

Essential Tennis Podcast #176

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's tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the podcast is brought to you by Tennis Express. Please check them out this week by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express.

Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the podcast. I have a special guest on today, Will Hamilton from Fuzzy Yellow Balls. We have a great conversation first about Wimbledon, and then we talk about how to learn, what types of things to focus on in your tennis to really give you the most benefit. So many recreational players focus on the wrong parts of their games and the wrong style of learning, and we have a great conversation about how to avoid that.

Next week I'm going to have another special guest, Brent Abel from WebTennis.com. Brent is a very knowledgeable guy, great player, and I'm looking forward to having him on the show as well. As I said last week, I was expecting to have Dave Kazlowski, but we're running into some scheduling problems. So we're going to get Brent Abel on, which I'm really looking forward to. So let's get to today's interview. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

My guest today on the podcast is Will Hamilton from Fuzzy Yellow Balls. Will, thanks very much for coming back on the show. Great to have you again.

Will Hamilton: Hey Ian. Good to be back with you.

Ian Westermann: So tell us a little bit about what's going on, Will. What have you been up to?

Will Hamilton: Not too much. I just got back from Jacksonville, Florida. I was actually hanging out with a bunch of buddies from the [inaudible] tennis team. One of our friends on the team is getting married, so it was his bachelor party. So for 4 days we just hit cross courts for 4 hours a day. Just back in the grind.

Ian Westermann: Standard bachelor party stuff, right?

Will Hamilton: Exactly. We fell right back into our training regimen, and there were absolutely no shenanigans that went on.

Ian Westermann: None at all.

Will Hamilton: Absolutely none.

Ian Westermann: So have you been watching Wimbledon much?

Will Hamilton: The past few days no, but prior to that we actually did watch a little bit. I'm getting back into it now, and today there's some heavyweight matchups later like Nadal versus Del Potro. I'm pretty pumped for that one. I guess Murray is playing Gasquet right now. That'll be a fun one to watch. And you got Federer coming out against Youzhny, and I bet Fed probably gets through that one. Nadal, Del Potro could be tricky for Raf. I mean, what's your take on that?

Ian Westermann: I haven't seen -- well, Del Potro I think is a big wildcard, but I mean he's made it this far so he must be playing well. I haven't seen him play yet, but I agree that if anybody has the ability to upset Rafa it's going to be a big baseline slugger like Del Po if he is playing well.

Will Hamilton: Yeah. Yeah. This is going to be a tricky match for Rafa. So he'll have to be dialed in from the first ball.

Ian Westermann: So who do you have winning?

Will Hamilton: I'm going to have Raf in 4. I picked Federer over Rafa in the final, so I'm going to stick with that until -- or if one of those two guys goes down if that happens. But both guys have looked dialed in, so I think we're on a collision course for another Federer Nadal final which would be super exciting.

Ian Westermann: Absolutely. I can't get enough of those -- who knows how much longer the two of them, I guess Roger especially, will be at the top of their game. So I think it's really special every time that we continue to see the two of them in a final much less a grand slam final.

Will Hamilton: That's a good question. How many more majors is Federer going to win? I think we talked about that question on one of the live broadcasts we did for the -- I can't remember what final it was.

Ian Westermann: It was last year, I believe.

Will Hamilton: I picked 4 at the time, and I'm not feeling too confident about that one.

Ian Westermann: I don't remember what the number was, but I remember being like I don't know I think 4 is optimistic, but I don't remember what number I chose exactly.

Will Hamilton: You've got to go big or go home, Ian.

Ian Westermann: Speaking of the pros, I want to make sure we get to at least some instructional talk since that's what my show is supposed to be about. But speaking of the pros, you've had a free course coming out this week, and I want to say just from the get go here really two things. First of all, everybody who is listening to this right now if it isn't past Tuesday yet you have a chance to see this. I was out of town. Will was out of town, and we didn't get a chance to record this the week before which would've been ideal, but if you're getting this show right away today is Monday. I'm going to release this as soon as I can on Monday the 27th. Will's free course is still going to be up through afternoon Tuesday. So you need to check this out immediately. You can go to EssentialTennis.com/RX.

Secondly, Will we didn't talk about this before, but just something I want to get out there is that at this point everybody knows we each help each other out with promotion, but I want everyone to know that truthfully Will I promote you because I like your stuff, I believe in your stuff, I know you put out valuable content, and that includes these free courses that are obviously promotional and leading up to the release of something else. But I watched every minute of this free course, and it's really solid. It's really good stuff. So I just want to say from the outset that it's great stuff and everyone needs to check it out. It's really solid.

Will Hamilton: Thanks. We really enjoyed putting this stuff together. It was sort of a new look on -- I guess you can say a little bit more theoretical in terms of its approach to learning tennis. And actually the theory is applied to learning anything, but it was -- it was drawn from a book called Talent is Overrated where they discussed how top performers learn. And it's not just tennis. It's anything. I think he had a discussion of tennis in the book. I can't remember, but he talks about Mozart, high level chess players, and so on.

And one of the concepts that the author Geoff Colvin talks about is this concept of concentric circles of learning which was coined or invented, I'm not sure, but the person he referenced in terms of these concentric circles of learning is a guy named Noel Tichy. He's at the University of Michigan, I think the business school, but essentially there's three circles that you could essentially be at when you're trying to figure out how to do something. And the first one which would be in the middle of something called the comfort zone, which is stuff you're good at. And that would be like driving a car. Like the gas, brake, you don't really think about that kind of stuff. You can do it on auto pilot.

And then surrounding that comfort zone is the learning zone. And that's where, those skills are kind of outside your reach. If you tried to do them, you would sometimes have access. You sometimes wouldn't -- they're not automatic for you. You actually have to expend a decent amount of mental energy to pull it off together, and that's where you

want to be when you're trying to figure out how to do something, get better at something. And again that's tennis, golf, karate, whatever, or chess, doesn't have to be a sport.

And outside the learning zone is the panic zone. And those are skills that are just so far out of your reach that it's pointless to try them because you're not going to be able to do them. And let's say you magically pull off the skill one time out of ten, so far you're not going to actually learn anything or get any gains from that. So hopefully we explain this in detail in the video. Hopefully everybody listening can visualize these three concentric circles. Again, it goes comfort zone, learning zone, panic zone. I was reading this book, and I was like this is an awesome explanation, and it's so simple for how you should go about learning. I don't know what your experience is Ian, but I know a lot of recreational players kind of spend most of the time in the comfort zone. And that means they spend most of their time on skills they've already got. So you end up working -- and because of that you don't really end up improving. You're not working to expand your skillset.

Ian Westermann: I totally agree. First of all I've read that book, and for those of you listening that are just kind of interested in general about learning and what makes really high performers successful, it's an extremely good book. I think it's awesome that you took this and applied it directly to your teaching, Will, and I agree it totally makes sense and I enjoyed it very much as well. I also agree -- I was actually going to take it the opposite direction. I think it depends on the player. Don't get me wrong, there's definitely a lot of recreational players out there. I mean, I kind of view these as your country club players that get stuck in the comfort zone. But so many of those types get stuck because they're not that interested in working hard, and they're happy with where they are at.

And then on the other side of the spectrum you and I deal with these types of players a lot online in our internet teaching, and I think it's really common especially with the last few years with the advent of high quality digital video of professional players. We have a lot of rec players now that I think are spending a lot of time in the panic zone trying to work on things that are way beyond if they were honest with themselves -- I guess if they knew. I'm not going to say everyone is ignorant, but if they really knew what they were working on they would realize that it's way outside of what they actually should be working on.

Will Hamilton: That's a fair point. I think if I was going to rephrase what I said earlier, pretty much every player wants to get better. I don't think there's too many who say to themselves I'm good where I am. I think what happens is you get a lot of players who think they're improving by working on stuff they already got. They're in the comfort zone and working on that stuff thinking that they're making progress, but it doesn't translate because again they're working on things they already got. Not skills that they don't have. I think you're absolutely right about the panic zone stuff because there's a lot of material

out there on the web. You watch these guys at Wimbledon hitting just outlandish crazy shots and then try to apply that stuff to your game, and you just simply don't have that foundation to pull this stuff off consistently. So you're right, you end up in the panic zone. It's certainly not clear the process you need to go through to build up the skills necessary to hit a reverse forehand consistently.

Ian Westermann: Sure. I just had a flash back. If I had a dollar for every time somebody in the past has signed up for a lesson with me and they're like, man my serve is terrible. I've got to get better at my serve. And then I take a look at two of their swings, and I'm like alright we need to start with X, Y, or Z technique. They're like I don't know if I want to make that big of a change. It's like, come on man.

Will Hamilton: It's tough.

Ian Westermann: So tell me Will, how can I as a student take your course, figure out what my style is, and figure out what changes to make so that they're best for me? Does that make sense?

Will Hamilton: Yeah. We talked about this in the video. You're talking about figuring out your identity as a player. Well, it's an introspective part of being a tennis player. The first thing is simply what are your athletic abilities? And if you're 6'3 200 pounds and you're real strong, then you're probably going to be a pretty powerful player. Being that big you're probably not as quick as somebody that's my size, 5'8 140, so you're going to try to keep the points short. Somebody like myself you're going to try and move you around a little more. So that would be the first just sort of obvious thing you would like at, but then there's also the -- identity is not a playing style because it takes into account your personality as well.

For example, I actually have a little bit of power monger in me. Not necessarily because I can knock the cover off the ball, but I am aggressive. So that changes your identity a bit. I would describe myself as an aggressive power counter puncher. And Yan actually thought I was more of a power mongerer, which kind of surprised me when he said that to me. He said that during one of our live sessions. I was kind of shocked. But he was right because when I look on my forehand I go after it. So it's a combination of your physical abilities that really make up your identity.

So that was how you figure out your identity, and the second part -- was there a second part to this question?

Ian Westermann: Yeah. The second part, you talk about it in your third video. The second part of my question was once you have figured your identity out, how do you decide what needs to be worked on next in your game to make a step forward?

Will Hamilton: Sure. Well when you're playing -- your matches are the best time to draw information about what you need to work on because if your opponent is any good they're going to be giving you shots that you're going to struggle with a little bit. And if they're not any good, they're going to be giving you shots that are in your comfort zone. It's really the matches where you get pressed a little bit. And when you combine that information with your identity, then you can kind of prioritize what you need to work on there because let's say there's 10 things you need to work on, you make a list of 10 things, how do you know which one goes at the top and which ones go to the bottom?

Well, if you're a counter puncher and you got a couple items on that list there that are skills that a power mongerer would want to emphasize, then you'd say these are the ones I don't need to work on right away. I need to work on the skills that complement who I am as a tennis player and fit into my identity, because that's going to give me the biggest bang for my buck.

Ian Westermann: So how does that work with what I think most teachers would probably recommend that tennis players do, which is find out what you're weakest at and build up your weakness so that you can fill in the chinks of the armor. I mean, does that go against what you're saying or not really?

Will Hamilton: What I think it plays into -- it fits in nicely with what we just talked about because you're going to figure out when you play a good opponent what your weaknesses are because they're going to expose those weaknesses. So you're going to know exactly what they are, and then you should certainly spend time strengthening them. But you don't just only focus on your weaknesses. You want to focus on your go-to plays and go-to patterns when you get control of a point. So I mean it's your entire game that you're working on, but again the process is sort of derived from your match results.

A good person to look at is Rafael Nadal because when he first started playing he was basically [inaudible] very powerful, forehand backhand was good, and he played very far behind the baseline. But he over the last 5 years he's turned into a very aggressive player. His movement I think has been a huge improvement where -- and his willingness to move forward and attack the first [inaudible]. There's an example of a guy who just was so dogged in improving both strengths and weaknesses. His willingness to move forward, to move around his backhand. There's that balance of going with what you're good at and tightening up your weaker elements.

Ian Westermann: Sure. So as we start to wrap up here, and again Will describes all of this really well using the whiteboard the way that all of you are familiar with him doing. I think you really do a nice job of really laying it out Will, and that brings to my last question here. I felt like having watched all three of the videos that you put out, it almost

seems like you gave the keys away. You explained it super well almost to the point where I'm like, Will is telling everyone exactly what to do to get better, so I guess what's left in the full course? How do you build on top of that? And how much more in detail do you get once you go to the full RX course?

Will Hamilton: Yeah. I mean the course is super detailed. It's somewhere between 15 and 20 hours of material. I mean the free material we produced is a very good explanation of what you need to do as you said, but it's a 30,000 foot look. In the whole program we go into detail on forehand, backhand, serve, net game, mental game as well in terms of how you use these circles properly. Now we actually don't -- we refer to the process as layering. Basically you start with a relatively simple exercise and then start adding layers of complexity, which would keep you in the learning zone. As you get better, more and more skills are going to end up being in the comfort zone, so you need to make your exercises more complicated to stay in the learning zone.

So we have an extensive set of exercises for every single shot, including the foot work, to make sure that you're always in the learning zone. We basically -- for all these shots, you're going to be able to get in there and figure out the exercise that's going to put you in the learning zone. And then you're going to be able to improve right from the get-go. And then at the end we wrap up -- we come back to profile and we talk about a process called sequencing, mapping, which really lets you drill down and be specific, super specific, with extracting the correct information from matches so that you can plug it back into your practice sessions, training sessions.

Ian Westermann: Okay. Great. Well I strongly urge everybody that's listening to me either on Monday or Tuesday, so 27th, 28th of June, definitely go check it out. Again you can do that by going to EssentialTennis.com/RX. Will is going to ask you for your email address so that he can stay in touch with you about the course. And then at the end of the free course you'll have a chance to sign up for the full RX 2.0 program. And I'm going to be sending out an email on Tuesday that's going to have a special link in it. If you use it you'll have an opportunity to get a great bonus that I'm throwing in as well in addition to everything that Will is including in the program. And also when you use that link, a percentage of your purchase price comes back to support me and EssentialTennis.com, which I always appreciate very much. Will, any final thoughts?

Will Hamilton: I think we all covered it very well. But yeah, check out the free training. I really hope it helps everybody listening. It was a lot of fun putting that together, so after you check it out please let me know what you think.

Ian Westermann: Okay. Thanks Will for spending your time with us. We always appreciate it, and hopefully we'll have you back on the show in the near future.

Will Hamilton: I'm looking forward to it Ian. Thanks again for having me on.

Ian Westermann: Alright. That does it for episode #176 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thanks very much for joining me and for listening. I really appreciate it. If you have any comments or questions about anything that you heard in today's episode, definitely let me know by going to EssentialTennis.com/Podcast and click on Episode #176. Leave your comments and questions there. I'll read one or two of those at the end of next week's show and respond and give you my thoughts on anything that you might have about my conversation with Will today.

So until then, looking forward to watching the finishing of Wimbledon. Should be exciting. I hope the rest of you listening are getting the chance to watch a little bit as well. And I'm looking forward to my interview next week with Brent Abel. So until then, thanks again for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.