

Essential Tennis Podcast #183

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 Westermann: Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis podcast, your place for free expert's tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game. Today's episode of the podcast is brought to you by Tennis Express. Please check them out this week by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express.

Thank you very much for joining me on today's episode. We have a really good topic. The entire show is going to be dedicated to being a better serve and volley or return and volley player. Really good stuff. Again the entire show is dedicated to that, and this is actually a rebroadcast. The reason for that is, and I'm actually recording this on Saturday night. It's almost 9:30pm Central time here on Saturday the 13th. Tomorrow I'm driving all day from Wisconsin to Cincinnati, and then Monday through Thursday of next week I'm spending all day -- I'm expecting to spend 10 or 12 hours per day out at the Cincinnati event, the Western South Open, both WTA and ATP tour events. And I'm doing a lot of filming on the practice courts. As I mentioned last week, if you're going to be there, please let me know. I'd love to meet up with some of you guys. I've already received emails from quite a few people. Really looking forward to meeting some of the listeners of the podcast. Just send me an email to ian@essentialtennis.com. Really look forward to sharing that footage with all of you when I start putting it out on the Essential Tennis Youtube channel. It's going to be really cool stuff. With that, let's get to today's show. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright, let's get started with today's show. I'd like to kick things off by just saying that I really think that you all listening will get a great deal out of today's podcast. We've got an excellent question here that Sally has written in with, and I've really taken a lot of time to outline this topic. And it's going to be very comprehensive. We're going to be going over a lot of things in detail. So if you're smart, get out your pencil and paper and notepad or something and take some notes here as I goes through this podcast, if you have the opportunity to. Obviously if you're driving and listening to this I do not recommend that whatsoever, but if you have the chance takes some notes here.

Now today's topic is going to be all about coming to the net after a serve or after a return of serve, and I'm going to read through most of Sally's question here and give you guys an idea of what she's getting at. So she has two parts. And the first part was, "How do I be balanced on the transition between serving and getting into the box? The 40 yard line where we hit that first volley or half volley is the hardest part for me to feel balanced especially with my backhand. I think I serve and run in goofy, and I'm not sure

when to stop or what shot to expect. Last night in my match I remember serving and then my first few steps were kind of swerving with my feet close together. I know what you're thinking. I run like a girl. "OK. OK. No I wasn't thinking that Sally. She continues and says, "But I specifically need help on how I should run and step after my serve to be in balance and be in good court position so I can judge and decide about that first foul or half foul. Should I run in being kind of low like a big ape? I know that sounds funny, but seriously. Should I run in low with a wider stance?" And then the second part of our question was, "Also can we talk specifically about the backhand half volley?"

And yes we're going to get to that Sally. And I'll tell you guys ahead of time what our outline is going to look like today. We've got 4 different sections that I'm going to cover and answering Sally's questions, and this question was posted in the forums at EssentialTennis.com. And there was actually a good discussion back and forth which was posted awhile ago. This was posted originally back in July. And there was conversation back and forth. We had input from other people and some other follow up questions too. One from Howard.

So we're going to get to a lot of these topics. Having to do with balance with the split-step, with serving and volleying, and we're going to talk about the half volley as well and we're going to do this in 4 main sections. I'm first going to talk about why the serve and volley or return and volley is the best strategy in doubles. Number 2. I'm going to talk about balance while moving into the net and that's really going to be the biggest section here. Number 3 I'm going to talk about the technique of the half volley. How to hit the half volley correctly and lastly we're going to put it all together and I'll have some finishing thoughts. So those are the 4 main sections of today's podcast for you guys following along at home.

All right, so let's go ahead and get started with the first section in Essential Tennis Podcast #90 and that first section is going to be why the serve and volley or return and volley is the best strategy in doubles And I want to start off with this today before we talk about specific things having to do with the split-step and hitting that first volley or half volley, because I just want you guys to understand that it really is a good play. And there's 3 main reasons why the serve and volley or return and volley is in my opinion the best play, the best overall strategy that you guys can try to implement in your doubles play.

First of all it hurries and pressures your opponent. The sooner you get to the net and the faster you get to the net, the less amount of time that your opponent have to react to your subsequent shots and I see a lot of times players that are an average level of play will sit back at the base line, because they are more comfortable there and I understand that you want to be comfortable when you play, but on the practice court, you guys should be practicing moving forwards quickly and right away. And the serve and volley or return and volley is really the best way to do that.

Secondly it puts you in an offensive position rather than defensive. When you sit back at the base line and you're in an defensive position almost just by definition, because you're far away from your opponents side of the court and your far away from your opponents relatively speaking. The person who's up at the net has the offensive advantage, because they are close and they get to put pressure immediately on their opponents as opposed to hitting the ground stroke or a lob back from the base line where your opponents have much more time to react which we talked about in the first one.

Thirdly, my third reason why in my opinion serve and volley or return and volley is the best strategy in doubles is, because it's just plain fun. And I enjoy serving and volleying so much. There is so much action immediately it kind of thrown into the thick of things and you have to be able to react very quickly and there's just a lot of action. And I enjoy that a great deal. It's so much fun.

I can't imagine playing doubles and staying back every time. Once in a while you have to do that strategically when your opponents are really beating you up at the net. Once in a while it is smart to stay back, but in general serving a volley or returning a volley is just a lot of fun to do. You get right into the middle of the action right away. Now if you don't do it correctly it can hurt you just as much as it could possibly help. So we are going to talk about next, how to correctly move forward and it's going to be really the bulk of today's show.

It takes away your own time when you don't do it correctly and it puts you off balance and the combination of those two things gives your opponents the advantage instead of it giving it to you. Which was the whole idea of serving and volleying in the first place.

Moving on to part two of today's podcast. We are going to talk about actually using the split-step and how to move forwards into the net in balance and not being out of balance and crazy and just not being able to make a very good shots as you get approached with that first shot from your opponent after your serve or your return of serve.

Now first of all I would to tell you guys the 3 most common mistakes that people make to lose their balance while they are moving forwards to the net and listen to this and try to figure out if one of these issues is your biggest problem.

The 3 biggest ways that people screw up when they are serve and volley or returning volley are first of all not split-stepping at all and running right through the shot and the big mistake and this is probably the number mistake that I see doubles players make, is they will hit that serve or that return and they have the right idea. They start moving forward. They try to get to the net, but on their way up there they don't ever balance themselves.

They just continue to run forward towards the net and if the ball is hit either to the right or to their left or at their feet or if they get lobbed and the ball get hit over them and no matter what happens they're going to be in trouble, because they're in the process of actually striding and running and trying to get to the net. And they are not prepared to move to the right or to the left or forwards and balance or definitely not backwards, because they are running forwards. And this is a big, big mistake a very common mistake. That's the first one.

The second common mistake that I see is people's split-step, but it's either early or late. And we're going to talk about the timing pretty soon, but they'll either split-step too soon and waste time that they could be using and getting forward up to the net or they split-step late, the balls already on their way to them and and again they have the right idea and they move forwards. They did split-step, but the ball is already on it's way and so they don't have very much time to actually react, because the split-step has happened too late. After contact has already been made.

And the third most common mistake that people make to lose their balance while moving forwards is their split-step at the right time, but their feet then get frozen. They make a good split-step. It's even at the right time. However, they just stand there and let the ball come to them.

So those were the 3 most common mistakes that I definitely see as people are playing doubles or even singles and serving and volleying or returning and volleying and coming forward.

Now let's talk about how to do this correctly. And this is where really the details are very, very important here guys. And I've split this up into a 6 step process and you might be saying to yourself. Well, 6 steps that's a lot. It's going to be a lot to remember? That's going to be difficult for me to implement into my game. And you're right. This is not an easy thing to do well. It's not easy at all and I'm not expecting you guys to listen to this Podcast and to go out to a doubles match tomorrow and do all this correctly. I don't expect that at all and you shouldn't either. Don't just because you're listen to this show and you understand what I'm telling you. Don't think that tomorrow you're going out and do this perfectly. This is going to take some time. It's really going to take some intentionality on your part on the practice court. It is going to take repetition before all these things start to happen automatically.

It's very possible it will take you quite a bit of time to be able to actually practice this enough that it becomes part of your game. Enough that you can actually do it during match play. So with that being said let's go forwards and you guys are going to get to learn how to do this correctly and again there's 6 steps here.

First of all, finish your serve or your return of serve first. Here's what I mean by that. Often times I see players hit their serve or their return of serve and before the point even started they knew it. They had the idea. All right, I'm going to hit this first shot and I'm going to immediately go into the net. And so they've got that in the back of their mind and they rush themselves before their serve is even done or the return is even finished, they are already starting to move their feet. They are already trying to get into the process of moving forwards quickly and as a result the serve or the return of serve is a poor shot or it's a missed shot and they get too far ahead of themselves and those of you who watch NFL Football. American Football, I see this all the time in football where a receiver has the ball coming right to them and start running down the field before they even catch the ball and so they kind of have their priorities mixed up.

You need to make the first play first and then move to the second one. Don't start running before you hit the ball. Make sure that you hit a good shot first. So that's step number 1. Make sure that you hit your first shot before you start running forward. Step number 2. Know your plan of getting to the net and commit to it. And what I mean by that is basically the opposite of step number 1. I very often times see people hit their serve or hit their return and stand there and watch it and try to figure exactly how good of a serve that I just hit there and I try to evaluate and figure out exactly what's happening before they start moving forward, but that's a mistake too.

That's basically the opposite mistake as the first one. This person is wasting valuable time and is sitting back there on the base line when they could be moving forward. So don't make that mistake either. You need to finish your return of serve or your serve and then don't hesitate or watch your shot move. Start moving immediately. That's step number 2.

Step number 3. Move initially in whichever way you think is fastest for you. And Sally was describing several different ways that she could possibly be moving forwards and some of them sounded more awkward than others. You need to move in whichever way is natural for you and whichever way you can move the most athletically towards the net. I personally finish my serve or my return of serve and I've got a very long stride. I've got long legs. And immediately stride out and take two to three steps or so. Full steps before I actually make my split step, but I do this right away, and I do it quickly and it's what's most comfortable to me and everybody's got different body's, everybody moves a little bit differently. And so you need to use what's most comfortable for you. Whatever you can use that's as fast as possible. We want to finish that serve or that return of serve and get in as quickly as you can.

So keep that in mind and move whichever way is comfortable for you that's number 3. Number 4 and this is really the most important part of this 6 step sequence of things that you guys need to do in order to move forward and do it successfully. Step number 4 is make your balancing move before your opponent makes contact with the ball achieving

a balance stance and weight as they hit the ball. It's the timing that's really most important here guys. We don't want to split-step early and waste time that you could be using to move forward to the net. You don't want to split-step late either, because the balls already on its way to you before you use split-step and you're going to get rushed after your split-step.

The balls going to be right on top of you after finishing your split-step. So the timing here is extremely important. You want to initiate that split-step, or whichever other move you want to use. And we'll get to that in a second, but you want to initiate your split-step right before your opponent makes contact with the ball. And in order to do this effectively you need to be watching your opponent and when they start to swing. Whenever they start to swing and the racket starts moving forward towards the ball that's when you want to start use your split-step. And ideally you want to be in that balanced position that a split-step is supposed to put you in as they make contact. So that we're making the best use of our time. We're moving forwards for as long as possible right up until they hit. Right when they hit we're split stepping, the balance is great.

And now we have the most amount of time possible after they hit to be able to move towards the ball. So the timing here is very, very important. You want to move forwards as far and as fast as possible, but not past the point of when they make contact. You want to split step and land in that split step as they make contact. Now you can use whatever split step type of move you want and there's a lot of different terminology out there and different types of steps you could use and examples of those would be a staggered split-step and that means the right or left foot landing first and the other foot landing second.

You can use a regular split-step which is kind of more I guess it's more of a hop and landing on both feet at the same time. You can use a shuffle step meaning both of your feet kind of shuffle and bring your momentum to a balanced, not necessarily a stop, but you're balancing and holding your momentum and getting your self balanced so that you're in a good right position. That's the shuffle step and to do that you can make a bunch of little steps with both feet and you can use a break step also which my buddy Royce was talking about in a previous Podcast. I don't care which of those you guys use. Which type of split-step or balancing step you guys use is not essential. The essential part is the timing of it and doing it at the right time and doing it correctly. It's all about the timing. So that's step number 4.

Step number 5 is now identify your opponents shot and immediately move towards the direction of the ball whether it's forwards for a short ball or a weak shot to the right or to the left. If your opponent hits a wide or down the middle or back if your opponent lobs. After you've gathered yourself in your split-step which was step number 4. Identify quickly where the ball is going and move right away towards the ball. Don't stand there

and let the ball come to you. You want to initiate and move towards the ball. Go intercept it whichever direction that happen to be. That's the point of the split-step to be able to allow you to move in any direction possible and step number 6 the last step.

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After hitting that shot start over again. Start the process again at step number 2 which is knowing your plan. Okay and I want to move that forward towards the net and then go to step 3, 4 and 5 again, And so you repeat this process every time that you hit the ball back to your opponents side. So real briefly here— Step 1. Finish your serve or return of serve first. Step 2. Know your plan of getting to the net and commit to it. Move right away as soon as you're finish with your first shot. Step 3. Move initially whatever way is fastest for you. Whatever way is most natural and most athletic for you to move forwards, move that way. Number 4. Make your balancing move as your opponent makes contact. You want to get your self balanced as they make contact to the ball. It's all about the timing. Step 5. Identify your opponents shot and immediately move out of your split-step, out of your balanced position. Immediately move towards the ball after you identify where it's going and step 6, s tart the process all over again.

So that's your 6 step process for correctly moving forwards, for using your feet correctly as you move forward towards the net. Hopefully that makes sense and that should really pretty much cover everything. That's pretty comprehensive. Next step we're going to be talking about the technique of a half volley.

Alright, let's next talk about the actually technique of hitting that half volley. After you guys have hit your serve or your return of serve. You have moved forward correctly and quickly. You've split-stepped at the right time and got yourself in balance. Now you've got to actually be able to hit that first shot. It could be a volley or a half volley, but definitely the shot that gives players the most amount of trouble is a half volley and Sally requested that I talk about it. So I'm going to tell you guys what I feel is the best technique to use for this shot and there's really two main ways of hitting this shot in my view. There's a more simple way of doing it and another one that's more advanced. And Sally is a 4. 5 player, so I definitely recommended to her the slightly more advance way of doing it and I'll explain both of them to you guys. The simple way. The simple technique of hitting the half volley is really just like hitting a regular volley. You should make contact with the shot with an open racket face. The actual path of the racket or the swing of the shot should be short and compact, very controlled and you want to direct the ball towards your target. So it should be very, very simple.

You should not be trying to hit the shot back with lower to average level tennis players and we'll say any player on up through like a 3. 5 level. The most common reason why a half volley is missed is by just missing it completely. And I'm talking about like the ball comes down at their feet their rushing into the net. They're trying to serve and volley

and it just passes them right by. They're not ready for the shot. Hopefully the splitstep will take care of that one.

The second most common reason why these level players miss half volleys is, because the balls just hits off their frame. They're trying to do too much with the actual swing of the shot. They're trying to hit it too much and they end up mishitting the shot or hitting it somewhere that they didn't want to go, because they're just trying to do too much. They are kind of panicking and throwing their racket at the ball and it's bouncing right in front of them and it's just difficult to make a shot that way. So if you are a 3.5 level player or below, I strongly encourage you to keep it very simple. Put the racket down there. Open the face. Make sure you make contact and just block it over.

You might end up popping up a couple at first too much a little bit higher than you wanted, but let me ask you which is better? Missing the shot into the net because you shank it or popping it up and giving your opponent an easy shot. I know that more competitive of you hate the idea of giving your opponents an easy shot and I'm not suggesting that that's the way you hit this shot, but it's going to happen once in a while fine. Pop it up and give it to them. Don't miss it into the net, because you're not hitting the middle of your racket. It happens all the time with average level tennis players and you're going to keep the ball from popping up by adjusting you racket face slightly. If it goes too high close it a little more. The contact should usually be made with an open face.

Now the more advance way of doing this is more like a mini ground stroke. And that is you should be making contact with a flat racket face instead of slightly open and contact is made with the racket lifting upwards to clear the ball over the top of the net. These results in a more competitive shot. You're able to hit the ball a little bit more aggressively, a little bit firmer and keep it a little lower, but it's a little bit tougher this time, because we're trying to lift the ball up with an upward swing and this should still be compact. We're still not trying to actually in part top spin on the ball. However, it's definitely more of a 'Swing' than the simple way of doing it which is opening the face and blocking it back.

And I suggested this for Sally, because she's above a 4.0 level. Once you guys get up to that level you will need a competitive advantages in shots like this. And so if you're above a 4.0 level, I suggest that you'd try to learn how to hit a half volley this way with the flat racket face and a little bit more of a lift with the racket and directing the ball just over the top of the net to keep it low and keep it competitive to your opponents.

So technique-wise, those of the two main ways that you guys can hit this shot, the half volley. Keep it simple no matter what way you were doing it. Make sure you make good contact and we're just trying to keep this ball back in play towards whoever is farther

away from you and we're trying to keep it low so that we can stay in the point and hopefully get closer and put the ball away as the point progressive.

Alright, I'd like to now wrap things up by finishing with some closing thoughts having to do with serving and volleying and the half volley and the split-step etc. So I have just 3 quick finishing thoughts here having to do with those topics. First of all, understand there's big misconception among many doubles player that when you hit a half volley, it was a bad choice or it's a poor shot, because there's kind of an attitude that a lot of tennis pros teach doubles with and that is, any time the ball drops to your feet you screwed up and usually it's a comment like, 'Oh, you didn't close in close enough. The balls is at your feet. You didn't get into the net fast enough.' That's a fallacy. When you play doubles you're going to get half volleys. So you're going to get shots that gets hit to your feet. It's just part of the game. Yes, I do want you to close forward. I do want you to get close to the net, but anytime you play doubles, you're going to get shots that are down at your feet regardless of your position or how fast you are. It doesn't mean that it was poor shot selection. It's just part of the game. So please understand that first of all.

Secondly, if you move into the net without split-stepping, you can get closer to the net and you can avoid some half volleys, but it will be at the expense of your balance. Please understand that. I would much rather that you split-step and hit a half volley in your doubles points and be under control and balance then rush in and hit a volley without very much balance. And those are very often the two choices that you're presented with in your doubles play. You have the choice of either getting in faster and closer and probably hitting more volleys, but being under less balance or using a split-step, being under more balance and probably hitting the couple more half volleys. You'll going to be better off with the split-step and learning how to hit a good half volley and being in balance instead of constantly rushing yourself and being off balance as you try to hit volleys or half volleys or overheads or whatever.

When you split-step correctly, you make all of those shots easier. That's #2. Number three. After missing a half volley or volley. After doing this serve and volley process and starting to move forwards up to the net. Don't give up on that strategy just, because you miss a couple and this is really important guys. I want you all to get more comfortable serving and volleying and returning and volleying. So don't wait for a shot or two for the point to develop. When you miss a volley or half volley. Don't sit back there at the base line and give up on the strategy and say, 'I'll just wait for a couple of shots and see how things develop and when I get a short ball I'll come forward and then I'll get up to the net.

Well, I'd rather you get in there and keep pressuring your opponent. When you wait back on the base line you are giving your opponent the first chance to get up to the net and that's something that we don't want to give away if we don't have to.

So let me encourage you guys to keep going with this strategy whether it would be in a just practice environment or in an actual competitive match. Keep the pressure on. Now obviously on the other hand I want you guys to be smart. Don't stick with a losing strategy. If we're getting beat by going up to the net again and again and again. Don't stick with it and so there's a certain point where yes, it is smart to stay back. Don't continue to get lobbed. Don't continue to get passed or beat at the net when you're in an actual competitive match. You've got to switch things up sometimes. So I'm not suggesting that you always stick with the strategy no matter what, because that would not be smart.

There's going to be times for every type of strategy depending on the situation. However, very often players get held back, because they don't ever get comfortable serving and volleying and they don't ever get good at doing it correctly. So I don't want you guys to stay back and sacrifice being good at this type of doubles play. I do want you guys to get better at this. So at the very first sign of trouble, don't head for the hills and stay back. Stick with it for awhile. Give it a good chance, especially in practice. Keep practicing this.

Alright, that brings episode #90 of the Essential Tennis Podcast to a close. Thank you very much for joining me today. I very much appreciate your support by downloading the Podcast and by anything else that you do. Whether you'd be talking to your friends and playing partners about the show or about the website or posting on the forums or e-mailing back and forth with me. I appreciate everything that all of you guys do to help support the website. Real quickly I have two shout-outs for today.

First of all I'd like to thank Nicolas in Illinois who donated some cash to Essential Tennis this past week. Thank you very much Nicolas for your donation, and that money will definitely go directly towards making Essential Tennis a better place for everybody. And secondly I'd like to give a shout-out to John Paul in Hawaii. He and I have been an e-mailing back and forth about a couple of different questions that he's had, so Aloha to John Paul in Hawaii. Good to hear from you and someday I'd love to visit Hawaii. So John Paul hopefully someday we can actually hit out there in the Island state. Alright, thank you very much everybody for listening. That brings everything to a close for today. Take care and good luck with your tennis