

Essential Tennis Podcast #190

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 of the podcast. We're going to have two topics today that both will have to do with being more successful against 5.0 level players. Really high level tennis players. There's certain things we can do to be more successful against them, and we're going to talk about two specific areas having to do with that. Really good topics.

Real quickly before we get to that, I want to remind you all about something that I haven't talked about on the podcast for a while and actually feel badly about that. And that is the forums at EssentialTennis.com. The forums are just a wonderful place full of community and a great sense of family there. And the reason for that is the people that participate within the forums. These are people who are super passionate about their tennis game, very inviting, very friendly. And it's just a great place to hang out and get some more feedback, some more instruction. I very often answer questions there myself. But it's just a great place to post your experiences, get help from other tennis players like yourself, and it's just a great place to get encouragement as you continue working hard at your game.

I'm going to throw in a little incentive to sign up. It only takes 30 seconds to sign up for the forums. It's totally free. There's no strings attached or anything, and I want to give you a free string to everybody this week that signs up for the forums and then introduces themselves inside the Introduce Yourself thread. All you have to do is signup for a free account, and then the very first section of the forums is introduce yourself under welcome.

Just go in there. Make your first post. Just a quick introduction of yourself. Let us all know where you're from, maybe what level player you are. Maybe what some of your goals are for your game moving forwards. And I'll send you a free set of strings. It's pretty much the easiest way you'll ever get a set of strings. I really look forward to meeting all of you that sign up this week. Again this offer is only good through the end of

this week, let's say October 9th. Let's get to business. Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

Alright. Let's get to our first topic today having to do with being more successful against 5.0 players. We'd all like that, right? Including myself. I'd love to be more successful versus 5.0 players.

Our first question comes to us from Daniel in Toronto. He's a 3.5 player. He wrote and said, Hi Ian. I've played tennis for a while today. Mostly doubles. But at the end I played versus an older 5.0 player who is very consistent. I'm a 3.5 that plays better than my rating, or at least I'd like to think so. I have solid ground strokes and serve, both first and second, but they're not always on and I have some work to do there. After we hit, the 5.0 player had some advice for me. I think we played for an hour. I was completely worn out and got a good sweat in. I think I played better than him, but I gassed out. He said playing like you're gassed out is better because currently at the beginning of a rally when I typically play against a player like this, I have a lot of energy and I'm really tight. I make more mistakes, and I'm not as good as when I play softer and slower. At least that's what he said.

I didn't get quite get it, and I wanted to get your thoughts. I also experienced a new sensation in that towards the end I was breathing much more vocally with my shots, like I've seen professionals play, and I'm wondering if that can be a breakthrough for me or I was just tired. How important is breathing and should I be trying some style of breathing while hitting?

Alright, Daniel. Good questions. Let's talk first about what your older 5.0 hitting partner was talking to you about. He was speaking about you actually playing better when you were more tired, when you were more physically tired or gassed out as you said. Let me just first say that playing at a 5.0 level takes way more energy than playing at a 4.0 player. Daniel says that he's a 3.5 but he tends to hit the ball towards a higher level. So let's just say you play more like a 4.0 player, Daniel. Even if that's true, the difference between 4.0 and 5.0 is huge. It's massive. Most tennis players don't realize or understand how much of a difference there is between levels.

I remember having my good friend Jason Cole on the podcast a while ago. I'd love to have him back on the show again soon. But we were talking about differences in NTRP rating levels, and he said that the USTA had actually stated – I haven't actually seen this in print yet. I'm not sure where he got this, but I believe him and I've seen this to be true, but he said that the USTA – he actually saw them say at one point that the difference between a full half point, meaning between 3.5 and 4.0 or 4.0 and 4.5 is the difference – or rather is the same thing. That the difference in level in a half of an NTRP point is the same as losing 6-0, 6-0. In other words, if you're currently just a middle of

the road 3.5 player and you play against a middle of the road 4.0 player, a full half level above you, you should lose 6-0, 6-0. That's big. That's obviously a wide gap in ability levels.

Now there's of course the rating levels don't go in even half point increments. They actually go in hundredths in degree. Meaning you could be currently a 3.79 NTRP. USTA actually keeps a record of your rating down to the hundredth point so there's a wide range in between each 0.5 level. But the full difference in between a half level is huge. Much less between 4.0 and 5.0. That's a massive difference. And we're talking about way more of a physical demand to play at a 5.0 level.

The reason for that is to be competitive at a 5.0, you need a lot of racket head speed consistently from shot to shot to shot. You have to generate a lot of racket head speed, and that's necessary to create the power and spin to challenge your opponent. If you're playing against a legitimate 5.0 player, then just hitting any old consistent shot into the court isn't good enough because somebody at a 5.0 level can create offense very easily. So if you don't challenge that person consistently, you'd better believe that they will be challenging you. And the ball is going to be taken right to you or away from you. What I mean right to you – I'm saying it's going to be hit very offensively and aggressively if you don't first at least get toe to toe with them if not even hit a little bit more offensively to keep yourself kind of in the positive from point to point.

So this just simply means big physical strokes. So Daniel for you to feel like you were keeping with this player, or maybe feel like you were hitting a little bit player, means that you were accelerating and using your whole body much more than you're used. So that's why you got tired and gassed out. And that's why you started breathing more vocally, which we're going to talk about last.

I just want to say even though there's such a difference between a 4.0 and 5.0, for whatever reason it seems like 5.0 players seem to make it look relatively easy just like when we watch the pros and we know that they make big power and big spin, but it doesn't really particularly seem like they're trying hard on each shot. They are. They're putting in way more energy than we realize. But for the observer, the casual observer, it doesn't seem like it's that hard. Trust me. It really is. That's just the first point I wanted to make as we're talking about a big difference between what you typically play, Daniel, and what your hitting partner was doing that day.

I agree with what your partner was saying. That's going to be the second part of my outline here. Most tennis players get tighter the harder they try. That's what your hitting partner was talking about when he was saying that you're actually hitting better when you're hitting the ball like you were tired, like you're physically tired. The reason for that is most tennis players, the harder they try to hit the ball, the physically tighter they

actually get. So their muscles tighten up and tense up as they try to really accelerate the racket. And that's really bad for three reasons.

Number one, you diminishing returns on the effort that you put in. What do I mean by that? Let's say you make a 50% effort swing. So 100% is as hard as you can possibly swing the racket, and 50% is just right in the middle. Most players when they swing at just 50% effort, they're able to stay relaxed and get 100% of the effort that they put into the swing, they get out of it in terms of energy transfer to the ball.

Just as an example, on the other hand, most recreational players when they try for let's say a 90% swing, they put that 90% effort in but only get 60% return on that 90% effort. So there's a big – they might be physically trying really hard, but they're not actually getting out of that effort the potential that they should be because as they try harder and harder, they get tighter and tighter. And that physical tension saps energy out of the actual acceleration of the racket. So it actually takes energy away from what should potentially be on the ball in terms of power or spin or a combination of those two. Again, most players have diminishing returns on the effort that they put in. That was probably something that was happening to you in order to get you so tired as you continued hitting with this player.

Number two reason why it's really bad, not only do you get less return on the effort that you put in, but that inefficiency makes the player very tired much more quickly. And that's what I believe happened to you. Thirdly is that it leads to injury. Very common. That's obviously a very bad thing. In my experience as a teaching pro, working with just your average Joe recreational player, in my experience the vast majority of the time that somebody has a knee brace or a wrist brace or elbow brace is because they have tension there. I should amend that statement, much more so the wrist and forearm, elbow. Not so much the knee brace. But any kind of brace on the arm, very commonly is due to tension and trying to still hit with a tight body and doing that over and over.

The reason why he's recommending that you stay at a pace where you're still efficient is so that you can get your full efforts worth out of the swing, Daniel. That's why he's saying you should swing like you're tired. When you swing like you're tired, everything loosens up. You don't have that big muscular full of tension cut at the ball. You tend to loosen up more and be more relaxed. It's good advice. I always want to throw in there that you should also be working on increasing your level while maintaining efficiency. That should be everybody's end goal if you're listening to me right now should be more aggressive, to hit the ball more offensively, because I assume that if you're listening to me you want to play at a higher level. You're at a 3.0 level and you're not satisfied with that. You're at a 4.0 level and not satisfied with that. You want to make your way up to the next level.

Hitting the ball hard is not the end all be all of tennis, okay. It's very important to be consistent. It's very important to have control. It's very important to sometimes have touch and be able to hit something delicately and softly, but there's just no skirting around the issue. If you want to continue advancing, you always need some kind of weapon. You need some kind of offence as well, and being able to hit the ball more offensively and more aggressively while maintaining control is the best way to do that by far. And we want to do that while maintaining efficiency. So I recommend Daniel to be able to do that just add a little bit of pace at a time while maintaining focus on being loose and fluid in your technique.

Let's say currently you're able to swing at 60% and still get everything out of the swing. So you don't feel like you're holding yourself back at all physically. If that's the case, then get out there on the practice court and just add 5% that. Maybe you're adding 5 miles per hour on the shot. Just make that small increase and focusing on continuing to be loose and relaxed and fluid. If you're able to do that, no problem. Then increase 5% again and see if you can keep maintaining your looseness and being relaxed. Just keep adding 5% at a time until eventually you can work your way up to a place where you're hitting the ball really offensively and aggressively, but you're not sapping your energy super fast by being tight and inefficient. You'll get much more out of the swing as well. You'll be able to hit the ball much more offensively and aggressively without having to hit at a 90% or 95% aggressive.

You'll be surprised when you stay loose and relaxed how much you can get out of 75% or 80% effort. You can get a lot out of the effort of a swing if you are loose and relaxed and you allow the racket to just accelerate freely.

Lastly I want to address your comment on breathing more vocally. That's commonly referred to as grunting, which is not the most pretty word for it, but that's how people call it. That's a totally natural thing to do when you're beginning to put high levels of effort into a swing, and it should be something that you just let happen naturally. It's not something that I would say you should go out and practice. It's not a technique, but as you start putting in more and more effort physically, it's just a natural thing that should occur. Just picture for any of you that have spent any time in a gym lifting weights exhaling as you push or pull on a really heavy stack of weights, and you're just putting all of your energy and focus into lifting that big weight. Obviously a tennis racket is not a big amount of weight, but again at a 5.0 level at a full pace ground stroke, that player is putting in a lot of effort. I would say as much physical total effort as lifting a big weight in the weight room. So let it come naturally Daniel as you begin to start working on being more offensive.

Daniel, hopefully that's helpful to you. Great questions. Listen, book some more time with this player. Hopefully this person will be open to hitting more often with you. It

would be excellent for you to get more practice with this person. Hopefully my explanation of hitting more efficiently, getting more out of your strokes is really going to be helpful to you as you start to get more successful against this 5.0 player. Best of luck and please let me know how you do.

Alright. We've got one more topic about being more successful against 5.0 players. First I want to remind you all really quickly about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis podcast, and that is Tennis Express. Excellent online retailer of all things tennis you can possibly need, rackets, strings, bags, shoes, clothing, whatever you could possibly need for your tennis game. They also offer free shipping for orders over 75 dollars which is awesome. By the way another great thing that they offer is their demo program. I'm actually looking for a new racket, and just took advantage of their demo program. You can check out 4 brand new name brand top of the line rackets at a time for I think under \$15 for a full week, and then just ship it back with the shipping label that they send to you. Pretty cool.

I just took advantage of that, and I'm getting my rackets in the next day or two. Looking forward to using those. Definitely check them out. Really inexpensive and convenient. Great people. Good service. And you can check them out by going to EssentialTennis.com/Express. When you use that link, you'll automatically get sent right over to Tennis Express and any purchases you make, a small percentage of those will come back to help support the podcast. Big thank you to everybody who has been using that link. I really appreciate it a lot. Thank you to Tennis Express for being a sponsor.

Okay, let's get to our second question. It comes to us from Vasu. I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly. Vasu in Virginia, a 4.0 player. Vasu wrote and said, I can maintain 40 to 60 shots from the baseline with my instructor both on my forehand and backhand side, but when I play in a match when the balls are coming at 80 miles per hour plus, my unforced errors go way up. How does one under any circumstance keep 80 to 90% consistency with significantly less errors? This is my goal for the year. What factors should I master that will cut down on my errors? Appreciate your guidance.

Alright, Vasu, that's definitely tough. When we start talking about 80 mph ground strokes, definitely playing against very high level competent players for sure. Those are big ground strokes. Definitely 5.0 level caliber. I want to start off by telling you what not to do when the ball is coming super fast and aggressive, and these are by far the two most common reactions from rec players. Number one most common reaction that you should not do is take a really offensive cut at the ball. When it's already coming at you 80 mph plus, the last thing you want to do is take all that pace and speed that's already on the ball and take an aggressive swing right at it as it's coming at you. It's really common for rec players that are just starting to learn how to handle big pace to see the ball coming fast and get excited and kind of panic a little bit, and they accelerate faster

back. And so they try to match the pace of the ball but in the process over do it. Big over kill.

When the ball has a lot of momentum on it already, if you're smooth and relaxed – I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll get to that in just a second. But that's the #1 thing not to do. The faster the ball comes, the faster you swing. That's a bad idea, and that's just a big error trap for sure.

The second big mistake that rec players make is they get tight and punchy with their technique. You'll actually lose control this way, and it seems counter intuitive. Rec players seem to think – it's a big misconception – that when a ball is coming really hard and fast, if you get tight and short and punchy, you'll be able to better control where the ball goes. And when the ball is coming really fast, being tight and punchy actually does the opposite. It will make you lose control of where the ball is coming. Plus if it does go in, chances are it won't be remotely challenging for the player that just pounded the previous shot at you. If they hit an 80 mph forehand and you get real tight and defensive and just punch it back into the middle of the court, you better believe the player that sent you the first one they're going to send you another one at you at least as strong as the first one. So it's just not a winning proposition in terms of tactics and strategy.

So what is the solution? The solution is a relaxed swing that's confident but not aggressive that also has a good vertical path. That's a really loaded sentence. Let me say that one more time. The solution is a relaxed swing that's confident without being aggressive that also has a good vertical path. There are three elements to that.

Number one, relaxed. This allows you to keep control of the racket head and direct the ball effectively. This seems counter-intuitive, but when you stay relaxed when the ball is coming hard, it's much easier to control where the ball is going. Players with good control have good touch. They have good hands. That means being relaxed and allowing the racket to do the work instead of tightening their body up. When you tighten up, the ball has a tendency of just ricocheting and flying off your racket face in all different directions. You should be relaxed.

Second really important part of that sentence is confidence. Without being aggressive, this allows you to hit a neutral rally ball back. Not something weak and defensive. So it should still be confident. That means that it shouldn't be strong and punchy. That goes along with being relaxed. It also means that it shouldn't be really slow. If the ball is coming at you really hard and aggressive, you should probably be making a 50% swing. Obviously not aggressive. We're not trying to kill it back. But if we're just relaxed and we allow the racket to move smoothly and confidently through the point of contact, then you'd be surprised how much you can get out of it without trying hard at all, as I was prematurely getting into a minute ago.

When you're tight, you lose control. When you're loose and relaxed and allow the racket to move towards your target smoothly, then you can start to really control the resulting shot back.

And then lastly, we want a good element of vertical racket path. This is because ideally we'd like to add some top spin back towards our opponent even though the ball is coming at you really hard and fast. Again, we're being relaxed. We're being confident. We're not punching the ball. We're taking a full swing but without being aggressive. Somewhere in between. We want a good vertical racket path so that we can reverse the spin coming at us.

If the ball is hit at us really hard and bounces on the court, even if it wasn't struck with a lot of topspin in the first place, it's going to come off the courts spinning towards you very quickly. That's the opposite direction of if you were going to hit topspin back towards your opponent. So it's important to come upwards and come up vertically at least a little bit. Not only to lift the ball over the net and make sure that we get it to the other side of the court, but ideally so that we can add some topspin. It doesn't have to be heavy. And again we're not going for an aggressive swing. We're going for a little bit of topspin as it goes back towards our opponent's side of the court. That's why the vertical part of the swing is so important starting below the ball and coming upwards as you make contact with that relaxed and confident swing.

So how do we develop this, right? This is tough. It's tough to be relaxed and confident and control the direction of the racket path when the ball is coming hard. Well, we can develop this through practice and repetition, conscious repetition and practice over and over again. Vasu, get a ball machine that can feed you a hard fast shot or get a practice partner who has great offense. Focus on those three elements that I'm talking about and develop them consciously. This is not going to happen on accident just every other worthwhile technique improvement and change. It's going to take practice, but you can do it if you focus on those three things, you'll be able to eventually calmly hit a rally back when the ball is coming to you at a really fast pace. And that's invaluable as you start playing high level players, specifically 5.0 players which has been our theme today.

Vasu thank you so much for your question. Please let me know if you have anything further on that. Feel free to let me know and best of luck. Let me know how you do.

Alright that does it for podcast #190 of the Essential Tennis podcast. Thank you so much for listening today whenever you may happen to be listening. I really appreciate having you as a listener, and if you're listening to this before October 9th remember that you can get a free set of strings by coming onto the forums and saying hi in the Introduce Yourself section. I'm really looking forward to seeing how many people take advantage that and looking forward to seeing some new people on the forums.

Before I wrap up today's show completely, I want to read a couple of comments left on last week's episode #189 in which I interviewed Todd Martin. There were some really interesting comments. First one I want to share is from F. Silver who wanted to talk a little about where he sees Todd going. That's one of the last topics Todd and I talked about. I asked him where do you see the game going? It's gotten so much bigger and stronger and more powerful. I was curious what his thoughts were on that. In response to that, F Silver said, as far as where the game is going, I'm very depressed on that. I think tennis's governing bodies are asleep at the wheel. They're ignoring a huge need for restrictions on technology to force the return of the use of correct stroke production technique. The players make the teaching authorities of the mid 20th century sound like fools. Really poignant comment there, and that set off a big discussion. I left my own thoughts in response to that in the comments section. You'll have to go over there to see what I said. Really interesting comments from F. Silver and many other people actually responded to that as well. I'm not going to get into it here, but I will read one response. I'll take that back.

I have a response here from Nick. Here's the other side of the discussion. Nick said, as far as a 43 year old guy who learned to play with wood rackets and who made the change to modern topspin strokes in my mid 30s, I want to say that these bitter old guys who think tennis was better in the old way are out of their minds. Yeah, tennis was better if you like hitting the ball a foot out over and over again. Topspin is the way to hit the tennis ball. Deal with it. It's simple. Spin equals in equals win.

So there's the two opposite ends of the discussion that went on in the comments, and if you're interested in participating in that discussion, feel free to head over to EssentialTennis.com/Podcast. Go to episode #189 and you'll see my comments and thoughts in there.

Real quickly here, one question here from Helena who said nice interview. Many interesting points. I liked hearing him talk as a parent too. Anyway, what did he mean when he commented that as a kid he lacked repetition? He didn't have enough repetitions as a 10 year old and had to develop a more analytical game. Where does that leave those of us who are learning the game as adults? Is repetition important enough to still work towards or not so important that we can be more analytical instead?

Really good question. I'll respond to that quickly. Todd was speaking to that and made that comment in reference to himself and his own success or maybe lack of success had he practiced and gotten more reps in for himself as a professional player. And he had a relatively late start at age 10. That's what he's referring to. So when it comes to professional players, he was at a little bit of a disadvantage there having started relatively late. Again, relatively late for a professional tennis player. So as a result he had to try to overcome that. He was coming at that from a professional player's

standpoint. Not from the rest of our standpoints as recreational players. Or even me as an advanced player and college athlete. But anywhere near the same level as Todd Martin.

To answer your question Helena, you should still work on repetition. Yes it's still very important. As is developing an analytical side to your game as well. You should develop both. He was not trying to say that for everybody listening repetition isn't important and you can overcome that by being more analytical. Both are still very important for recreational players for sure. Hopefully that makes sense and hopefully that clears things up a little bit. The main point there is he was speaking for himself from his own perspective as a professional player.

Those are just some of the great comments and questions that were left. Go check them out. Again, EssentialTennis.com/Podcast episode #189. If you have any thoughts on today's episode, definitely leave them under podcast #190. With that, I'll sign off. Thanks very much for listening. Take care and good luck with your tennis.