

Essential Tennis Podcast #125

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Welcome to 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!

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Ian Westerman: Hi, and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast, your place for free, expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

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Thanks very much for joining me today. I really appreciate you taking the time to download this podcast file and to listen to the show. I've got a special guest with me on the podcast today. We're going to be talking all about different mental tennis topics, which is always a favorite topic of mine.

So, let's go ahead and get right to it. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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My guest today on the Essential Tennis Podcast is Dr. Patrick Cohn. He is the host of the Tennis Psychology Podcast. You guys can find that on iTunes. It's one of the top tennis podcasts in iTunes, and he's a mental toughness expert in all kind of different fields of sports, which is interesting. Dr. Cohn, welcome back to the podcast. It's great to have you here.

Cohn: Thanks for having me again, Ian.

Ian: Yeah. You bet. Actually, let's talk about that briefly. In googling your name to get a little bit of background information about you to do an introduction, I couldn't help but notice but you specialize in a lot of different sports. I noticed race-car driving, and tennis, and there were a couple other ones in there as well. How many different areas of sport do you specialize in?

Cohn: Well, the whole gamut. I mean, tennis is one of my specialties. Golf and tennis are a couple specialty areas that I have. Also racing is another specialty. But I work with equestrians, skaters, dancers, basketball players, baseball players, I work with the entire

gamut, you know.

So, I've opened up my business for working with all performers and athletes. And tennis and golf are the ones where I've focused in terms of the products that I've developed, and also some of the online material like the podcast, etc.

Ian: OK. That's interesting that you bring so much different experience to the table. And I'm actually curious, one question for myself before we get to listener questions.

What unique challenges or circumstances do tennis players--in your opinion-- get faced with, compared to all those other sports that you've worked with?

Ian: Well, both tennis and golf. I mean, we can chunk those together. But, it's the start and stop nature of tennis, I think, that has one of the unique mental demands.

Because you know, between points, obviously there has to be a ritual and you have to be able to let go of the last point, but then you have to kick up the focus again and restart it. You have change-overs, obviously, and it's like coming out at half-time again, you know. Even though a change-over, you know, it's shorter than a half-time. But I think the continual starting and stopping it would be one.

I think another one that I find in particular, at least working with young juniors right now, is they pay too much attention at ranking, I guess. And I don't know, they get psyched out, or they get over confident. And really the ranking, the rankings and the seedings really don't mean a lot, I don't think, at the junior level.

So I think they get too worried about where their seeding is, or who they're playing, and don't focus enough of their own game and their own strengths.

Ian: OK. Interesting. Well, let's go ahead and get to some questions from listeners of the Podcast. And these were actually taken from the forums at essentialtennis.com. People were really excited to hear that you were coming back on the show, by the way. You're definitely one of the favorite guests that I've had on the show. So I'm happy to have you back.

Cohn: Great. Great.

Ian: So let's go ahead and get started with the questions.

The first one is from David in Dallas. And he wrote nice short and sweet one, and said: Are there stress-relieving routines one can do in a match to promote fluid strokes during tense moments? What do you think?

Cohn: Um, this is in a match. This is during a match, or before a match? This looks like in a match, during a match.

Ian: Yeah.

Cohn: OK. Well, David, I think you have to understand that there's no really quick fixes in my work. In other words, there's no Band-Aid out there.

Ian: [laughter] [inaudible]

Cohn: Breathing obviously, tightening and releasing, stretching, you know, those are all the physical things that you can do, obviously, to relieve stress. The whole area of relaxation training and being able to use relaxation training. But there's one premises, and that is, it's body to mind.

So what that means is you're trying to reduce the tension in the body, and hopefully that will reduce some of the tension in the mind, you know.

But my philosophy is often that's a Band-Aid. The whole breathing, certainly that can help settle yourself between points, tightening and releasing, relaxing, but what you really have to understand is where that mental stress is coming from. Because the mental stress, the mental anxiety, ultimately leads to the physical tension, and then the strokes don't feel as smooth.

So typically what I see, if I was to give a kind of the chain of command here, it would be, there's an underlying fear of failure--let's just say that there's a fear of embarrassment, for example--that creates some anxiety, which creates some of the physical tension, but it also creates a lack of trust.

And now, it's hard to hit out on the ball, it's hard to hit your normal fluid strokes, because you've got both of those going, the tension and the lack of trust, and they may be related to each other. Lack of trust is usually when you're trying to guide it and steer the ball around, rather than just hit your normal strokes, because you're afraid of missing shots, or you're trying to be too perfect with it. But so, that's what I mean, David and Ian, is about there's no quick fixes and Band-Aids like simple relaxation techniques.

Now you can do that to reduce your physiological activation. In other words, the breathing--what we call the abdominal breathing-- between points, can help get oxygenate your system and reduce your heart-rate quickly, but it really doesn't address where the mental stress is coming from. And that to me, is the key. My philosophy is: What is the fear? What is the stress?

And a lot of times what I find is the fear and the stress, is it relates to some type of fear of failure, which is often related to other people. I don't want to disappoint a parent. I don't want to disappoint a team-mate. I don't want to disappoint a coach. Um, I've worked too hard on my game to, you know, to perform this way. I don't want to lose. You know, so, it's... Those are often what I call the mental triggers that are going to lead to some of this perceived stress and anxiety that the player has, which is more of a core issue. And you have to address these core issues in order to completely relieve...

So, I guess what I'm saying is there are no quick routines that you can do, other than like I said, there's certainly, you know, you could do some relaxation training and stuff like that. But, from a mind game perspective, I would say how to keep your mind focused in the present. Don't get ahead of yourself, because when you get ahead of yourself and focus on results, that's when you can easily start getting tense and anxious. Try to just play the next point to the best of your ability. Obviously easier said than done.

But, for some players that's helpful too. Is to remind yourself, let's just play the next point. Let's just play the next game, you know, one point at a time, one shot at a time, and not get too far ahead on myself. Cause the fear, the anxiety, is often future thinking about results and consequences, and what if I lose?

Ian: Sure. Sure, yeah. Well, I think that a lot of my listeners will really be able to identify with one thing that you said. You said that a lot of times this physical tension is due to mental anxiety over fear of failure, or embarrassment, or letting a person down.

So let's say that my listeners out there are having this realization that wow, yeah, I'm feeling so much pressure because I don't want to let my parents down, or my coach down, or my team-mates down. Even though it's easier said than done, but we all should realize that it's not that important that we win each match.

But I guess my follow-up question for you Dr. Cohn, is once we identify where that anxiety is coming from, how do we deal with it? In other words, if my pressure is coming from thinking that I don't want to let my coach down, how can I work past that mentally?

Cohn: OK. So, that's good that you gave me a specific example. So ultimately, then you have to find out the roots of, you know, why does the player worry about letting the coach down? What is it that they... Are they playing for the coach?

So #1: the player probably cares too much about what other people think. And we call that social approval, um, in my work. They're looking for some type of approval, some type of respect. They're very much oriented and geared towards, you know, what the coach has to say to them, too much. You know, they hang on every word maybe, the coach says, for example. And it's not, in general it's not healthy, for example.

Ian: OK.

Cohn: So, step one is the athlete has to realize that they're playing for themselves and not their coach. Or they're playing for themselves, and they're not playing for a parent. Because a lot of young kids I know, that I work with, they worry about disappointing a parent, or they want to make their parents happy, or you know, whatever. So they have to start playing for themselves, and not playing to get respect or get admiration from the coach.

Ian: OK.

Cohn: The second part of that is they have to learn to be able to catch themselves when they start worrying about what a coach is gonna saying, or worrying if they're going to disappoint a coach. They have to be able to recognize that mental turmoil that's going on, and be able to refocus themselves in a way that they're not burdened or hindered by that. So, it's you know, I'm making it sound easy, and simplistic. It's not that easy, and it's not that simplistic certainly.

Ian: Sure.

Cohn: But that's the direction that I take it with my students. And it usually goes to [inaudible] some type of ego involvement, to put it simply. Ego involvement means players that don't have self-respect often look for respect from other people. That's a premises of social approval. They haven't given themselves unconditional self-respect, and they feel like they need to get it from other people. And that can be really dangerous for athletes.

Ian: Well, before we get to our next question, I want to remind my listeners about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast, and that is Championship Tennis Tours. You guys can find them at tennistours.com. Since 1987 they've been providing tickets and travel packages to professional tennis events. You guys should definitely go check them out.

And especially check out their US Open travel packages. If you guys purchase one of those using my promotional code, which is Essential, with a capital E, you'll not only get a discount, but you'll get an invitation to a cocktail party in Times Square, where myself and Will Hamilton from Fuzzy Yellow Balls are going to be doing a little cocktail reception during the tournament. And it's gonna be a lot of fun. So please go check them out. Look at their prices, and make a purchase through them if you're going to be going to a professional tennis event anytime soon.

And please use the promotional code to show that you're supporting the Essential Tennis Podcast, and thank my sponsor for their support of me as well.

Alright, let's go ahead and move on to our next question, which comes to us from Gary. And his question was: Should I consciously think that I'm a better player than the opponent or opponents? Or should I just be confident in my game and my strokes? At what point is confidence just simple arrogance? Also, can arrogance actually help you sometimes in a game or match? What is the precise relationship between confidence and being able to stay relaxed in tennis? [inaudible]

There is a bunch of questions that aren't in there, but let's go ahead and start with the, I guess...

Cohn: There's several issues there.

Ian: Yeah.

Cohn: There's several issues, yeah.

Ian: Go ahead and take the lead on that.

Cohn: OK . So, let's start off with the first segment about should I consciously think that I'm a better player than the opponent.

Well, I don't know about the "consciously" part about that. I mean, either you do or you don't. You can't fake that, right? You can't fake that. So, it sounds like he's asking should I fake it and just automatically think that I'm better than my opponent, or should I just be confident in my game and my strokes? There may be some expectation imbedded in there, that I think that I'm better than the other player, which I'm not a fan of, of having expectations like I should win, for example.

Ian: OK.

Cohn: So, I guess my answer is I like the sound of the second part of that. I want him to be confident in his game and strokes, go out there and play one shot at a time, and continue to believe in his game and his strokes no matter if he's up big, he's down big, or if it's a really tight match. That to me, it just has a better ring to it than having to consciously think that you're a better player.

Ian: Yeah, it's kind of an unreasonable thought, isn't it? I mean, there's always gonna be players that are better than us, and it's not just tennis, but every sport. And from day to day you're going to play people that are much better, much worse, and right in between. And it's probably not healthy psychologically to walk out onto a court and just automatically assume that you are better. Is it?

Cohn: No. Because I think, once again, tied in with the expectations, if you just think you're better and you expect to win, and then it doesn't go your way early in the match, then there could be some real frustration time with that.

Ian: Yeah. Absolutely. So, what about this comparison between confidence and arrogance? I guess, would arrogance be that first thought? That kind of the assumption that of course I'm better than my opponent?

Cohn: I look at that a little bit differently. I mean, I have this discussion with my students a lot.

So confidence as we define it, is a believe in your ability, is a believe in your skill, it's how strongly you believe you can execute your shots, if you want to get more specific with it. So it's a strength if you believe.

Arrogance, I don't use that term in sports psychology, but it's defined by people, I think,

outside of sports that look at very confident athletes and say that's arrogant. In other words, they look at supreme levels of confidence as being more too cocky or too arrogant.

Ian: Right.

Cohn: I think it's usually people that are outside of sports. But some athletes do worry about how their confidence comes off. They don't want it to come off as an arrogant type, you know, confidence. Like I guess some people would say, you know, Nadal obviously is a very confident guy.

Some people that might not like some of his action would say that's arrogant, he's being arrogant or cocky. So, what we really want, is we want cockiness and confidence on the inside. You've got to be internally confident and humble on the outside.

Arrogance I think can be construed as you're just doing it for the showboat-y. You know, I think of Deon Sanders.

Ian: [laughter] Right.

Cohn: If people... if your listeners are old enough to remember, you know, Deion Sanders' heyday was very much a showboater. However, he had the skills to back it up, you know. Even though he was a showboater he was very respected by his teammates and he was a very, very talented athlete.

So, often I look at arrogance as just trying to put it in other people's face, rub it in their face, on purpose. Right?

But I really want my students to have that internal confidence and cockiness yet be humble on the outside, but not go out of your way to be humble on the outside. Okay?

Ian: What do you mean by that?

Cohn: Well, sometimes if you try so hard to be humble with your actions and your statements, that can often stifle your internal level of confidence and cockiness.

Ian: Hmm.

Cohn: OK? Because you're so concerned about how it looks to other people. Boy, I'd better not say that. Or, I'd better not think that way. You know, that might be construed as being too arrogant and cocky on my part. So, ultimately then that'll feed internally to them where there's trying to put a cap on some of those thoughts.

Ian: That's interesting. Do you watch professional tennis very often, Dr. Cohn?

Cohn: Yes. I do. I mean, obviously the bigger ones, Wimbledon now, and the Open, and

Australian... So I'm glued to the TV when the big ones are around. I don't watch every week in and week out. No.

Ian: So I'm curious what your opinion is, because I've had conversations with actually many people, tennis fans, tennis players, who do think that Nadal is arrogance and cocky. And I'm curious what personally you feel about that statement, coming from a psychologist's standpoint.

Cohn: Well, I would say that it's a reflection of what he feels like on the inside.

Ian: OK.

Cohn: That it is a true confidence. It's a true confidence that he lets out. In other words, he's not protecting or he's not filtering what he does or what he says. It's you know, and he's not afraid of the repercussions of it. So often it can be a reflection of somebody that has a superior level of confidence.

Because I think even a confident athlete, or a confident tennis player, can look at Nadal and say that's arrogance, because maybe they can't relate to that level on confidence that you have to have. So... Oh yeah...

Ian: And maybe it makes them a little uneasy to see another player that confident on the court?

Cohn: Yeah. Yeah. It could make them uneasy, or they just can't relate to that level of confidence, and then they call it arrogance, or they call... he's too cocky. But you know what, the best athletes in the world and the best tennis players in the world, they have that internal level of cockiness. You have to have that in order to perform your best.

Ian: Interesting stuff. And let's talk about the final question that Gary wrote here, which was: What is the precise relationship between confidence and being able to stay relaxed in tennis?

Cohn: Um, I don't know.

Ian: Or is there one?

Cohn: Well, it's an interesting question, because he's asking for a precise relationship between confidence and relaxation. How I would answer that, is I would say if you have a lot of confidence, I call it a cure-all.

Meaning: you don't get anxious, you don't get fearful, you don't get scared, because you have this level of confidence that everything is gonna be alright, everything is gonna turn out alright. And if it doesn't, then the next day will.

So I guess, I really don't know where he's going with that. But to me, the relationship is

when you have a high level of confidence you're going to be relaxed. When you don't have confidence it's much more likely that you're gonna have tension in your game.

Ian: Sure.

Cohn: Does that make sense to you?

Ian: Yeah. Yeah. That makes sense. OK.

Cohn: He says relaxed confidence, in the next statement he asks about what is relaxed confidence in tennis as opposed to other types of confidence.

I've never heard of relaxed confidence. I would make the assumption once again, he's looking at it from a perspective like, someone like Federer. Federer kind of looks laid back and relaxed, but he has a nice confident demeanor about him; as opposed to Nadal who looks very, you know, jumpy, cocky, you know, type of confidence when you look at him.

Ian: Sure. Yeah, is that just kind of different personality styles? Or why do they come off so differently?

Cohn: Yeah. I think that's different personality styles and how they display their confidence. Certainly. Yeah.

Ian: OK. OK. Alright. Let's move on to our third question. This comes to us from [inaudible] in New York. He wrote and said: What should you be thinking about on change-overs? Is this the time to pump yourself up, take a mental breather, or put yourself in a relaxed state? Should you be mulling over tactics? And if so, should it be general things like stay aggressive, or more detailed thoughts like serve wide to their backhand, or hit down the middle to take away angles, etc.?

Cohn: Very interesting question. I think very astute question. I like my students to start off with a game plan, that they have a game plan that's going to work for a particular opponent or their style of play. In addition to that, I like my students to focus on what are called processed goals. Processed goals are little things that you're going to do to execute, you know, each and every point that you can.

So it's a good example of kind of a strategy and a process goal tied into one. Stay aggressive could be a more general process goal, whereas serve wide to the backhand, hit down the middle to take away the angles, that's more of a strategy once again, but it can also be a process goal.

Process goals can be really small like make sure you pick a target before you get up to the service line. In your service routine, make sure you pick a target and commit to the target and commit to the type of server you're going to hit. Right?

Ian: OK.

Cohn: Those are more specific examples of process goals.

But in terms of change-overs, he says, pump yourself up, take a breather, relax yourself. I do believe, it's kind of where you are in the match and what your mental state is. If, you know, you just missed an easy volley to lose the game, and you're just beside yourself, you know, I don't think pumping yourself up is going to work. [laughter]

Ian: [laughter]

Cohn: Right?

Ian: Yeah.

Cohn: That's the time where you want to take some deep breaths, say it's okay, let's let it go, let's get to the next game, for example. If things are going really well, for example, in the match, and you're up 4-1, for example, that's where you want to remind yourself to stay aggressive. Okay, let's finish this off. Let's stay aggressive. Let's not go into protect mode, you know, and give my opponent any momentum. Let's keep the momentum going and stay aggressive with my shots. So that's a couple examples of it .

Depends on really what's going on for you in that match, and what type of adjustments that you have to make on the change-overs. Because sports psychology, Ian, is all about the real value in sports psychology isn't when you're in the zone and you're playing great. The real value of sports psychology is when you need to make adjustments.

Ian: Sure.

Cohn: You just lost your confidence because you, you know, whacked two balls long, for example. Or the example I said before, you missed an easy volley and you're really upset with yourself, and you're frustrated and you need to make an adjustment. Or you find that your mind is wandering and you just don't have the focus you need, and you need to, you know, get your mind re-focused on the match. You know, on and on and on.

Obviously I could keep going on some of the adjustments that you need to make. Maybe you're too anxious and tense, and you need to calm down, take some breaths and try and let go of the last game, for example, or the last couple of games. So it's really about what's going on with your mental state at that time.

Generally, I can say, what you're trying to do each and every point, and each and every change-over, is you're trying to be in a confident, a focused state, and in a state of what I call trust, meaning you have trust in your skills and what you practiced, and you trust your strokes. Those are the biggies that I teach my students. So if any of those are askew, during change-overs you obviously want to talk to yourself and set up a plan.

For example, if you feel like you're tightening up and you're pushing the ball, or you're steering, you're guiding it with your racket rather than swinging out with your racket, then that might be a situation where you decide, you know what, that's not working. So, let's just throw that away, and let's just start hitting out on the ball and accept the results.

Ian: I like how you're tying the decision making process there to the momentum in the match, and how well things are going.

I actually learned that lesson when I was playing in college, and it's not anything that I had thought about before. But I was playing up with somebody much higher in the line-up than me, that normally I wouldn't have been playing doubles with, and we were beating a team that was better than us. And we were both playing a real well. And we going over to a change-over, and my partner, who's a much stronger player than me, much more experienced, you know, we went over to our bags and we're grabbing our water, I started to sit down, and he's like no [inaudible] stand up. Stand up.

And we put our water down, walked right over to the other side of the net and got into our positions to play the next point, and just stood there and watched the other guys. And like, you know, kind of to pressure them, to keep them going. And he kept us rolling. You know, he didn't let us take a breather, he let us stay on our role.

And the flip side of the coin, we were having trouble in a different match, and I think we were down a break, and he took a ball and kicked it [laughter] over like two courts down, and he was like, come here. And we like walked and talked while we went and grabbed the ball to give ourselves a little bit of time.

Do those sound like good, you know, maybe kicking a ball on purpose to waste time isn't ethical, but do those sound like good examples of being able to play with the momentum of the match?

Cohn: Yes. Absolutely. You know, another good example that I see is a player that's down and that's frustrated, I see with the younger kids a lot, what they'll do is they won't stop for a drink. They'll just go right to the service line. You know, to return a serve.

Ian: Yeah.

Cohn: And that's exactly the wrong thing that you need to do in that situation. That's the wrong adjustment. They want to get up there, they either want the match over with quickly, or they want to get to the next game so that they can win a game quickly and settle themselves down.

And it's exactly the wrong thing you need to do, where you need to actually take more time on the change-over to sit down, do some breathing, try to let go of some of the frustration that you have. And then when you're ready, then get up and walk slowly and calmly to the serve or return of serve.

So yeah, those are good examples of trying to make adjustments on change-overs based upon what's going on in the match. Certainly. Yup. I remember one time, I mean, just quickly, my daughter was up, was playing a pretty good opponent. This was a while ago. But she was up 3-love in the second set, and she needed to win the second set to pull even. And she took a bathroom break.

Ian: [laughter]

Cohn: What do you think happened after she came back from the bathroom break?

Ian: I'm guessing she had a let down.

Cohn: She lost all the momentum.

Ian: Oh man.

Cohn: She lost all the momentum. She had her opponent's back against the fence. You know, she was reeling, she was upset, she had lost 3 games in a row, and it's just exactly the wrong time to go for a bathroom break.

But I mean, you got, you know, nature calls. You've gotta go, but you've gotta go. But I said, "Why did you take the bathroom break? You're up 3-0 and you got all the momentum?" "I had to go, dad." [laughter]

Ian: Good answer.

Cohn: [laughter] So, that's another example of when you've got the momentum and you got your player against the, you know, you know, get out there and get after it.

Ian: Sure.

Cohn: You know, don't call an official, or you know, don't break the flow. Don't break the momentum.

Ian: But Dr. Cohn, with that we're gonna wrap things up. We're out of time. But, I want to thank you very much for spending time with me, and especially for answering questions from my listeners. I know that they're going to appreciate it very much, not only that you took the time to be here, but for all the great information you've given as well. So, thank you very much for doing the show with me. It was great to have you.

Cohn: Hey, thanks for having me on again, Ian. I appreciate it.

Ian: Sure. And before we sign off, I want to remind my listeners as well, definitely check out the tennis psychology podcast on iTunes. And you can go to Dr. Cohn's tennis site as well, which is sportspsychologytennis.com Thanks again, Dr. Cohn. It was great to have

you. [music]

Cohn: Thank you. [music] [music] [music]

Ian: Alright. That brings episode number 125 of the Essential Tennis Podcast to a close.

And before I wrap things up, I want to thank a couple really special people who have donated to Essential Tennis in the last couple weeks. Just 3 people this time: Shelley in New Mexico, Kimberly in Texas, and I want to send a special thank you to John in Oregon, who sends an unusually high donation, unusually large donation to Essential Tennis. And John, I want to send a special thank you out to you on the podcast. Really appreciate your donation.

So if the podcast has helped you improve, and if you really appreciate the show and you'd like to give back, feel free to do that through a donation. It does not have to be a large amount. And you can also sign up for a subscription donation and make a small monthly donation of 5, 10, or 20 dollars. And you can do that by going to essentialtennis.com and on the front page, on the lower right, there's a box that says donate. So go check that out. And I would appreciate your support very, very much.

Alright, that does it for this week. Thanks again everybody, for listening. I appreciate it. Take care. And good luck with your tennis.

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