

Essential Tennis Podcast #157

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 experts tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought you by www.tennisexpress.com. Please check them out this week by going to www.essentialtennis.com/express.

Well thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the podcast. I really appreciate having you as a listener. And before we get to today's topics, which is going to be all about Singles Strategy, I'd like to spend just a minute or two telling you all about the Free Doubles Tactics Course that is going to be available just for this week and that's an important part of it. You can only view this free course through Sunday, what is it the 20th I believe? Yep Sunday the 20th at midnight Eastern Time this course will be taken down and you need to go check it out. It's really full of value. I've worked really hard on it and it's going to be split into three different sections.

Section #1 which is currently up and people are viewing and commenting on it right now as I speak is all about the transition game. Learning how to attack the net with more consistency and effectiveness. The second video is going to be about how to cover the lob more quickly and easily, which is big for recreational doubles players. And the last section is about how to play doubles more like the pros even if you're currently just a singles player. So those of you who play singles mostly or maybe even exclusively and want to get into doubles, or more into doubles, need to watch that third part of free instructional course. - And the kind of overall focus the title of the course is Three Causes of Weak Passive Doubles Dominated Forever. And so the whole focus here is getting you away from poor tactics, from weak passive doubles tactics, which is just not how high level players play.

So this course is going to teach you how to get away from that. And some of the skills that I teach in these free videos are how to use the split step correctly, how to practice deep follies and half follies, how to judge how close to the net you should get, how to read your opponents and anticipate their lobs. I'm also going to talk about the doubles directionals lob coverage footwork and a lot more. So there's just a ton of free information here. And this is all leading up to the release of Doubles Domination 2.0, which is my big comprehensive doubles tactics and strategy course. And signing up for this free course means you're going to get some information about Doubles Domination 2.0 but you absolutely don't have to buy it, you're under no obligation to buy anything.

Really if you're not interested in Doubles Domination 2.0 at all that's perfectly fine but go watch the free course, seriously. I don't want you coming to me next week and saying "Ian, I ran out of time. I wasn't in front of my computer, etc, etc., you've got to go check it out this week before Sunday the 20th. And you can do that by simply going to www.doublesdomination.com. Go there right now sign up for the free course and I promise that you won't be disappointed with it.- All right with that let's go ahead and get to today's topics. Sit back relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music]
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All right. Let's go ahead and get started with our first question having to do with singles tactics. And both of our questions today are going to come to us from Megan in New Zealand. Thank you for your writing and for being a listener Megan. First of all she writes in and says "Hi Ian. I'm just getting into the summer season and I'm starting to play a lot more matches. I really struggle in the tactics area. I feel like you never know where to hit the ball. I do figure out my opponents weaknesses but especially when I'm returning serve I feel like my only targets are deep cross [inaudible] or deep down the line. When I'm in a rally I either think I have too many places to hit the ball or not enough.

Do I need to research different three or four shot sequences and develop them and make them target my opponents weaknesses or just make those target hitting decisions while I'm rallying.

Alright, Meagan good question. It seems like you have a lot of questions rolling around in your head and you've got undefined and several possible solutions to what your question question is, at least in your own mind. And what I want to start off talking about is simply that when it comes to tennis tactics both singles and doubles simple really is best. You don't want to overload your head by thinking about too much at once and having, you know, for each individual shot and each situation you don't want to have four or five possible shot selections. You know granted on one hand it's great to be able to hit the ball in different places but in general in singles if you can take any given forehand and reliably hit it either cross court or down the line, any given backhand hit it either cross court or down the line, then really that's all you really need to be a pretty good tennis player.

And in your question you made it sound like that was not enough. You made it sound like that was just too simple and "Well I can't possibly be a good player", you said here in your question, "I feel like my only targets are deep cross court or deep down the line", like that's a bad thing. That's great, that's good, you don't want to get much more complicated than that. And when it comes down to it you don't need anything more complicated than that against the vast majority of your opponents. Honestly, and I just played for the first time in quite awhile, played a set of singles this past weekend and trust me I was not thinking anymore complicated than that. In fact my opponent was really pressuring me from the baseline and so I was playing a net attack kind of tactic or strategy. I wasn't even thinking cross court or down the line on my return of serve. I was chipping and charging which I know some of you probably just fell out of your seat hearing that somebody in this day and age would actually play a chip and charge tactic off the return of serve, but that's exactly what I was doing. And I wasn't even thinking in terms of cross court or down the line. I was just simply trying to get my return deep. This particular opponent I had he was very strong on both forehand and backhand side and so it didn't really matter from that perspective which side I hit to. And his serve was good enough, you know, it wasn't a weak serve. So I was just happy to get the ball back deep and then come right in behind to pressure him. I wasn't even thinking anything more complicated than that. And most of the time that should be the case for all of you listening as well.

Now I want point out a great video that [inaudible] at Fuzzy Balls put out just a couple of days ago. The title of that video is Variety Is Overrated. And this is a free video that they put on their site. I'll link directly to it and the show notes for this show. This is Episode 157. If you go to www.essentialtennis.com/podcast go to show 157 I'll put a link there that'll link directly to that video. I'd really suggest you go check it out. And

Will really lays it out well in talking about how recreational players very often over-complicate things and it really should be very simple. Now in answering your question specifically Megan really you should only be thinking about three singles necessities. We're going to break it down into three single simple necessities. When it comes to tactics and playing your singles play. And to some of you out there some of you listening our going to be slapping your hands and saying "Wow, this is so obvious Ian. I can't believe I'm wasting my time listening to this.

I know so much more than this and I'm more advanced of a player than this. For some of you that may actually be true, and if you're a four, five player this is going to be very, very basic. And so to be honest you might want to skip to the next topic today. If you're below a four or five player, even if you're attempted to think this is way below my level and this is way too simple, please listen anyway and you're going to benefit from hearing me lay this out, even though you probably heard this before. So three necessities. Number 1 when in doubt go deep cross courts. It's high percentage but still effective.

And it's high percentage because we're hitting the ball over the longest part of the court from corner to corner diagonally and the net is lowest in the center of the court and we're hitting over that part of the net so it's very high percentage. Most of your ground strokes should go in that direction during a singles point. There are situations where going down the line is warranted and it's good and it's maybe even the way you should go and I'm talking about in a baseline to baseline rally. But the majority of the time just keeping it safely cross court will be more than good enough against most of your opponents Megan. Keep it simple.

Don't change direction a lot meaning If the ball is coming at an angle to you and your opponent's struck it cross court, don't change the direction by going down the line off of that shot. When they hit to cross courts to you most of the time you should hit cross court back.

When they hit down the line to you most of the time you should hit cross court back. And again I'm referring to a baseline to baseline rally. Make your opponent be the person on the court who has to try the more difficult down the line shot and make them do that throughout the course of the match and they'll make more errors than you if you do your job by keeping the ball in play. So that's Number 1. Number 2 on a comfortable neutral rally ball, meaning an an easy ground stroke in a baseline to baseline exchange, especially if it's in the middle of the court. In that situation I would encourage towards your opponents weaker side, whether it forehand or backhand. And that should be something you start picking up in the warm up is which side their forehand or backhand is the stronger side and which one is the weaker side.

That's based on the results coming off the racket and it's based on their technique of their stroke. You should be paying attention to those things so that you can pick out which side that they prefer. And then when you have the opportunity to equally hit to either side you should be hitting to their weaker side over and over and over again. I don't care if they know what the tactic is keep doing it until they can come up with something that still challenges you back even though it's their weaker side. And this means that you can go down the line to their weakness but be careful I wouldn't go down the line a ton unless over and over you get a comfortable shop, you're good at hitting in that direction and it does go towards their weaker side. If those three things line up then by all means continue to hit there over and over.

Again. So that's Number 2 when you get a comfortable shot, especially in the middle of the court hit to their weaker side. And then thirdly, when you're coming to the net keep the ball in front of you. And that means down the line on most approach shots. So if it's on the right side of the courts and short and you're hitting a four hand approach down the line should be where you go most of the time, and I mean really most of the time. And I did a video awhile back about why this is the case. I'm not going to go over all the details of this right now but I will link to that video again in the show notes so go to www.essentialtennis.com/podcast Episode 157 and I'll leave a link, not only only to Will's video but to my own video in which I describe and show in a diagram, a video diagram why going down the line is the percentage place to go when you're approaching the net.

So in general keep those approach shots in front of you. So that's it. I mean that should be the extent of your singles tactics the majority of the time. Keep most shots cross courts and a baseline to baseline exchange. When you get a comfortable new rally ball go to their weaker side, especially if it's a shot that they hit to you down the middle and you can go in either direction. And when you approach keep the ball in front of you, which means usually down the line. So practice those three situations until you're blue in the face. Practice them in feeding drills cooperative hitting drills back and forth, competitive drills where you're playing off points putting yourself in these situations so that when it comes time to play a match these shot selections and these choices and these targets are more or less automatic and you don't even really have to think about it and there's no thought required. And ultimately that should be your goal in your tennis is recognizing your situation, understanding where you are, where your opponent is, understanding where the safest play is and the smartest play is, and then being able to do that over and over again.

Now in closing up this segment I want to say that to those of you who wanted to skip this section and are hating on me right now because the information that I just gave is so fundamental and so simple, yes there are more layers to this. If my goal in this segment of the show was to lay out a comprehensive overview of singles tactics then I could talk for hours and hours and hours about unlimited different combinations of different situations and scenarios and different types of opponents and shot selections, etc. It's never my goal here on the podcast to lay out comprehensive answers. What I'm always trying to do is highlight the most important fundamental things to understand. And in reading Megan's question I can tell that those are the things that she really needs to hear is keep it simple, keep it to those three basic fundamental truths when it comes to being successful as a singles player.

And the vast majority of the time that's all you're going to need to know to win is those three things. Myself as a 5.0 player I did not use anything more complicated than what I just laid out. I mean there's some little things here and there details that I didn't talk about that I used in my singles set this past weekend, but for the most part it's those rules that I'm following, and so that's what I suggest. So Megan thank you very much for your question I really appreciate it and we'll be right back with your second topic.

Thanks so much for writing this one in. [music] [music] [music] [music]

All right. Moving on before we get to our second question I'd like to remind you all about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast and that is Tennis Express. And www.tennisexpress.com is an online tennis retailer that can service your every possible equipment need. They've got great shipping, great service and I highly recommend them. Please check them out this week by going to

www.essentialtennis.com/express. When you go to that link you'll automatically be pushed over to www.tennisexpress.com and it will track any purchases that you might possibly make. And from there a small percentage will come back to the Essential Tennis Podcast to help support the show, which I really appreciate.

And thank you to all of you who have been making purchases through that link. It means a lot to me and it really helps continue doing the show. So thank you to Tennis Express and to those of you who have been going to check them out.

All right let's go ahead and get to our second question again from Megan in New Zealand. Another singles strategy topic. She wrote and said "I am coming back from a two year shoulder injury", sorry about that Megan, "And I'm obviously quite an inexperienced player because of that. I've trained all through the winter here in New Zealand and now the summer season has arrived which means competition time. Most of the players I am up against have played solidly for quite a few years which I have not. My question is how do you beat players that have a lot more experience than you? What I mean is, how do you beat players that don't make many mistakes when you do and seem to cope well under any amount of pressure that you put them under?"

All right, well that's tough Megan, that's really difficult. And for those of you listening, everybody listening who has done any amount of competition at all knows exactly what Megan is talking about, myself included. It doesn't even matter what your level is when you go out and compete eventually it's just a matter of time you will play somebody who's more experienced than you, who's got bigger shots, more weapons moves better, whatever. We can make a huge list of things that they could possibly do better.

And that's just how it is sometimes that's part of competition is you play people who are better than you. And rather than get frustrated it's really important to appreciate those opportunities to play somebody who's a level or two levels above where you are so that you can see what you have to do to get to that next level. I've got three options that you can use the next time you're in that situation Megan. Number 1, and this goes back to our first topic in today's show, play the percentages and just try to beat them straight up. Meaning nothing fancy, nothing special just solid fundamental strategy choices.

Don't go crazy and aim for the line on every single shot and try to hit the ball harder than you ever have before. Just see if you can hang with them long enough that by the end of the match you're right there with them and maybe you can come out ahead. More than likely you'll have to pick up the pace of your shots, at least a little bit, so that you can off off the attacks of your opponent who's more experienced and probably have bigger shots than you are.

But strategically you're still trying to beat them with a smart game plan, with a solid fundamental game plan, with nothing fancy and nothing crazy that you're trying. So this is Option Number 1 and admittedly you're going to have to have a really good day to win with this tactic basically just trying to beat them straight up. Just beat them with good solid tactics and not go for anything outlandish and anything low percentage.

Again as I mentioned a second ago you'll probably have to up the pace of your shots a little bit but we're not trying to crush every ball which would probably result in a lot of unforced errors. So that's Option Number 1 basically following the formula that I laid out in my first answer to your first question. Now if you start off a match that way against a better opponent than you are if Option 1 isn't working and they're just kind of hitting you off the court and pushing you around on the courts then you may have to

playing more low percentage. And that means taking every opportunity you get to drive the ball aggressively at the open you probably overall going to make unforced errors as you typically do but it's something you kind of have to accept once you get to a certain point. When you try tactic Number 1 and you're just getting beat and you're playing the high percentage shots but your opponent is just putting you away then at a certain point you have to transition into something more aggressive to try to keep them at bay, to try to hold them off tactically.

So that's mean-- you're probably going to make a few more mistakes but if you don't try it, if you don't at least give the effort to pressure them more and keep them more defensive they're going to beat you anyway or at least that's how it seems to be going, which is why we're trying this more offensive lower percentage tactic. So that means go ahead and go for more shots down the line, change the direction more frequently. Hit harder and more aggressively than you typically would, maybe much more aggressively than you typically would. And I mentioned in the first option a minute ago that you're going to have to play well in order to win.

Admittedly when you play just kind of high percentage in smart tennis well guess what, when you just start going for the open court on every opportunity and you're hitting out and you're hitting aggressively and going for winners, even more so now, you're going to really have to be dialed in. You're going to have to have a good day hitting the ball otherwise you're just going to spray unforced errors all over the courts. So even more so, and this is not something you should be thinking about by the way oh boy I better be having a good day, I'm just putting it out there so you understand. I don't want you to go out there and try this tactic make a whole mess of mistakes and then come back and tell me that the strategy didn't work.

You have to understand that it's a very likely scenario that you try option Number 2, the low percentage high attacking option, and everything wasn't quite clicking that day and you kind of give the match away because you made a whole bunch of unforced errors. So don't get upset if that happens. You have to realize that it's very possible you didn't have a whole lot of choice. If you just played high percentage and you kind of played into the hands of your opponent a little bit and they manhandled you, that would be one way to lose. And different personalities kind of have to decide which way they want to go at this because for me personally I have a hard time accepting my opponent beating me, even if I know deep down inside they're better than me, if I play high percentage and cross courts and approach down the line, I don't try down the line winners very often, and I just get beat and just get hit off the courts I'm extremely competitive and I have a hard time handling that ego wise.

I'm honest enough to be able to say that I have a hard time dealing with that. So rather than do that my personality, and I realize this now after kind of stepping away from competition for a while, my personality is such that very early on I'll revert to this option to high offense low percentage option very early in a match. If I get a sense that my opponent is kind of the tides are switching over to their side and they're playing better than me that day. And you have to decide when you're playing somebody who's clearly better than you, you almost have to decide which way you'd rather lose that day. And I hate to lose that day. And I hate to sound pessimistic about it but sometimes it's just reality. I mean you step out and this person's just blasting you off the courts you have to decide which tactic you think, first of all, you want to decide which tactic could possibly be the most effective. And then secondly you might even have to decide which one suits you best and where you think you're going to be most successful emotionally as well tactically. There's a lot of different layers going on here.

And so this is Option Number 2 be offensive, go for your openings immediately and as often as possible. And sometimes you just have to do that just to have a chance. And then Number Option Number 3 the last one is kind of the consistency special. Actually take some aggressiveness off of your typical shot and just aim for a high margin for error over and over again. If you have good hands and very good quickness and good stamina this might be the way to go. And basically we're playing the part of a pusher here or a counter puncher or a retriever or whatever you want to call it. Just very high percentage just put it in play aim high over the net, hopefully deep in the court, not a lot of pace and just don't miss. Don't even be offensive at all and just put the ball in play over and over and over again against a player who's much stronger you it's very possible that they'll just start cracking winners. Maybe you'll get three, four or five shots back in play slowly and very consistently and eventually they hit the winner.

The hope in playing this tactic is that eventually maybe they start getting nervous, they started thinking wow I can't to lose to this player, or they miss two or three easy shots in a row and it kind of rattles the cage a little bit. And it's our hope that eventually it gets to them and they can't keep up their level of play and kind of crack and start making a bunch of unforced errors. So that's Option Number 3. And by the way it's important to point out that in playing somebody who's much better than you, you don't have to stick with any one of these you can try different tactics out and see what's working best and make adjustments as necessary. Those are your three main options and when you're playing somebody who's much better than you, you know, hopefully you can find one of those three that works the best. And you still may not win the match but you'll at least give yourself the best opportunity to play them close or best opportunity to make the upset. You never know and you don't want to just go down with the ship and just pick one of these and just stick with it the whole match. If it's obvious you're getting beat and your opponent is much stronger try different approaches.

And again those three approaches were Number 1 play the percentages, play them straight up. Good fundamental shot selections. Maybe a little more pace than you typically

Option Number 2 was low percentage, go for winners, be offensive and just try to hit with or maybe even out hit your opponent whose a level higher than you are. You're going to make unforced errors more than likely and if you don't have a good day you're probably going to hit yourself out of the match by making a lot of mistakes, but sometimes you just might have to try it or you'll get beat anyway. And then thirdly the consistency special really high percentage take pace off your shots, high over the net hopefully deep in play, nothing special at all you're not going for errors just put it in play and hopefully your opponent screws up. We're just hoping for errors from our opponent. So Megan there you go, those are your three options. Feel free to mix and match those and match them to your personality and your strengths and your weaknesses. Some of you listening your game style is going to fit up great with one or two of those but really poorly with the third, you might not want to try the third one. So try to fit this to your own game. And best of luck as you continue competing. It's great you're getting out there and competing after your time off and after your surgery. I hope that you're successful and I look forward to hearing back from you and in hearing what you think about this topic.

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All right. So that does it for Episode Number 157 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you so much for joining me today and before I sign off just two quick things.

Number 1 I'd love to hear your comments and feedback about this episode. You can live those by going to www.essentialtennis.com/podcast click on Episode #157 leave your thoughts. I'd love to hear from you. And lastly you need to get that free instructional course. It's Doubles Tactics and Strategy Course that again is only going to be available through this week up until Sunday the 20th at midnight Eastern Time the course is going to come down. In between my recording sessions here doing this podcast I've been continually answering questions, questions, comments are just pouring in on this first video that I just released this morning.

So people are really enjoying the contents so far, which I'm really happy about, and I know that the whole course is going to be very helpful to you. Again even if you have no interest in Doubles Domination that's perfectly fine, just get the free course. I promise it's going to be helpful. And again you can sign up for that free course by going to www.doublesdomination.com. All right that does it for this week. Take care and good luck with the tennis. [music] [music] [empty]