

## Essential Tennis Podcast #189

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

**Ian:** Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast, your place for free expert'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](http://EssentialTennis.com/Express).

Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the podcast, a very special edition where I'm going to be interviewing Todd Martin. We talk about a lot of great topics including how he got started in the game, his thoughts on reaching your potential as a rec player. We also talk about his time spent with Djokavic and the types of drills that they did together. And we discussed new racket and string technology and also where he thinks tennis is headed in the future. Lots of really good topics and I really appreciate the time that he has spent with me. I know you're going to enjoy our conversation.

Real quickly before we get to that, I want to say I'm sorry to everybody whose questions I didn't get to. I did ask him a lot of questions that were submitted those of you who are listeners. Thank you to all of you that took the time to make questions. Of course I couldn't ask him all of them. We had a limited amount of time, but I did get in as many as I could. Sorry for those of you who I didn't get to your questions. With that let's get to the interview. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Today on the Essential Tennis podcast I have a very special guest. He has a top ATP ranking of #4 which he achieved in 1999. He also was part of the winning Davis Cup team squad in 1995. He's a finalist at the Australian Open in '94 and finalist at the US Open in '99. And since his playing career, he's been coaching high performance players and tour pros as well including Marty Fish and Novak Djokavic. My guest is Todd Martin. Todd, welcome to the show.

**Todd:** Thanks, Ian.

**Ian:** I want to start off by just saying thank you very much for spending time with me. My audience I know is really excited you're going to be on the show, and I'm really excited to be asking you some questions as well. So thank you very much for agreeing to give me some of your time. We all appreciate it very much.

**Todd:** My pleasure. I'm looking forward it.

**Ian:** I'd like to start off with a couple of questions about how you got started with tennis. I'm curious and I know that my listeners are curious as well. Can you please tell us your story as a tennis player? Getting started in the game. When did you start playing? And when did you know you wanted to pursue it 100%?

**Todd:** Well, I grew up in Ohio, and my parents were recreational players. They'd walk up the street to the park once a week on the weekends. I was probably 4 or 5 when they started letting me take batting practice after they were done. I found that to be a lot of fun. My dad sawed off an old wood racket in half. I got to the point where I was just sort of toting that around the house and probably knocking stuff over. My mom showed great patience with me, but then before long I was doing the once a week on the weekend park lessons. Eventually probably when I was about 8 or 9 I started going to the indoor courts and taking it a little bit more seriously. By the time I was 10, I moved to Michigan and that's when tennis became a real passion of mine.

**Ian:** Cool. So that seems -- and kind of in our modern professional tennis world, it seems like casual play at 4 or 5 and then starting to take it seriously at age 10 -- and it doesn't sound like your parents really -- it doesn't sound they pressured you into it.

**Todd:** That's definitely the case. They were -- my mom had her Masters in phys ed, and my father was a high school athlete in three different sports. It was part of their lives together, so they wanted us to understand and appreciate sports. But what sport was up to us and to what extent was up to us as well.

**Ian:** That's great. It's great to hear that you had so much success without your parents having to force you to do it and really pressuring you into it. You and I talked briefly about -- now you have your own children. You have three kids and it sounds like you're following that same model, which I think is great.

**Todd:** Well, I don't think the way my parents raised me broke me. I'm not concerned about doing things the same way they did. I think that there are some adjustments in this generation that need to be made due to some of the surrounding circumstances but for the most part my wife and I would like our children to play more sports than less and enjoy them to whatever degree they're interested in.

**Ian:** So these days with professional tennis being so athletic and so competitive at the journal level going all the way on up to the professional level, do you think that -- there's kind of this stereotypical tennis parent, kind of crazy tennis parent really driving and pushing their kids from a really young age. Is that necessary these days to be successful at the professional level? Or can players also follow more of a path like what you did and still be successful?

**Todd:** I think that success can be had from most any path. Just the other day I was watching a quick show (inaudible) and it said that he didn't pick up tennis until he was 11. Marcelo is not the same age as Novak and Murray and Nadal, but at the same time he's not 40 years old already. He's in his early 30s and was able to have great success basically 10 years after he started the game. I don't know how intensely he pursued the game once he took it up, but the most important thing in athletics is passion. And what I find people overlook in their child's development is the importance of that passion. If kids aren't -- if their interest in the sport is not nurtured or managed let's say in the long run when after puberty and when the sport becomes much more up to them and they have greater ownership, a lot of the discipline won't be there and a lot of the passion will be challenged. You don't know how that will respond. I think there are very few kids who have been introduced to the sport and introduced to it competitively early, I don't think there are kids who didn't like kids at the beginning. It's a matter of getting them to love tennis when they're done with it. I think that's a huge challenge for parenting and for those of us who have a more relaxed and faithful perspective on it and say what will be, will be. It's difficult for us to manage those things as well because there is a point where you have to discipline your children and help them understand what pursuit of athletics demands.

**Ian:** Great. That's a topic we can definitely talk a long time about, but I want to transition over to your perspective as a coach now. You just talked about passion, which I think is awesome, and my listenership, they are recreational players. My average listener is probably a middle aged person, mom or dad, 3.5 or around that kind of level. And they're listening to my show because they want advice on how they can improve and reach their potential. So from your perspective as a coach, what are the most important qualities that my listeners can have apart from their whatever innate ability that they have if they want to reach their full potential on the court?

**Todd:** Well, I think managing expectations is very important. One of the best ways to manage those expectations is to have good, sound instructions. So that would be my first tip, to find someone to assist them with their game. Sometimes it's going to be for some of you people who are trying to make it from the 4.0 level to the 4.5 level. Some might be looking to get off the C or D team at their club. I think skill oriented game, it's very difficult to navigate the waters by yourself. At the same time, it's incredibly important that the instruction that your listeners be from someone who is not trying to teach the textbook but trying to teach them and improve them from where they are currently.

**Ian:** Can you please elaborate on that? Textbook versus teaching the person.

**Todd:** Well the textbook might teach you to hold the racket a certain way, but if someone has been playing tennis for 30 years and let's say playing dare I say the

wrong way, it doesn't behoove them to be to hold the racket the right way if that doesn't match their swing paths. Certain contact points that apply to you and me don't necessarily apply to someone who holds the racket dare I say the wrong way and so forth. So you really have to -- a good instructor will match what their student comes to them with with what their student might be capable of doing.

**Ian:** Do you see very many teaching professionals teaching in that way or do you see most kind of club pros doing a more cookie cutter approach?

**Todd:** Well, it's different everywhere you go. I think it certainly underscores the importance of good club leadership, good program design. So the park districts and private clubs, tennis clubs around the country, those who are led best get -- educate their teachings the best and also hold their teachers accountable for the type of instruction that they are providing their students.

**Ian:** So let's transition over to your experience coaching professional level athletes. What about working with a Martie Fish or a Novak Djokavic? Is it the same kind of approach as far as Novak's been using X, Y, or Z grip and technique for this, and I want to work within the confines of that rather than totally changing things up? Is that kind of a similar approach with those players?

**Todd:** Absolutely. It's not my favorite part of the business, but when you walk out on the court with somebody who is 22 or 23 which was approximately Novak or Marty's age when I started working with them, there are certain things that they've done a certain way that's going to make it pretty difficult to do much with within the scheme of a competitive schedule. With Marty, we spent a good bit of time restructuring his forehand which was for my liking a pretty bold step considering he was 23 or 24 at the time. But he had gotten to the point where he had lost confidence in that stroke to feel like he was going to make it the way he had it. I admired him for being willing to take on that change, but at the same time it was a very challenging change for him to make and for us to work through.

With Novak, boy there was such little that needed to be addressed. Technically it was much more about he went about his business on the court and how his mindset was in a competitive setting and how he wanted to strategize against anyone's opponent.

**Ian:** So I have a question here from John in the forums at EssentialTennis.com about Novak. He said, I'd like to know about Todd's experiences working with Djokavic. What is a top player like Djokavic looking for in a coach?

**Todd:** Well that's a question that's probably asked of Novak, but there was a huge cultural barrier there that was at times managed very well, at times a bit challenging. But what Novak was looking for when he came to me was someone to let's say calm the

waters around him. His life is pretty tumultuous. His family is very involved. Novak is very involved in other business. There's just a lot going on around him. On top of it, he's a very emotional guy. I think rightly or wrongly he was looking for someone to help calm those waters a bit.

**Ian:** So in the case of Novak, it was the work that you did with him was more emotional or mental as opposed to technical or technique?

**Todd:** No it was -- let's say mindset, psychological, but also tactical. He was very understanding that his game was too defensive. His strengths were his defensiveness, but at the same time he relied on those attributes way too frequently. And he understood that, so he was also looking for someone to help him understand the offensive game a little bit better than he had at that point in time and understand how to move forward.

**Ian:** Okay. Samir on Facebook asked, I would love to hear about Todd did coaching wise with Novak. Can you give us a quick snapshot of how do you design -- do you design drills for Novak to work on then? Or is it like a point play scenario where you're talking to him between points about shot selection? Or how would you work on that?

**Todd:** Well, yeah there are some drills specifically that I would work on. One thing that I think is incredibly important is pace control and management. I think the best players in the world play with great intention and purpose with regard to pace. The not great players or the guys who don't maximize their potential are the guys who get very ingrained in one pace and just sort of metronomic tennis. That was something that Novak struggled with quite a bit. When I went out with him the first time, I was amazed at how hard he hit the ball because it certainly is not what I had seen in his matches. It is what you see now. He controls and dominates play with pace because he's being aggressive. Then you look at a guy like Andy Murray who plays the game very intentional with pace, and it's all over the map. He plays very soft sometimes. He plays harder. He changes up the pace very well.

So some of the drills I would do with Novak were understanding first and foremost if you wanted to get to the net, understanding pace at the net and trying to manage -- get him to understand that being at the net is about position as much as it is anything else. And in order to gain position, you have to hit the ball at the right pace. Some depth control drilling, all this would be done in a live ball setting, but get him to feel the volley instead of just hit the volley. We're all taught to stick the volley, but if you come in regularly, you're going to have to volley from a defensive position as well. So I wanted him to understand how best to control the pace as he volleys that way.

And then tons of movement drills on the course in a live ball setting to get him to understand opportunities to shorten the court and move forward and also understand

when he needs to play defensive not just by choice but by necessity. And then navigating the waters in between those two extremes.

**Ian:** Okay. I think a lot of ears perked up in my audience when you mentioned just a minute ago -- you said that when you first went out and started working with Novak, you were surprised at how hard he hit the ball in practice and yet during competition, he was known for a more defensive overall style, and my experience coaching recreational players that's a really common theme. Somebody hits really confidently and solid and offensively during practice, but then in match play they can't seem to find that same level. What would you say to any listeners I have that have that problem?

**Todd:** Well, it's a lot easier to work with Novak Djokavic on these things than it is to work with Sally or Bernie down at the club. At the same time, there are loads of ways to do it. You can do it in a dead ball setting where I like to think about things relatively two dimensionally. I think some of the more talented players over the years could hit places on courts a little bit better, but for me depth is a product of height, spin, and speed. And so if I focus first on height, I can sort of figure out which window I need to hit in order to accomplish a certain thing.

So I like to talk a lot about the height over the net that the ball is played. Once you force somebody to play let's say three feet over the net, they can start to figure out what they need to do with the speed of the ball and the spin that they impart on the ball to make something happen and to hit the proper spot on the court. That can be done in any number of ways. It can be done for hitting the ball short on the court. It can be done for hitting the ball deep in the court. And then as much as anything else, you want them to play in order to make their best decisions as to when to hit certain shots.

**Ian:** Okay. So I'm curious Todd, it's obvious in hearing you talk that you're an analytical thoughtful guy. Obviously you know a lot about the technical and mental parts of tennis. I'm curious were you this technically minded when you were playing professionally? Or have you only just started I guess analyzing the game this deeply since you started coaching?

**Todd:** I was taught in Michigan when I was 10 and went to the local club and just like most everybody else I found the guy that was taking new students. As it turned out, I got incredibly lucky. He was a great coach, a great student of the game, and had a similarly analytical mind. And so we spent a lot of time discussing the game and not nearly as much time hitting balls. And that worked for me and really helped. I was not a great athlete. I had very good hand eye coordination but I was not a great explosive dynamic athlete. I was not someone who played a ton of tennis growing up, so I didn't have the repetition to make up for other deficiencies. In fact, it might have even been one of my deficiencies not having more repetition.

So how I was taught was analytically and psychologically and technically so that I had a way to self correct on the court. I had plans B and C, and then once I started working with those as a professional, I had more plans. So I would say my analysis of the game is a product of my childhood and is increased through the years. When I first started playing professionally, I looked at the game much more from a brute force standpoint and I wanted to over power guys. That was the nature of my game. I was part of the generation that came into the game that was new and different from those that had been dominating the game. So there was opportunity.

As I got older and as the next --or as this generation started to take over the game, I needed to get much more creative about how to handle what they can throw at me athletically. So I started playing much more creative and unfortunately much less successfully.

**Ian:** So you think you should have stuck with your strengths and continued to play big and offensive?

**Todd:** No. I think I was right in making the adjustments. I just wasn't good enough at let's say plan C and D as I needed to be to make those plans A and B.

**Ian:** Got you. Well, I'd like to ask you one or two more questions here before we wrap up. What you were talking about there about the evolution of the game during your playing career actually feeds perfectly into the next question I wanted to ask you. Which do you think has made the bigger overall change in how pro tennis has evolved in the last 20 years? Has it been player training and athleticism or more so changes in racket and string technology?

**Todd:** I don't know if you can quantify either one. I'll tell you right now that that they're both at the front of the list, the string technology has allowed players to swing at the ball much more aggressively than ever before due to the amount of spin that they can impart on the ball, which without making an indirect hit or glancing blow -- (inaudible) put a ton of spin on the ball back in our day, but he had to brush up the back of the ball way more than the average bear, so his ball didn't fly as fast. I hit the ball real flat so I hit it much harder than most people. Now you've got guys who are spinning the ball as much as Brugera did and hitting the ball faster than I ever dreamt of hitting it. So the string technology specifically has made a huge difference in the game.

Sport science and specifically strength and conditioning is through the roof improved in the last 20 years. 20 years ago it was still being introduced and was the transition into weight training systems and machines. Now the guys have reverted back to much more dynamic training, medicine ball work, lots of core strengthening, lots of universal body strength and speed and endurance training that is so scientific that it doesn't even look or sound like what we did 20 years ago when I first started playing professionally. I don't

know where those two pieces of rubber meet the road in tandem, but I know that the guys wouldn't play the way they do now if it weren't for the string technology, and I know they wouldn't play like they do now if it weren't for their ability to train their bodies to the level that they do. But I know that more and more the game is a physical game that demands of players greater athleticism than ever before.

**Ian:** Absolutely. Alright last question here. This comes to us from Charles in the forums at EssentialTennis.com. He said where does Todd see the game going? Does he expect a player that can serve like Isner but can move like Rafa in the future?

**Todd:** Yes.

**Ian:** Wow. Really?

**Todd:** That's not spoken from any great knowledge of the game. It's spoken from a logic standpoint. 10 years ago, I would've never dreamt of seeing (inaudible) that just move like gazelles and hit the ball amazingly well. John Isner is demonstrating consistently that he's a top 20-25 player, and that's because he's a unique athlete. He's not a great athlete, but he's a unique athlete. He's 6'9, 6'10. He's got a tremendous serve and a great forehand, and those two weapons are enough to carry the load for him at this point in time. I don't imagine that someone with John's exact skillset in 10 years is going to be as effective because there will be more guys who are close to his size if not his eyes who will have learned how to hit all shots without the holes. You look at the top players in the world and Novak doesn't really have a hole. Some used to think his forehand was a hole, I don't believe it is anymore. Nadal has one tiny little hole, and it's tied to his backhand. Andy Murray doesn't have a hole. He just doesn't generate as much power as he needs to with as much control as he needs to. Federer is starting to be exposed to the backhand more and more but still is extremely strong.

You look 10 years ago, Richard Krajicek had holes. Pete Sampras had a hole in his backhand. Andre Agassi had a hole. He didn't move across the court as well as his peers did. The game is being played better and better as the years go by so it just stands to reason logic wise, common sense wise, that another 10 or 20 years from now, geez. John Isner is going to look like an average player if you could fast forward.

**Ian:** Well, Todd, with that I'd like to wrap up our talk here. Listen, thank you very much for your time and thoughts. I appreciate it very much. I know my listeners do as well. By the way, everybody who is listening to this interview, please check out Todd's website. It's ToddMartinTennis.com. Todd, anywhere else online that you want people to check you out?

**Todd:** Yes, you're very kind to offer Ian. Go to ToddMartinKids.org which is my non-profit organization up in Lansing, Michigan my home town where we operate national



junior tennis and learning programs and leadership development programs and a first serve tennis chapter. So we can use all the help we can get. I would ask them to go there before I'd ask them to go to my professional website.

**Ian:** Alright, so ToddMartinKids.org. Everybody go and definitely check that out. Anyway that my listeners can help in any way, Todd?

**Todd:** You know, in order for at risk youth to learn how to play tennis, grow in their abilities to be constructive human beings, and manage the troubles in their lives, it takes money. And up in Michigan, the economy is struggling so it's always a challenge. Any support would be appreciated. There's directions on how to give on the website. Also information on how to get more information about how to help our kids in Michigan.

**Ian:** Okay. I see here on the right side toward the bottom, donate today at ToddMartinKids.org. Everybody, please check that out. Todd, again, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it. It's been great having you on the show and good luck with your organization and coaching and your kids and everything else.

**Todd:** Thanks a lot, Ian. It's been a place.

**Ian:** Alright. That does it for episode #189 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you very much for being a listener today. Really appreciate that you decided to spend some of your time in your day listening to this episode. That really means a lot to me. I hope that you really enjoyed my conversation with Todd Martin and a big thank you one more time to him for spending time with me and recording that episode. I hope that you all appreciate it as much as I do. I think it was great of him to do that.

Going to pretty much leave it at that for today's episode. Getting pretty long. I just want to say if you have any comments or questions about what you heard in today's episode, as always please go and leave those at [EssentialTennis.com/Podcast](http://EssentialTennis.com/Podcast). Click on episode #189. I do my best to reply to all the comments and questions that get left in the podcast section of the website. It's always great to hear from those of you that are listeners of the show. So please go do that. That does it for this week. Thanks again for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.