alright. So Ben, great question. Enjoyed talking about it. Hopefully this has been helpful to you. If you'd like any more feedback, please let me know. Good luck as you continue working on your game.

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Alright. Before we get to our second question on today's show, I want to remind you all about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast. That is Championship Tennis Tours. You can find them online at tennistours.com. They're a supporter of the Essential

Tennis podcast, which I really appreciate. To show your appreciation for their support of myself and the show, go check them out.

And if you're going to be going to a professional tennis event anytime in the future and you want tickets, travel arrangements, hotel accommodations, etc. definitely check them out first. See if they have tickets for the event that you're going to. If they do, when you make your purchase, use the promotional code "essential" and you'll get a discount off your purchase. Plus, it will show them that you're a listener of the show, and you really appreciate their support. Which will help keep them on as a sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast!

Alright. Our last question on today's show comes to us from Vidron in Croatia. Vidron, [laughter] I'm really sorry. I'm probably killing your name, so I'll go ahead and just apologize up front. I'm not sure what the correct pronunciation is, so please forgive me. Vidron is a 3.5 player. Again, in Croatia. He wrote and said:

"The thing that I want to get advice about is an experiment that I tried on my serve. In trying to develop an aggressive and more powerful first serve while maintaining my second serve at its current level, I decided to change my toss, and throw the ball a bit lower and significantly more in front of my body to create more pace and more spin. But more pace mainly.

Unfortunately, this experiment led to losing my consistency on my second serve, and producing a whole lot more double faults than before. So my question is this: Is it recommendable to have 2 different types of service toss? Is it even possible considering the problems I've developed? And keeping in mind all those problems that pro-players often have with only 1 type of ball toss in various parts of their careers."

Alright. So Vidron, do I recommend 2 totally different ball tosses and techniques? Because that's what that would mean. Basically, when you put your toss in a totally different spot, it changes the whole rest of your serve as well. You can't just make a big change to your toss and use the same technique. Everything else has to change to accommodate that new location.

So we're really talking about a completely different swing. Short answer is no. I definitely don't recommend that you do that. Mostly for the sake of consistency and unity in your game. And it would mean twice as much work for you to continually try to improve 2 totally different serves than if you used basically the same toss, and small changes in your technique between your first and second serve. If you tossed in essentially the same place between your first and second serve, you could keep things like your rhythm; the rotation of your body; your contact point.

Again, relatively speaking, all of those things could remain the same, whereas this big change that you're talking about much lower and much farther in front, all of those big technique elements have to be different. So we're talking about trying to develop 2 completely different service techniques. It doubles your work as a player as you try to continue to become better and better on the court.

I give this same answer when players ask me about something like maybe developing both the one handed and two handed back hand. Something else that I don't recommend for the same reason: it's 2 totally different swings, and it's just that much more to work on and try to improve as you try to get yourself to be a better player. The benefit almost never outweighs all that extra work.

This is especially since most of you listening I assume--probably over 90% of you listening--are just recreational players, people that have a regular job during the day. Or maybe you guys are students, and you have school during the day. You might have a couple of hours a week to practice and play. Maybe 2-4 hours at the most. You guys want to be smart about how you use your time. When you start really spreading out your asset of time, especially on the practice court as you try to improve your technique, doing things like this is just not something that I recommend.

Now this is unless your previous toss Vidron, if your previous toss was really high and it as far behind you, where you were constantly leaning backwards to get to the toss and it was super high so it kind of busted up your rhythm, and you had to wait for a long time to wait for the ball to get down. Unless that was the case, your change isn't going to lead towards better technique anyway. It sounds to me like you're trying to toss it low and kind of right in front of you, into the court a couple of feet, and probably making contact lower. [laughter] Basically, exactly what I was describing in my first topic today when I talked about bad habits on service technique. It sounds to me like you were trying to put it low right in front of you so you could make a low contact point and hit the ball just straight out in front of you into the box with a slightly open face to make sure that it makes it over the net.

This is really common technique, but it's definitely not a very athletic motion. It's not going to give you a lot of potential as far as developing a higher level serve in the future.

Now a lot of players are very consistent hitting the ball this way. But it's not a technique that I like. Again, because it's just not very good as far as fundamental use of your body goes for creating pace and spin, etc. It's not going to leave you a lot of room for growth.

Now there's one exception to all of this. I've told you that I don't like your idea. I don't like you having 2 totally different motions and tosses in general. I also don't like the idea of the specific technique you're talking about. However, there's one exception to both of those things.

Previously, you were really struggling with your first serve, and weren't making it very often. This big toss change made an immediate improvement. Vidron has told us already that this hasn't worked out very well for him, but this is more for the rest of you listening. If that big toss change makes an immediate improvement and ultimately you're happy with the result, and in the long run, you're going to continue being happy with it, then fine. Go ahead and do it! Go ahead and make the change, and have fun playing. I don't think it's the best idea, and I also don't think it's the best technique.

But if you see an immediate improvement in confidence and consistency, and you're happy with where it's at and you don't mind sacrificing some long-term potential for short-term success, then go ahead and do it. I want to make sure that I don't get too rigid and too strict about my views with technique. I know I have the tendency to do that: both on the podcast and in person.

Ultimately, all of you listening, it should be your goal to enjoy the game. To have fun. If you can make a quick, immediate improvement--even if it's not the best technique and you're going to be OK with the fact that it's not the best technique and it might limit you as far as potential a little down the road--go ahead and do it. But just keep in mind, it's not going to be my #1 suggestion! My #1 suggestion is always to be to learn the best

possible technique, and work hard at it, and give yourself the best ceiling, your best change, to continue making yourself a better tennis player. I'm always going to be upfront with you guys about what changes will lead to the most long-term benefits, basically.

It's always going to be the direction that I come at with my answers to your questions on this show. Those of you who come out and work with me in person at a clinic, etc. That's always going to be my perspective, because that's just the way I think. I don't like shortcuts in general. [laughter] And tennis is no exception! I want you guys to learn the best possible technique. I just want you guys to know where I'm coming at in regards to that.

So Vidron, thank you very much for your question. Hopefully you've got a good idea of what I recommend here. I'm sorry that your change didn't work out very well for you in general. Yes, I do recommend that you have some kind of unity between your first and second serve. They should be slightly different techniques, but I don't recommend that you use totally different serves for those 2.

If you have a video camera, feel free to send me an e-mail with a video clip showing me your serve, and I'd be happy to give you some input. Some further input as far as specific technique is concerned.

But thank you very much for being a listener in Croatia. I appreciate it. Hopefully this episode has been a help to you!

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Alright. That brings Episode #136 of the Essential Tennis podcast to a close. Thank you very much for joining me on today's show. I hope that you enjoyed it, and that it's been informative and helpful to you.

And in wrapping up today, I wanted to remind you all about the different social networks that Essential Tennis is on. You can get updates on Twitter at [Twitter.com slash Essential Tennis](https://twitter.com/EssentialTennis). You can also check out the Facebook fan page at [Facebook.com slash Essential Tennis](https://facebook.com/EssentialTennis). And you can look at the instructional videos that I have posted at [YouTube.com slash Essential Tennis](https://youtube.com/EssentialTennis). So go check all 3 of those pages out. Lots of good stuff in all 3.

And if you'd like to be friends with me on Facebook, you can check out my personal account as well, which is [Facebook.com slash Ian Westermann](https://facebook.com/IanWestermann). Westermann is with 2 n's at the end, and Ian I A N. I'd love to be friends with you guys! [laughter] As long as you don't mind seeing my personal thoughts instead of just my tennis. I don't really post anything about tennis in that. Just personal updates.

Alright. That brings today's show to a close. Again, thank you guys so much for listening, for downloading the show. I really appreciate it. I'll be talking to you guys next week in the next installment in the Essential Tennis podcast. Until then, take care, and good luck with your tennis.

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