

Essential Tennis Podcast #145

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, tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

Today's episode of the essential tennis podcast is brought to you by tennisexpress.com.

Thank you for joining me on today's show and we have two excellent listener questions to talk about both with having to do with being on the run and still trying to hit good shots in your tennis play. Before we get to those, I want to tell you guys about a new section of Essentialtennis.com that just went up. It's not so much a new section, just a remade section and that is the podcast section. The entire podcast section of essentialtennis.com just got redone and was live as of yesterday.

And I want to tell you guys a little bit about it because there are some new features that are awesome and it's going to make listening to the podcast much easier in finding podcasts much more easy as well.

So four quick things-- there is now a player, a podcast player for each episode, so you guys can play it right there in the podcast section or you can do a pop out player as well. This means that you click the pop out button and it comes out away from the page. So if you are at work or where ever, and you just want to make it a separate little player off on the side, you can do that which is pretty cool.

You can now leave comments for each of the episodes which I think is awesome as well. So if you guys have feedback or thoughts about each individual show, you can leave them there and I'll see those and respond to you guys. Thirdly, the transcripts for each show are now integrated into the post, so you guys will have a post for each episode. You'll have the mp3 file that you can download or listen to there or pop it out as a player, and you can download and read the transcript for each episode right there in the post as well. The transcripts were all separate before.

And I think most importantly, lastly, there are now categories. Every show has been categorized -- all 145 shows. And I'm going to read through the categories real quickly-- approaching net play, beating pushers, doubles strategy, fitness and conditioning, footwork and positioning, gear and equipment, general game development, general strategy, ground-stroke technique, injuries and sports medicine, mental toughness, overhead technique, return of serve, serve and volley, serve technique, singles strategy and volley technique. Those are all different categories and under each of those categories are many shows. So you guys can now browse through the whole catalog of essential tennis podcasts, find exactly what you are looking for or exactly what you are looking for information on, and download that show about whatever piece of your game that you are trying to improve.

I think that is probably the biggest improvement. And guys, there is a tonne of good

information in these podcast archives. I've personally went through and categorized every show that's available-- all 145 episodes, which was a lot of work by the way.

But it just made me realize how much content in there now. There are over 80 hours of shows and just about topic that you guys want to learn about. So take advantage of it. Just go check it out and see all the new features, leave some comments on shows and enjoy the new section of the site. I hope that is more functional and you guys deserve a better podcast section.

So I hope that this does it for you guys.

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

Alright, let's go ahead and get started with our first question on today's episode of the essential tennis podcast. And it comes to us from Mallen who posted on the forums at essentialtennis.com and he is located in the UK. He wrote and said, "You see the pros getting amazing shots back when they are running at full stretch, including some distinctively different moves to those they play for more under control shots. It seems to me that the ability to play defensively and get back shots that pommel the corners, is one of those skills that distinguish the great players from the OK ones. What kind of drives can you do with a partner and or with a ball machine that will better equip you to be able to improve defensive shots like these.

Additionally, what are the top tips for how to play effectively when you are on the defense?

That's a really good question and I can't say that we have had a question about specifically, defensive shots-- that may be a new category in the new podcast section at essentialtennis.com. But it's a really good question and being able to play defensively, you are absolutely right-- as a big distinguisher, even among top players-- when I say top players, I mean professional players.. Being able to just get the ball back in play sometimes is all it takes and is the difference between winning and losing a match. It's not that you always have to crush the ball and hit it super aggressively, very often you need to play defensively as well.

So we are going to talk about four main areas that you need to be good at in order to play good defensive tennis. And I'm really happy about this outline. I think this is going to give you guys some really really good practical information here and things that you can go and apply to your games right away. Not 100%, but start working on these things to try and improve this part of your game.

So, number one, the first area that needs to be improved, to improve your defensive skills is identification. Early identification can absolutely make the difference between winning and losing points where your opponent is attacking and you are on the defense.

And I have four different things that players that are good at defense are constantly watching for. These are things that might sound obvious, but all of you guys should be paying close attention to these four things because they will give you tips and keys on when a an aggressive shot is coming from your opponent. The first step to being able to play good defense is seeing that you are about to be put in a defensive position. And kind of put yourself on high alert and really be prepared to do what is necessary next to get the ball back which we'll also talk about.

So the four things that you need to watch for that fall under the category of identification. Number one, your opponent's position on the court. If they are five feet behind the baseline, most of you don't have anything to worry about when your opponent is in that spot.

Now if you are a 4.5 player or a 5.0 player going by the NTRP ratings guidelines which is top 5-10% of recreational players... It's possible from 5 feet behind the baseline, your opponent could attack. But most of you listening don't have to worry about that. But on the other hand, if your opponent is five feet inside the baseline, they now start to have the ability to hit a shot consistently that could hurt you or that could put you in a defensive position.

And so it might seem obvious but you have to pay close attention to where your opponent is on the court and that is largely going to dictate to them whether or not they are able to attack and put you in a tough spot.

Number two, your opponent's balance. Just because they are well inside the baseline, doesn't necessarily mean that they are going to be able to attack. If it's a short ball that you gave them and they are having a hard time getting to it, then more than likely, they are not going to hit a super offensive shot. And they are going to be trying to just get it back in play.

So notice their balance. If they are well inside the baseline but clearly off balance, meaning that they are kind of on a dead run and leaning over to get to the ball and they just don't look comfortable, there is not a whole lot to worry about.

On the other hand, it's very possible that they could hit a short weak shot back if they are really struggling to get to the ball. So another reason to really pay attention to what their balance is like. If they are setup early before the ball gets to their strike zone, and they look like they are ready to go, their body is coiled, their feet are in a wide stance and they are not having to reach for the ball and they just look solid and they are ready to go with their swing... You might want to watch out for what is coming next because they are ready to hit as good as a shot as possible. Especially when you combine balance with a good court position, you probably have some stuff to worry about.

Number three, your opponent's preparation with the racket, and what I mean by that is technique... if they are taking the racket back pointing up towards the sky or towards the ceiling with their body and a strong rotation then look for a top spin or a drive shot. If they are setting the racket up with the racket above the ball with an open racket face or behind the ball with an open racket face, they are getting ready to slice the ball and it's not that you can't hit a good shot with a slice... You can attack with a slice, but it's more likely that if they are setting up for a drive or a top spin shot, that they are getting ready to attack. Especially when you combine with that the two previous things-- if they are in good balance, if they are in an offensive court position and they are setting up for a top spin or drive-type shot... watch out. Combine those three things and you better be alert and prepared for a defensive situation.

Lastly, number four-- you need to know your opponent's strengths and patterns. Everybody you play is going to be a little bit different, and everybody that you play has different abilities to attack in different situations. And everybody you play has different patterns-- meaning they get this shot in this position on the court. They setup in this way with their racket and usually it results in this shit.

And everybody will have patterns like that. And if you can play close attention during the match to what they are doing in each of those different criteria and pay good enough attention that you notice patterns as far as what they try to do when each of those things matches up with this scenario... know what I'm saying?

That can go a long, long way to identifying what is coming next and being able to play good defense. So you put all these things together, noticing your opponents' position, their balance, their preparation... You pay attention to their patterns. You put all of those things together, and you have what is known as anticipation. And you hear that word thrown out during professional matches a lot.

That means basically knowing what is coming next. You are able to anticipate what shot is coming from your opponent next. And that is incredibly valuable when a defensive shot is needed next. Because if you waste a split second of time after your opponent attacks and you don't anticipate what is coming and you are being completely reactionary, the chances of you hitting a good shot back are extremely poor.

And so, you need to pay close attention to all of those different things that I've just talked about and that all falls under the category of identification. So that's thing #1 when it comes to being defensive and getting these types of shots back.

Alright, section number two of my outline is you have to make an objective decision to go for the ball. No subjective decisions.

Let me tell you a quick story that will outline exactly what I'm talking about. When I was playing in college, one of the coaches that I had would make us do push-ups when we were playing the point out and our opponent hit a shot that landed close to the line but out and we didn't run for the ball.

So in other words, our opponent hit a shot-- let's say it was me-- I stood there and I read that it was going out. I kind of knew it was going out... Let's say I landed out by a foot and I was standing there in the middle of the baseline watching it bounce.

Let's say it landed on the ad side a foot wide of the court, and I was standing there watching it land out... in other words, not going for the ball... I called it out, it was out and I would have to do pushups.

Why? Because what if my judgment was a little bit off on that particular shot. And what if it actually landed in and hit the line? It had more top spin than I thought it did. Maybe my opponent kind of shanked it a little bit and had more spin than I thought and it actually landed in, and I got caught just standing there watching a ball that I thought was going out, but I could've gotten there for, and it was in.

Well that is a terrible mistake. That is giving away a point completely free without even trying or putting in any effort and it's not acceptable. And this is something that since college, I have absolutely tried to instill in my students and this is something that all of you listening should be trying to develop as well. And that is-- you should not be making a subjective decision based on whether or not you will go for the ball. You will make an objective decision, meaning that you will go for the ball. It doesn't matter what opinions you might have about the shot that is coming towards you... you are going to react and you are going to make some kind of move.

Now here is four different times that you should not be using your brain to try to figure things out. You should not be using subjective decision making. You shouldn't be trying to form an opinion about whether or not you should go.

Here are four specific circumstances where that might be the case. Number one, you think the ball is going to hit the net. Emphasis on you think. You don't know the ball is going to hit the net for sure, until it does.

So if the ball hits 6 inches below the top of the net and you are not already moving for it... if you haven't already taken 2 steps forwards when the ball hits 6 inches below the top of the net, then you made a subjective decision.

When it is in within that close of a distance from making it over or not, you should just automatically be moving forwards anticipating that the ball is going to be short if it does make it over. Or if it hits the net and makes it over, you should already be running. You shouldn't start running after it hits that net and is trickling over, you should already be running because you see that the ball is low and it's going to be close to the net. And it might not make it over and so you might burn some extra calories by running two steps forwards and then it hits the net... that's fine... in fact, that's great. It's a good habit and you are going to get some more balls when you stop thinking that it's going to hit the net.. and not running.. and then you get surprised when it does make it over and you are just standing there.

Number 2, when you think the ball is going to be out. That was the situation that I described using myself as an example.

Number 3, you think that your partner will be able to reach it-- this is doubles. Maybe your partner is getting lobbed. You see them go back and they intend to get the ball, and they reach for it and they can't reach it. And you are standing there watching them. So they go for it, they miss it and it's a ball that if you had went right away, you probably could've got a racket on, but you are standing there watching them, assuming that they are going to be able to get it back... but they can't, it turns out.

And number four, you think it's your partners shot.. This happens a lot when the ball goes down the middle and both players stand there and just turn their head and look at their partner, and the ball goes right between them and neither of them even go for it because there was an assumption there on both their parts that the other person was going to get it. That is unacceptable-- both players should be going for it immediately. And if it turned out that it is obvious as you guys are moving towards the ball that one person is going to get there first, great, that person can take it. But you both should be making an initial move. It should be an objective decision-- you will move for the ball and this is section number 2 of getting better at playing defensive types of shots.

You have to move immediately. If you waste any time by thinking about it or assuming the ball is going to be out or in the net or whatever, you are going to give away points that could've been winnable if you had just gone for the ball without thinking about it.. just go for it.

So that is number two. Number one was identification. Starting to play closer attention to what is coming next. Number two was making an objective decision to go for the ball no matter what.

Number three, make a commitment to 100% effort. Please start doing this. I urge all of

you listening.

And listeners to this show, if you are listening to my voice right now, you are way more dedicated than the average tennis player. You wouldn't be listening to this. You wouldn't have taken the time and the effort to go to the internet and do a search for tennis instruction or maybe look specifically for a tennis podcast or maybe you just heard from a friend about this show... It takes some effort to go online, download it, put it on your iPod or your phone or whatever.. and then set the time aside to listen to it or play it during your commute.

So just the fact that you are listening to my voice tells me that you are working harder than the average player to begin with to try to get yourself better. But those of you listening still need to make sure that you are giving an honest, 100% effort to run for the ball every time it gets hit.

And in my experience, recreational players... this is probably the number one thing... this combined with the decision to just go for every ball... if you combine the decision to just go every time the ball gets hit by your opponent and you combine that with 100% effort and you really give an honest effort to go as hard as you can and as fast as you can towards the ball.... if you combine those two things, you will improve your game drastically. If you just commit to hustling and you go for every ball.

And running hard, which is what point number three here is... just going 100%... it's its own skill. It's a totally separate tennis skill and the more that you do it, the better you will become at just going all out and going 100%. And certain players, even at the professional level, are just known for doing this.

Certain players go all out more than others. And who is the player that you think about? When I say certain players run hard for every single ball, everybody immediately thinks about Nadal. And if you didn't, you don't watch much professional tennis. Nobody hustles harder than that guy. Nobody runs for every single ball like that guy 100% and that's part of what makes him so incredibly difficult to beat, is his work ethic and his commitment to just running for every single ball.

So next time you go out to play, whether it be competition or practice, make a commitment to yourself that you will run 100% for every ball until it bounces twice. And I don't care if the ball is on the completely other side of the court.. maybe you've mis-read it and it's in a different spot in the court than you thought it was going to.

I don't care if by the time it bounces twice, you are still 10 feet away and you are literally not even close and you feel dumb for running all that way and you didn't even get close to the ball.... Just promise me that the next time that you go out, just try it once for an hour. Run for every ball until it bounces twice or until it lands out or until it hits the net or until your partner gets it and I was a little bit unsure whether or not they were going to have it.. and you ran anyway, just to cover, and make sure that somebody was going to get it. Do it every time.

And number one, you are going to be more tired than you ever had before after playing tennis.

And number two, you are going to put your body in better shape the more you do it, it is going to condition your body to be faster and to be stronger.

And number three, you will get faster. You will condition your body to react quicker, get full speed faster, and you are going to get some more balls when you make a commitment to just run for everything 100% and not like half speed at first, and then realize it was farther than you thought. And then you end up having to just try 100% for the last couple of steps because you realize that it is farther away than you realize.

No. Just go all out and if you get to the ball earlier than you thought, great. You get to setup being a little bit better balance, hopefully. If you are not used to running 100% all the time, it might throw you off-balance a little bit but as you guys continue to do it, you get better at it. And it's a skill that you can improve.

Alright, and that brings me to the end of number three-- making a commitment to 100% effort.

And the last section here, number four, I'm going to talk about technique having to do with getting these defensive shots back. And my whole point here is going to be, you need to do whatever it takes to put the ball in play.

You should still be trying to hit the best ball possible but you need to be reasonable about it.

I'll go in order here that I have... Let's talk about minor emergencies and major emergencies. A minor emergency would be your opponent has hit a good shot. You are definitely having to hustle to get to it and it's going to be some work and we're going to call it a defensive situation but it's not all out having to dive for it and stretch for it.. and even then, you aren't even sure if you are going to get to the ball, but you are going to put your racket out there, that would be a major emergency.

A minor emergency, your opponent has still hit a good shot but you are able to get there relatively easily. You are still having to really bust your but to get there, but you are barely getting to the ball. You are going to get there, but it's not easy. Hopefully you guys see what I'm talking about.

You should still be trying to use a driving or a top spin type swing whenever possible. And I talked about this briefly, I believe it was last week... Whenever you can, I am encouraging my students to still drive the ball and hit a solid shot, but it should be at a very percentage based speed. Meaning if your typical rally ball or neutral rally ball back and forth is like 70% of your ability to hit the ball... if 100% is hitting the ball as hard as you can and 50% is half-speed, your typical rally ball should probably be somewhere around 70% or 80%. A confident speed, definitely not as hard as you can, but more than half way. You should be hitting the ball nice and solid.

In an emergency defensive type position, that should definitely come down.

And I would say in a minor emergency, you should probably be hitting the ball like 50% because we just need to make sure that the ball gets in play. This is not a easy shot and it's where we want to play the highest percentage shot possible. So that means being conservative as far as the speed that you hit the ball at and you should also be aiming the ball at a high percentage target.

So if you are playing singles, definitely aim cross court or just back to the middle of the court. Give yourself a high margin of error over the top of the net. So you should not be hitting a 80% swing a foot over the net down the line, when you are an emergency

situation. Even if it's just a minor emergency-- that's just not smart. You are going to make a lot of mistakes that way.

And the more of a defensive position that you are in, the safer of a shot you should be trying to play. Because we need to just make sure that we put the ball in play.

Now let's talk about major emergencies.. this is where you have to try 100%. Maybe you even anticipated where it is going. You made an immediate move for the ball. You went 100% and you are still barely going to get there. In this kind of situation, this is where you want to use your slice which is a safer shot.. an easier technique swing just to get the ball in play. Or maybe even just open your racket face and just push it back.. not even a slice, but just play a purely defensive shot. And just push it up in the air to buy yourself some time.

When it's a big time emergency, be smart and use a safer technique like this. So open the racket, use a very high percentage target... so you should be aiming 5 or 6 feet over the net to make sure it makes it over. Just aim for the middle of the court or if you can get it cross court, that would be great. That would give you some more margin for error because it's going to be a longer court going across court. Put it up in the air, make sure it gets over the net, and even if it gives your opponent an easy shot, please do it this way because we just basically want to give them another chance to screw up.

Hit them another ball, challenge them to have to hit a winner to finally win the point. And force them to have to really earn it and put it away. If you go for kind of the sucker play and try to end the point yourself in a really defensive position, you might come up with an incredible shot once in a while but you are going to make more mistakes than the points that you win. And it's definitely not going to come out in your favor in the long run.

The last thing I want to say before I wrap up today's show is this kind of varies a little bit based on level of play. If you are a pure beginner or moving up towards an intermediate level of play. So here in the US, the NTRP scale, it would be 2.0 or 2.5 would be beginner. And 3.0 towards 3.5 would be intermediate.. If you are somewhere in there, you need to take the advice that I just gave you.

Play high percentage shots when you are in an emergency situation. Even if that means feeding it right to your opponent. Maybe even right to their strengths where they are good at putting the ball away-- they are going to miss it sometimes. And if they are not good at putting the ball away, maybe they'll even miss it a large percentage of the time. And so you'll earn those points even without hitting a great shot, but you are smart enough to just put it in play.

On the other hand, if you are a 4.0 or 4.5 player-- so kinder stronger intermediate or an advanced level of player-- there comes a time when you start getting up towards those levels of play, that just giving your opponent an easy shot and saying to them here you go, try to put it away. I'm going to challenge you to finish the point and hit that winner to win the point.

Once we start getting up towards 4.5, those players will have no problem with that. They will say OK and they will make it 95% of the time. Maybe they'll miss one per set or something like that.

When you start getting up towards that level of play, unfortunately, even in these

defensive positions, you still have to try to hit a relatively solid shot. And you still have to try to challenge your opponent even though you are in a really tough spot.

And I think that a lot of times recreational players put that pressure on themselves way before they get to the level where it is actually necessary.

So what I mean by that is maybe you are a 3.0 player. You are in a really defensive spot. You see your opponent in a balanced position on the court and you know that if you just put it in play, they are going to have a chance to put the next one away.

And at a 3.0 level, some of you are saying 'Oh no, I can't just give it back to them -- they are going to put it away!' And you go for that down the line winner on the run and it's totally not necessary. It can be difficult to give it up and just give it to our opponents, but those of you at beginner or intermediate level, need to do it more often. If you are a 4.5 level, fine. You need to put some pressure on your opponent, even when you are on the run here, and there is not really any way around it because they are a good enough opponent that they'll have no problem putting the ball away if you give them an easy shot.

So anyway, my point is, it depends on your level what you should be going for. The majority of you guys should just be trying to play a purely defensive shot.

Alright, so quick overview and again Mullen in the forums, excellent topic that has made for a great discussion. Lots of good information for you guys and hopefully you've enjoyed the show.

As an overview, the four main elements of being good at playing defensive shots-- #1) Identification. Paying close attention to your opponents, their tendencies, their balance, their position on the court. #2) Making an objective decision to go for the ball. Do not think about it. Do not form an opinion in your head about whether or not you will be able to get there. Or whether or not it is going to hit the net. Or whether or not your partner is going to get it-- just move. Start making a reaction immediately.

Making a commitment to 100% effort on every single shot-- every shot. And finally, technique. Do whatever it takes to put the ball in play. Even if that means giving an easy shot to your opponent up until a certain level of play.

So, there you go. There is some really actionable things that you guys can go and start adding to your game to help you guys improve in these situations and get better. I hoped you guys enjoy this discussion and thank you very much for being a listener in the UK. Excellent question and hopefully this is going to be helpful to you. [music] [music] [music]

Alright, that does it for episode #145 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for listening to today's show-- I appreciate having you as a listener no matter where you might be or when you might be listening to my voice. I appreciate your support of the show just by listening-- I really do appreciate it.

Go check out the new podcast section at essentialtennis.com. I think it's a huge improvement and I hope it really makes the listening experience and just the whole process of getting the show and listening to it, I hope it makes it easier and more enjoyable.

Feel free to give me some feedback if you guys enjoy it or think that there are areas that need to be improved still or any suggestions, please feel free to let me know.

My email address is ian@essentialtennis.com

OK, that does it for this week. Take care everybody and good luck with your tennis.
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