

Essential Tennis Podcast #160

Welcome to the essential tennis podcast. If you love tennis and want to improve your game this pod cast is for you whether it is technique, strategy, equipment or the mental game tennis professional Ian Westermann is here to make you a better player and now here is 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 podcast is brought to you by Tennis Express and Tennis Tours. Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode of the pod cast. I really appreciate having you as a listener and before we got to today's listener topics to talk about I want to give full details really quickly for the next up coming essential tennis clinic is going to be in New York City at the New York Tennis club in the Bronx New York. It is going to be on April 16th and 17th I just opened it up to those people who contacted me to get early notification yesterday. There is only six spots left it is first come, first serve and every clinic I have put on is sold out I do not expect this to be any different, so if you are in the New York City area and would like to join me for a weekend of working and improving your tennis game, working on your tennis game and helping you get better.

Definitely go sign up. You can do that by going to Essential Tennis dot com click on clinics and you will see full details there as well as a sign up page. If you have any questions about that you can feel free to let me know Ian at Essential Tennis dot com alright let's go ahead and get down to business, sit back and relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction. [music] [silence] [music] [silence]

Alright our first topic today comes to us from Brad in Atlanta Georgia he is a 3.5 level Player and wrote to me and said in singles when you opponent has approached the net is it better to pass them across court or down the line should I hit it flat or heavy top spin. Should I make them make consecutive volleys with their back hand or move them around, or is a lob over their back hand side in to the corner the best idea, alright so lots of questions from Brad about passing shots or just in genera how to deal with an opponent who is coming up to the net, I would be happy to talk about that Brad and the way I am going to do this is I am going to break it down and give pros and cons for five main different options that we have. When an opponent comes up to the net you basically have five main option and you could combine and mix and match those options as well. B ut there is five main ones and then I am going to talk about which is best. If there is a best.

So let's first go over your different options number one and you basically covered these but I am going to lay them out one at a time and give the pros and cons of each option number one is down the line, just a general down the line passing shot attempt and the pros, the upside of going down the line is, it is and easier target when you are on the run first of all if your opponent has hit a good approach shot and let's say you are a right handed player and they have hit out to your right and you are having to hit a running fore hand, in general it is easier to maintain the direction of your momentum with your target and also aim to the right and I am talking when they have really put you in a tough spot and you are on the run heavily I guess and it is difficult and maybe even your a little off balance it is difficult to take a shot on the run and cut it back the opposite

direction, and let's say to the left to hit a sharp angle in this situation when you are running out to the right for a fore hand so as pro number one down the line is easier when you are on the run.

Next up it is going to be the most open court if your opponent approaches cross courts and most of the time you guys have heard me on the pod cast say that it is smarter to approach down the line and everybody follows those rules and if they approach cross courts then they are leaving a big chunk of court open down the line from where you are receiving the ball, so being able to hit down the line in general is good in that situation the down sides of hitting down the line are first of all just lower percentage in general and it is lower percentage because you have less courts when you aim down the line from corner to corner the court is shorter by I believe three, I got to do the calculation again and come up with this but I think it is three or four feet difference between going from corner to corner down the line as opposed to cross courts and the net is also higher when you aim down the line, it is lowest in the middle and that is where the ball will travel if you go across courts.

The second con of going down the line is it leaves your court open for an angle volley. So, if you aim down the line and your opponent does get to it and they're at the net, even a mediocre angle volley back the opposite direction, is angled away from you into the open courts which makes it really difficult to gather your balance, change direction, go back the opposite way, and then have to catch up with the ball as it's traveling away from you. So, there's some pros and cons to going down the line.

Cross courts, general pros and cons. First of all under pros, volleys to the open court are down the line. So, if you attempt a cross court passing shot, let's say again you're a right handed player and you hit a forehand from the deuce side, you hit cross courts and your opponent gets a racket on it, the open courts based on where you just hit from on the deuce side, the open court is down the line from your opponent's perspective. So, that means that the ball is no longer angling away from you. If they go for the open court the ball is traveling straight so that means it's going to be a little bit easier to get to it; it's not traveling away from you. So, that's a pro.

Another pro is it's a higher percentage shot in general. The net is lower, the court is longer, that is unless you're going for big angle. If you're trying a sharp angle ground stroke, then it's no longer the case and it's a higher percentage shot. That's really important to keep in mind.

If you're talking about aiming for the side T where the service line meets the single side line, that's no longer a 'high percentage shot'. It's tough because you have not a lot of court to work with as you try to angle it off. But, if you just try a general cross court shot, then it is higher percentage than going down the line.

And then cons of going across court is it's difficult to do it on the run because you're trying to hit in the opposite direction that your momentum is aggressively moving towards, and we talked about that already in going down the line. So, that's cross court.

Next up we're going to talk about trying to hit a flat drive, you know, a relatively flat shot., not a lot of top spin. The pros to that are it's a faster paced shot which means it's easier to try to get the ball past them so that this style of shot travels a little faster than if you're trying to hit heavy spin.

So, being able to drive through the ball can be advantageous when trying to hit a clean

passing shot past your opponents. Or maybe even if it's not a clean passing shot at least you're not giving them very much time to react to that shot.

The downside of hitting flat is it's lower percentage. You don't have that curve in the path of the ball to be able to keep it in play more easily, so you have to aim lower to keep it from going too far, and aiming lower means that you risk hitting the net. So, it's just in general a lower percentage shot than hitting with top spin.

And another con is it's much more difficult to hit angles because it's flat and you don't have that dip in the path of the ball. Trying to cut a sharp angle to the Side T like I was talking about before, it just becomes more and more difficult when you hit the ball flat without a lot of top spin. So, that's the flat shot.

And number four; heavy top spin. So, we've already gone over the down line, cross court flat, heavy top spin is next up. This is your other option when trying to pass. When you hit with heavy top spin in general, the pros are, number one; it's great for dipping the ball at the feet of your opponents. You can use that big curve in the path of the ball, aim higher at the top of the net, but still have it dip down at the feet of that approaching player. And that can be really, really advantageous to have them kind of pop up an easy ball maybe put away the next one.

Another pro is that it's great for fast angle passing shots when you hit heavy top spin. I talked a second ago about how the flat shot is difficult to hit angles, but with heavy top spin it's easy to hit angles because you can keep the ball inside the boundaries of the court much more easily when you have less space, which is exactly what you're left with when you try to go for a sharp angle passing shot.

The downside of hitting the heavy top spin is that in general it's a little bit more difficult to hit a winner, and that's because the ball is traveling more slowly than just a flat drive, which was one of the pros of a drive shot, is that they travel faster through the air. And so if all you have is heavy, heavy top spin, then you might hit good angles, you might get it down at the feet of your opponent really well however, it's going to be difficult to just hit an outright winner and cleanly pass your opponents because the ball is not traveling through the air. It's not cutting through the court nearly as quickly as the flatter shot.

And then lastly, your last fifth and final option, main option here for dealing with an approaching singles player is the lob. And the pros to the lob are, you can keep an attacking player honest. So, if you're playing in a opponents in singles actually or in doubles, this applies for doubles as well. If you're playing an opponent who loves coming to the net and is constantly attacking and making you feel uncomfortable and especially if they are very aggressive with their positioning and they get very close to the net and as a result put the ball away very easily, you can try to keep them honest by using the lob to keep them from constantly getting super close to the net over and over and over again. So that's a definite upside to the lob. The downside is that it's a high slow shot. That's what a lob is. It's high and it's slow.

By definition it's a highly defensive shot, and so if you don't place it well, especially if your opponent has a good overhand, then you're just setting them up, you know, against a player who moves well and anticipates well and has a good overhand, they're hoping that you try to use the lob, honestly. And I fit all of those descriptors. As a tennis player, I love the net. I love my overhand, and quickness is definitely a strength of mine as a player. So personally, I love it when my opponents start trying to lob me because it

means that they don't see another way out besides playing the most defensive shot in tennis, and I love the challenge of trying to put overhands away.

Very often it's not even much of a challenge. Depends on how good of a lobber we're talking about. So those are your five options, Brad. Down the line, cross courts flat, heavy topspin, and lob. Of course there's different combination's and different specific targets that we can talk about with different options there, but those are your general main options and the pros and cons of each. So of course, Brad's question was, which is best? Well, it totally depends. I can just imagine all of you sitting in your car or at home or going for a run constantly hearing me saying the phrase it depends, and I'm sorry but it depends. It totally depends on a huge array of variables. It's impossible.

It's totally impossible to pick one of those options and say this is the best because it depends on many different things that could be different from match to match, from opponent to opponent, and even from day to day depending on different things like wind or sun or whether or not your forehand is on, and all kinds of stuff like that. Some variables to keep in mind are how well your opponent covers the courts, how good is their footwork, and how quickly can they change direction. How well does your opponent put away volleys? Do they have really good angle and put away volleys? Or do they basically just keep bumping it back to you?

Other things to keep in mind are which direction your opponent is approaching from. Do they tend to hit cross court or down the line? How closely do they get to the net? How good is their overhead? And how good are your technical skills and abilities to be able to aim in different directions, to hit different types of spin, to hit the ball more or less aggressively. How good are you at those types of things? And it's probably going to be different from your forehand to your backhand side. And how often do you get a forehand or a backhand approach, etc.? There's tons of variables, and so the best thing is just to know your options, to know the pros and cons of each of those options.

Then you have to practice those different options so that you have the ability to use them so that when you get into a match situation, and you play somebody who let's say keeps approaching cross court to your backhand, and doesn't get very close to the net. And your strength with your backhand is heavy topspin and you don't like aiming down the line. Alright. So that's just a quick example of all those different variables coming together in just a random example, and if that's the case then you want to either dip it at their feet or try sharp angle. We can talk for hours and hours and hours grouping together different examples of different combination's of those variables, and it could mean that depending on which day and which combination we're talking about, your battle plan is going to be completely different.

So my best advice to you Brad is to practice these different options, and you can do that by working with a partner and playing competitive games. Cooperative drills are good as well to actually practice making each of those different types of shots, and then go into a competitive game where one person is approaching, and the other person is trying to deal with that approaching player. And play out as many points as you can to practice these different options. That way when you get into a match, and you have a very specific instance where you have to be able to come up with the goods, hitting a certain type of shot in certain type of situation against a certain type of opponent, you can say "Oh great, I practiced this shot, this is what makes the most amount of sense today against this opponent and this situation and then you can re-create that and use it during match play."

So there you go. Brad, hopefully that make sense and that's helpful to you. Hopefully you'll get out and practice those things so that you don't get paired up against an opponent who's exactly the opposite of what you're good at when it comes to hitting passing shots. And again, those five different options down the line, cross courts, flat heavy top skin and lob, there is no best per se, totally depends on the situation and that's the end of my outline. So thanks very much for your question Brad. Thanks very much for writing in and hopefully that answer made sense. Keep working hard at your game and I'm sure that areas like this will continue to improve. [music] [music]

All right, before we get to our next topic real quickly, I want to remind you all listening about the official sponsors of the Essential Tennis Podcast Tennistours.com is the first, you can go there to buy tickets for WTA and ATP Professional Tour events, all for the Grand Slams, Indian Wells, whichever tournament you're thinking about going to. They got a lot of them. Not every event obviously but go check them out if you're going to a professional event and check out the prices. When you check out use the promotional code "essential" to get a discount off your purchase. I thank them very much for their support.

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Alright let's go to our second question now This comes to us from Jessie. Jessie wrote in and said, Ian, can we do a podcast on the running forehand and running backhand. I have no problem hitting a normal forehand and backhand with good span and pace through a smooth kinetic chain but when it comes to the running forehand, even when I'm not stretched out that far it is easy for me to roll over the ball and dump it into the net. And a double handed running backhand is just awkward because naturally it has less reach and that last step needed to make it smooth is often an impossibility when you're hitting on the run. It's amazing to see some pros hitting these shots with even more deadly angle and pace than a normal ground stroke.

Sampras's forehand is such. How do they do that? What are some of the essential technique and mindsets needed when they are hitting these shots? Alright Jessie, good question and I agree, it's incredible that's one of the reasons why watching the pros is such a treat as they come up with shots that the rest of watching at home could never dream of making in a million years if we were just standing there. But they do it on a dead run going from one side of the court completely to the other in an impossible position and it just seems like it's impossible. I'm going to talk about three different elements that you need to work on to be able to hit on the run smoothly.

And the first one is good judgment and you know good judgment, and what I mean by judgment is judging where the ball is going exactly and as a result being able to tell where you should be going and positioning yourself to be able to hit a quality shot. And of course good judgment is an essential no matter the situation, whether you are on the run or not but especially when it's a difficult shot and you're being put on the run, you need to know exactly where the ball is headed. And so many recreational players misjudge where the ball is going and it leaves to panic.

One of two things happens: either they over run because they thought the ball was a little further away in reality so they over run the ball and get jammed up. This leads to poor technique and you'll never be able to hit, you know, a high quality or a high level shot when the ball is too close to you. It's possible to still hit a good shot but definitely not the type of shot that is good as you can. And the second mistake that they'll make is that they will misjudge the ball and think that they're going to get there, no problem. It ends up being further away than they thought and so they under run where the shot is and they end up stretching and reaching for the ball, which again is poor technique.

You talked about the kinetic chain in your question Jessie which is excellent that you're aware of that that's basically the efficient use of your body and the transfer of energy from your lower body to your core and then out through your arm or arms and out to the racket head ultimately and when you're either too close or too far away from the ball using the kinetic chain correctly is pretty much impossible, so good judgment is key and you can develop that. This is something where very often in my experience recreational players make the same mistake over and over again and ah, typically players are always getting too close or they're always too far away and in different circumstances or situations they make consistent mistakes and it is up to all of you at home listening to figure out what those mistakes are that you make and then break those habits, do something different and force yourself to get out of that rut where you're mis-positioning yourself over and over again.

So that's number one good judgment you have to know real clearly where the ball is headed so that you can position yourself correctly. #2. Co-ordination between your upper and lower body and this has to do with the kinetic chain, but I'm going to talk about something specific about it and that is kind of the separation between your lower body and your upper body and this is something that Andy Zodin, he was a guest of my on the podcast awhile back and he talked about this, which I thought was a really good observation. I can't remember exactly what context he brought it up under but it has to do with hitting shots under duress, you know when you're in trouble and certainly being on the run is one of those situations.

But you have to try to separate your lower and upper body so that, your urgent and explosive and fast and powerful with your lower body because when you're on the run, you know the assumption is that it is a difficult shot and you're having just to get there and the types of shots, Jessie, you're about are so tough that you really have not choice but to continue to run as you hit the ball, that's what makes these difficult. It's not that we're running, stopping, you know, getting set up having time to be calm and relaxed and hit a shot and then move back to the middle. We're having to run as we hit which is difficult, so the hard part is being urgent and quick with your lower body while being calm and collected with your upper body, if you panic with your upper body the kinetic chain will not be preserved.

Everything will go too quick and probably kind of jerky and tight and all of a sudden you don't have that smooth and flowing stroke on your fore-hand or your back-hand that you had before, instead everything gets rushed and it just, the ball just doesn't come off the racket with as much pace, or spin or accuracy as what you are used to having when you receive a typical shot from your opponent. So, you have to co-ordinate correctly between your lower and upper body. And then thirdly, essential for being able to hit good shots on the run, is practice. You can practice that good judgment you can practice that co-ordination between your lower body and your upper body, and I really encourage you to do so Jessie, and everybody else listening at home.

Use a ball machine to feed you those types of shots, get a partner and have them feed to you difficult to the right or to the left whatever you can do to give yourself repetition and practice these things on purpose, over and over again do that, you need to train your body and train your mind to work efficiently and smoothly and be calm and collected. If you start to panic as you run towards the ball, then preserving your good technique that you've worked on for months and years is almost impossible. It also throws your balance off in general. You know kind of your entire body, but upper body and the lower body, when you start to panic and you're having to run to get to the ball, and you're having to run through the point of contact, it's very easy to panic, and everything technique wise just goes down the tubes, really quickly.

So Jessie, there you go. Those are the three most important elements for you to keep in mind as you try to improve your shots on the run. Good judgment, good co-ordination between your upper body and lower body, and practice. There's no special techniques here. It's not that the pros use different techniques when they're on the run and having to hit in difficult situations. They're incredible athletes and so things like good judgment and the co-ordination between the lower and upper body, undefined undefined Move on at such a high level, it's something that automatically happens and you know the rest of us watching on TV, you know are in awe of that and it seems like it's super human but it's something that's been developed and those of you listening be encouraged.

You can develop it too obviously probably not to the same level that they have but the very fact that you see people on TV playing at that level means that anybody that puts the time into it and hard work can get better and better, of course, is a relative statement. We're all starting from different starting points and we all have different abilities and gifts physically and athletically but wherever you are now and this is why the Pod Cast works. This is why people who listen to this show do get better because they give them the really core fundamental things to work on and regardless of your athleticism and your experience, if you focus on those things and improve those big core things you can raise the level of your game this shot is certainly not an exception to that.

So Jesse thanks very much for the great question, great topic. Thank you very much for being a listener of the show and let me know if I can help any further, I'd be happy to. [music] All right. All right that does it for Episode Number 116. Number 116 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for listening to today's show. And wrapping up, I'd like to read a couple of comments that were posted about last week's Episode Number 159. And by the way, if you enjoyed today's episode or you have any general comments about it or questions about anything I talked about in today's episode, you can all ways feel free to leave me comments and questions at EssentialTennis.com/Podcast, click on Episode Number 160 and leave your thoughts. I read all of those personally and usually respond to all of them and I'm going to continue reading a couple of comments at the end of each episode.

So Number 159, I talked about raising your tennis I.Q. and also which parts of tennis are natural and which need to be learned. So first quickly here I have comments about the tennis I.Q. part, and I had talked in that episode about having players, high level players very often pick things up quickly because they have some previous experience in a different sport or they have been playing tennis a long time so they pick up different skills very quickly.

And I have a comment here from Soren that I thought was interesting, he wrote and said hi Ian, great show, about people having different athletic skills perhaps honed over the

years of practice and other sports that possibly translate over into making their tennis look natural. I think you also could have noted the variability and kinetic static sense among people, i.e., being aware and in control of your own body position and movement, mainly unconsciously. You see this very clearly in kids. I have four of my own, ages two to twelve year old so I rely on that experience I have seen a six-year-old run to a low, short ball and pick it up solidly with a one-handed, sliced back-hand and keeping balanced by crossing over with his back foot. This came utterly out of the blue to me. We had never practiced anything like that, we don't practice, by the way, he says, "practice," just having fun, aiming for targets, competing for ice cream etcetera. He had just seen it on T.V., being that young, he has not honed these skills for years.

Surely playing soccer and being athletic overall helps but the pattern of movement I mentioned does not appear in any other activity he does. The natural way for kids to learn is by watching and imitating, not by introspective reasoning about - as an example, how effectively they pronate on their serve. Growing up we can take in more abstract information and do the reasoning in order to justify certain patterns of movement or tactics of play. The interesting thing is that we then learn not to imitate top players.

All right, sorry, good thoughts, and there's definitely a balance. And I talked on last week's show about how very often players who pick things out very quickly, they have a, they have kind of a predisposition to picking up athletic things because they've had practice in training and experience in athletics in general. Maybe different sports, etcetera. And I'm not going to deny that there are different, natural undefined undefined them, kinesthetic sense is what Sorin said. So, I totally agree with that. I think in general, I think in general recreational players tend to attribute high level play more so to those kind of natural, oh he's just a natural player, he just picks things up, you know, quickly, it's no fair. And they kind of write off their own possibility being able to do those things because they think, well I'm not that natural of an athlete, I've never just picked things up right away.

And so I think a lot of players sell themselves short because they see good players and they assume that can't be me cause I don't have the natural athleticism. So, that's why I really focused on just the one side of the coin last week, but, you know, I can't deny that there's a certain amount of, you know, genetics and different natural abilities that people are blessed with, and that's certainly part of it as well. And it's cool that you get to see that in your children.

I bet other of your kids of the three others probably don't have that awareness to be able to just naturally come up with that footwork and that shot like that that you saw your one son do, that six year old. That's awesome, that must be a lot of fun to watch.

And next up we have a comment from Beth, and I talked about the different phases of learning a physical skill last week. She wrote and said, "Hi Ian. I absolutely needed one thing that you said in this show, 'Don't give up. It will come with time and practice.' I seem to be living between the consciously incompetent and consciously competent. The problem is at times I seem to be flowing the wrong direction."

"Back in November my backhand was amazing, great rhythm, good contact and pace on the ball far more consistent than my forehand. I felt I could stand in the ad corner for hours and hit the ball - and hit ball after ball. Then the past month or so I can't hit the ball at all on the back hand side, framing it all the time, timing issues, drawing my elbows in, late, no court turn, net long, net long, etcetera. I'm just - I'm sorry - I'm just now barely getting it reconstructed so your comments really helped give me a glimmer

of hope."

Yes, I was talking last week about the four stages of learning a skill and how it takes a lot of time and repetition before we can ever make good technique a habit where it automatically happens over and over again. And I kind of went on a little rant or speech saying don't be frustrated if you keep reverting to an old habit and then you fix it, and then it goes back again, and you fix it. Don't be too frustrated by that. It's natural and it's going to happen at least some times.

And if you need to hear a message like that go back and listen to podcast number 159, if you haven't already. And Beth I'm glad I gave you a bit of hope there, and yes please don't let it get you down. It's part of the process of trying to become a good player. It will happen.

Even when you're - even when years from now you're a much better player than you are now, it's going to happen or some thing, some kind of skill that you thought was just automatic and you would never have to think about it ever again, you'll just out of the blue have issues with it, and it's just part of the game.

Even the pros deal with things like that where their timing or rhythm is off or technique wise something just doesn't work quite right over a given period of time. And so don't let it get you down. Keep working hard and just enjoy the process of working on it, being out there, being on the court and having an athletic endeavor that you can work towards.

So, Sorin and Beth thank you both for your comments, and everybody else who left comments last week as well thank you very much. If you'd like to comment on show number 160 do that by going to essentialtennis.com/podcast.

All right, that's going to do it for this week's show. Thanks very much for listening, take care and good luck with your tennis. [music] [music]