

Essential Tennis Podcast #115

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Speaker: Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you love tennis, and want to improve your game, this Podcast is for you! Whether it's technique, strategy, equipment, or the mental game, tennis professional Ian Westermann is here to make you a better player.

And now, here's Ian.

Ian: Hi, and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast: your place for free expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

Today's episode of the Essential Tennis Podcast is brought to you by TennisTours.com, where you guys can get \$25 off your next purchase of ATP or WTA Professional Tennis Event tickets by using the promotional code Essential.

Before we get started with today's show, I've got a couple of guests Tennis that are going to talk with me about tennis improvement on the show. I just want to remind you about the various social networks that you can find Essential Tennis on. Get connected with the website, and find more out about exactly what's going on during the week.

First off is Facebook. You guys can connect with Essential Tennis@Facebook.com/ EssentialTennis. Also on Twitter at twitter.com/EssentialTennis. And on YouTube I put all my instructional videos up there. You guys can follow the videos there and become friends with me at Essential Tennis at YouTube. The URL for that is YouTube.com-Essential Tennis. So go check out the website on all those different places. For right now, let's go ahead and get started with the show.

Sit back, relax, and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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Today on the Essential Tennis Podcast I have 2 guests with me. Both of them are frequent visitors to the forums at Essential Tennis.com. They are very active there in the Essential Tennis community. Both really passionate players about improving their tennis games, which is exactly why they're on the show with me today.

You guys may remember--those of you who have been listening to the show for awhile--I had Sally, definitely another big fan of the website and forums. I had her on the show awhile back. That was in Episode #53. I kind of interviewed Sally. I asked her, 'As a recreational tennis player, how are you improving? What's working? What's not working?' And I want to have another one of those conversations.

I oftentimes have guests on the Podcast that are experts in tennis or in a certain aspect of

tennis. Today I want to talk and have an open conversation some recreational players, and kind of come at things from another angle. And get the perspective from a couple of people who are out there on the battlefield trying to improve their own games. Because I think it's really important to get thoughts and words of wisdom from those of you out there who are just working hard on your game day in and day out.

With that, I'm going to introduce my 2 guests. I have first of all John, who goes by John in real life on the forums. He's located in California. John, welcome to the show.

John: Thanks, Ian. I'm glad to be here.

Ian: Thanks very much for spending the time with me and being on the show. I really appreciate it.

Secondly we have Steve, who goes by Steve-O on the forums. He is in North Carolina. Steve welcome to you as well.

Steve : Hey Ian. Thanks for having me.

Ian: You bet.

So let's start things off with just a little bit of introduction from each of you. I'm curious--well I want my listeners to know exactly how long you guys have been playing; when did you start; those kind of things. So tell everybody listening a little about your game; how long you've been playing; and those kind of things. Let's start off with John. How about you?

John: Well Ian, I came to tennis late. I actually got started or dragged into tennis kicking and screaming. I didn't really want to play, but all of my friends were doing it.

So I started at the age of 42. I've been playing about 6 years now. Taking time out for break meals and potty breaks.

Ian: [laughter] Yeah, in the last 6 years, how many hours a week would you say that you've been playing and working on your game on average?

John: I'm not sure I want to answer that in case my wife is listening to this podcast!

I'd say it's fluctuated over the years. I play more now than I used to. I get about 3-5 days a week for a couple of hours of sun.

Ian: Great. And Steve, how about you? How long have you been playing, and how much time do you typically spend on your game during the week?

Steve: I played in high school and in my early 20s. I'm 37 now. I took a long hiatus from the game, and started back about 6 years ago. Over the past 3 years, I'd say I've been

playing at least 2-4 times a week. Maybe sometimes 5 on an avg. of maybe 8-12 hours a week. 12 on a good week when I can get it in.

Ian: OK. Good stuff.

Now my first question having to do with how you guys have improved. That's going to be our focus today, to pick your brains and see what has worked; what hasn't worked; what have been the big challenges for you as you start working hard at your games in trying to improve them. Because obviously the whole point of the podcast is to help get people better. I'm hoping that by hearing the stories from both of you, people are going to get some ideas and at least a good sense of what it's going to take for them to move up in level, because of both of you have. And that's the first question I want to ask is: Both of you started--or Steve, you re-started--6 years ago.

John, you started for the first time 6 years ago. I'm curious how many--and we can go by NTRP, which here in the U.S. is a rating scale that goes from 1-7. About 3 or 3.5 is around avg. 4.5 or 5.0 would be an advanced player. And a very beginner would be a 2.0 or a 2.5.

How would you rate yourselves when you first started? Over the last 6 years, how much exactly have you improved? John, I know that you play competitively. Steve, not as much. I don't think in NTRP or USTA type of league play or competitive play.

But Steve, let's start with you. Exactly how much of those 6 years have you improved?

Steve: The bulk of my improvement has been over the last year. When I started playing, I rated as a 3.0 player. I could get the ball over the net a couple of times. I'm very athletic, so that always helped out. I think now I'm playing at about a 4.0 level, I rate myself.

Ian: OK. And John, how about you?

John: When I started, I played the same 18 year-old kid that was in lessons with me for about a year and a half, and I didn't play anybody else, just because I didn't know anybody and I was a little too chicken to get involved! Then I got into USTA, and I guess I started at a 3.0 level. In about 4.5 years I've gone from there to 4.0.

But even more important than the rating level is just the stuff you learn, how you mature in the game. I definitely became far smarter on the tennis court in the last 2 years, and I have improved technically.

Ian: Yeah, well I agree. That's extremely important to be able to improve tennis IQ and not only be able to recreate physical skills and strokes, but actually have a broader knowledge of tactics, and maybe even history, and general tennis knowledge can definitely help your enjoyment. To help spark your improvement even more I think and increase your passion for the game.

Steve, I'm curious about your thoughts on that. Would you agree that your general tennis IQ has increased a lot over the last couple of years?

Steve: Absolutely. I've learned in matches for sure to be a smarter player. I think that's an important distinction to make for me. Because I played about an even number of--well probably a greater number of recreational play vs. actual match play when I count. And I can hit with guys that are a lot higher level than me for practicing and knocking balls around, but when it comes to playing matches and winning games, I'm still very much on the upward curve of learning how to win. I think when we're talking about NPRP level, we're talking about rating based performance. I would rate myself a weak 4.0 on that scale, but if we're just hitting around, I'm a lot better player. I may actually look like a lot better player than I am in the match play! So I think that's important to think, and that a lot of people don't make when they try to paint a number on you.

Ian: Yeah. That's a very common thing. I'm sure a lot of people listening are definitely relating to what you're talking about. Don't feel badly about that! The vast majority of us are much better at practice than we are in competitive play. In fact, I would say that's very rare that it's the other way around, where somebody is poor in practice and really rises to the occasion on competitive courts. I'd say there are a couple of players out there like that, but they're definitely the exception.

So let's talk about some specifics here. I'm going to ask a very general question of you. Feel free to talk about whatever part of your game that you'd like. Basically I'd like to know: What has been the most important thing for you to improve in your game over the last couple years? What's been--in your opinion--the most important aspect of your game that you have improved? [laughter] It's a very broad and general question!

But I'm curious if you would maybe want to rank your 1, 2, and 3, or just give me your top 1. Whether it has to do with tactics, technique, or mental toughness. John, let's go to your first. What do you think has been the most important improvement for you?

John: Taming my raging inner 5.0.

Ian: [laughter] Wow. Sounds tough!

John: [laughter] I know that sounds funny, but if I can look back over the past 6 years, the one curved corner that I turned that helped me the most was realizing who I was. That came after reading Inner Tennis. That's a book that came out in the '70s. It's a little bit zen for some people. But it taught me that... You know, like Steve, I played other sports. I was a baseball player and then a volley ball player. I did well at those things. Then I get introduced to tennis at a later age. I just had this expectation that 'I should be good at it!'

Ian: Right.

John: But that doesn't come for free! And I think that once I learned to stop putting pressure on myself and just enjoy the process of learning, it got so much easier. When

you try too hard, everything's hard. Put in hard work, but you don't berate yourself on every stroke. It starts to click, I think.

Ian: Yes, and there's several steps to what you're describing here. The first one I think is the acceptance that tennis is a lot tougher than people give it credit for. It's really hard to jump up the way that you guys have. 3.0-4.0 both of you kind of described your progression over the past couple of years is not a small jump. It's very large. So both of you have done a great job, and I hope you both continue to improve.

Those of you that are listening to this show right now need to understand that that is a big jump, and I guess don't head out there. Even if you have played previous sports like John described, don't assume that you're just going to pick it up. Maybe listen to a podcast; watch videos on YouTube; watch some slow-motion video of pros; and just go: 'Oh, I'm just going to do that and be a great player!' It's a lot more difficult than that.

So it's great that you pointed that out, John, that the first step for you was identifying that it's going to be a longer road, and not take it too far ahead of yourself.

Steve, what would be 1 or 2 things that you would say has been probably the most important thing to understand or learn as far as your improvement has come over the last couple of years?

Steve: I don't there's any particular stroke that you can...Obviously, increasing your technical attitude and learning the proper fundamentals on strokes is definitely important. Especially if you're going to get past the 4 level, you're going to have to have some technique behind it.

But I think John touched on it. I was very athletic. I played lots of basketball, lots of baseball, lots of sports. Those kinds of sports--especially basketball--they're rewarding when you let all out and were very physical. When I try to take my athletic ability over to the tennis court, I found out that running around and smacking the ball as hard as you could was not the best things to do. I found that out quickly! I was stubborn--and I am stubborn--and it took me awhile to make myself back down.

I think over the last year that's what I've learned to do, is just make myself apply the proper amount of exertion on a shot based on situations where I am on the court. If I'm stretched out wide and running for a ball, I know that I might be able to make a shot, but the spectacular 2 out of 10 times; 1 out of 10 times. I think just in learning to play the percentages and saying, 'Hey, at this point, just hit a defensive ball and stay in the point.' and definitely when you're talking about competitive tennis, I think that's what we all want to get better at, is winning more games and winning more sets and more matches.

It starts with that kind of court wisdom and recognition of where you are, what the ball's doing, what my opponent's doing, and the dynamics of how all that fits together in leading you to play a particular shot at a particular time. I'm very much still at the beginning of the learning curve on that! But I think that it's finally starting to click. For

me, that's been not a particular technique, change, or improvement, but it's just that mindset of: 'Hey, slow down! You know you can chase down a ball, but slow down and play the right shot at the right time.' That's been the thing that's helped me improve a lot.

Ian: Good stuff. Let's actually bounce off that a bit, Steve what you're describing, and talk about how you guys have split up your time on the court. And I'm curious from each you what you find is the best combination of drilling or stroke practice, technique practice type work on the courts where maybe it's you and a partner doing some focus hitting, cooperative hitting back and forth. Or maybe with a ball machine. John, I know that you hit with a ball machine quite a bit. Or maybe hitting serves by yourself.

How do you guys split up your time between that type of cooperative or structured practice and actual competitive play? Whether it be organized USTA matches or practice sets with a competitive partner, that type of thing. I'm curious for each of you, and I expect you guys to be at least a little different, how do you guys split that up so that it's optimal in your opinions? John, let's go to you first.

John: Sure. I'd just like to make one comment on what Steve said before we go on.

Ian: Yeah, sure.

John: There's a subtle distinction between what Steve and I talked about. This should be important to your listeners. Steve was talking about playing smart. You know: don't swing hard when you don't have to, when the shot doesn't call for it. What I was talking about was playing content. You miss a shot--everybody's going to miss a shot--that's OK. You just tell yourself, 'I'm not looking forward to cleaning that shot up or making it better next time' as opposed to carousing about it.

And I know you've talked about mental tennis a number of times on the Podcast, but just to be clear, that was what really helped me. Just getting in a better mental frame of mind. To answer your question about practicing, there's so many variables that go into that. I try to get a little bit of practice and a little bit of play each week. There's always people around on the weekends; the courts are full; so I know that's going to be competition. USTA matches are off an on weekends.

I try to sneak out at lunch on the weekdays to get a little ball machine practice. If I can; if nobody's available. But I definitely in a little each week.

One thing that I do that I don't see a lot of people doing and it mystifies me: if I have a lesson, I schedule practice time either immediately after that lesson or the following day, so that whatever the pro taught me I immediately put that into practice. Instead of just assuming that 30-60 min. with the pro has fixed the problem! You have to do your homework.

Ian: I agree. Obviously, I've spent a lot of time on the court myself around recreational players. In my experience as well, it's very rare. And trust me, I consistently suggest to

people to practice whatever we happened to be working on. We have several great ball machines at my club. We have a hidden wall. Obviously serves are easy to work on by yourself, but I rarely see people go out and actually put the sweat time on their own, and spend time working on whatever we happen to be practicing during lessons. So good stuff.

All of those things you suggest are valuable. If you're hitting against the machine, the wall, a live person taking a lesson, you can learn from all that as long as you're deliberate. Actually that's something I learned from you and Jason. Going back to talk about hitting ground strokes. You just have to have something in mind, because if you're not practicing towards a goal, you're just exercising.

Ian: [laughter] So John, give me a percentage. I know the club where you play is very active. There's a lot of players; a lot of courts. What percentage of the recreational time spent out there has some kind of focus? It doesn't even have to be a very specific cooperative drill where there's targets, objectives, and that sort of thing.

John: Of the entire membership?

Ian: [laughter] Yeah.

John: I'd say maybe at the high end 5%. I mean everybody goes out to play mostly.

Ian: Sure.

John: And you know the 5% that practice, maybe outside of somebody like me who just practices a lot and is of moderate ability, the good guys get out and practice. You see them all the time doing cooperative drilling.

Ian: Isn't that funny? [laughter]

John: Yeah, it's amazing.

Ian: I think rec players, lower level rec players a lot of time assume that it's kind of the opposite, where 'Oh man! I'm just starting to get going. I've got to hit as many balls as possible. Play a whole lot of sits.' And they don't really stop, slow down, and think about anything that's important to their game.

Whereas you go watch 2 4.5 players drill. They're going to just hit balls for an hour without keeping track of score at all. Yeah, it's just one quick example before you go to Steve. There's one guy that I see: he's the most diligent practicer I've seen. He'll go to practice his serve. He will throw up a toss, and if that toss is not worth hitting, he will not bother. He will sometimes throw that toss up 5 times until it's in just the right place to swing.

Ian: It takes a lot of focus.

John: Yes. Patience.

Ian: Yeah.

So Steve, going back to the original question, how do you split up your time on the court between cooperative hitting and maybe stroke work and competitive play? How's your ratio look?

Steve: It's probably 60-70% drilling and hitting. 30% match play. I've been fortunate over the last 3 years to have a really good hitting partner. We'll go out and hit balls for 2 hours at a time without even playing a point. Over the past year, I've really been more disciplined about using that time constructively and trying to hone down my technique, especially on my forehand. 1. I have a powerful forehand, and 1. I have that as my go-to shot. My game-winner shot, so to speak.

The couple years prior when I was really working on solidifying my game and getting better, I would go and practice my serve 3 times a week for 1-1.5 hours. That's really helped me out over the last couple of years in making that a better and a go-to shot, and I now have a good powerful serve that I can use.

Then over the last 6-8 months or so, I've been playing a lot of doubles at the courts that I go to. There's the challenge court. I'll be consistent in going out there. It's hard to practice I think doubles play. There's obviously some things you can work on: volleys and maybe your approach game with yourself or somebody else. But actually practicing doubles. I've got to play doubles [laughter] to actually....That's really what's improved my level in doubles play a lot. Concurrently, I think that's helped to expand and help out my singles game as well. I play an all court game and what's the tax in that?

The most important thing for me has been some things that I learned at the last [inaudible] was just being deliberate and disciplined about hitting the same shot 4 or 5 or 6 times in a row. Being able to hit the same spot on the court. Being able to work on my footwork, and get it to where I know exactly where my feet have to be and where my weight has to be to go into the shot to hit the kind of shot that I want to. To produce the kind of shot that I want to.

Like I said, that's probably--I don't know how that ranks with the avg. but 60-70% practice time and the other small percentage of the remainder of that playing matches.

[speaker] Before we get to our next topic, I want to tell everybody about the official sponsor of the Essential Tennis Podcast. That is TennisTours.com. Since 1987, Tennis Tours has been putting together tennis ticket passages to professional men's and women's touring events. Whether you're into the WTA or the ATP, they have the Grand Slam tickets available for all 4 of the Grand Slams. Also, most of the ATP 1000 Master's events and some of the lower level tournaments as well. They carry a full range of tickets for a lot of events.

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Let's switch gears a little bit. There's at least 2 other questions that I'd like to get to. The first one is a little different from what we talked about before. I asked you guys a few minutes ago to talk about what in your opinions, were the most important things that you have improved over the years. Now let's talk about the most difficult thing for each of you.

For myself, I would choose either my one-handed back-hand top spin has always been a weakness for me myself on my backhand side. So that would be one example. Or you can pick something having to do with tactic or mental toughness, whatever.

Steve, let's start with you. What has been the most difficult thing for you to improve over the last couple of years?

Steve: Definitely not backhand. I hit a one-handed backhand, and up until about a year or 6-8 months ago, it was a hit or miss shot. It was a spectacular winner or it would go in the fence, over the net, or in the next court. [laughter] [inaudible] It was extremely inconsistent. It has improved over the last couple of months. It's gotten to where it's not such a liability. But that's definitely been the hardest thing for me. Everybody wants that--everybody that hits a one-handed backhand anyway--wants that pretty [inaudible] Federesque rolling top-spinner. It is a hard shot to master.

Ian: Is there anything specifically recently that has helped it get a little better? Or has it just been repetition and practice time for you?

Steve: Definitely repetition and practice, but I've played with a--I've worked with a guy who's a 5.0 player. We go out and hitting a couple of times a week. He moved away. He made me focus on my point of contact: moving my feet. I'm real good at moving my feet and getting in the position on my forehand side and knowing what to do, but I'm not as comfortable going on my backhand, recognizing that it is a backhand and going and getting my feet set.

And also recognizing like I said, where the contact point needs to be and moving not

laterally side to side, but backward and forward to adjust and make that contact point as optimal as possible. So that [inaudible] has been huge in helping me out.

Ian: Good stuff. Those are types of things that I think a lot of rec players take for granted. It's like, 'Well, yeah. I'm supposed to move my feet. And I'm supposed to make contact around waist height.' And yet it's something that is done incorrectly so often. So it's great that you're focusing on that.

John, how about you? Give us an example of one thing that has been particularly difficult for you over the last couple years.

John: Searching for my inner singles player. [laughter]

Ian: Ah. You're more of a doubles expert?

John: Well you know, I think it was just a product of joining the club and you'll find in most places at my age almost everybody plays doubles. And there was a challenge court which was the social venue. I would show up there, and I kind of learned to play tennis on that court.

The downside of that is I learned to play doubles. And I kind of geared my attitude around doubles. Which is 'Go get the ball!' I sometimes tell people, like if I'm playing with a lower player, in doubles my view is either the ball is coming to me or I am going to get it. You have to have that mentality.

So when I get out on that big open singles court, there's too much hurry and panic, and that manifests itself in ways that I'm still dealing with now. I get too close to the ball. I'm just not comfortable letting that ball get far enough away from me. So I'm constantly fighting balls off from both the forehand and the backhand side, because I don't give myself room to breathe in singles.

Steve: John, that's funny. I'm almost the exact opposite! [laughter]

John: Yeah, we've talked about that, haven't we?

Steve: Yeah.

John: If we could find some way to clone the good half of Steve and the good half of me, you might have a decent all-around tennis player. [laughter]

Ian: I'll try and work on that product.

Alright, speaking of which, one question I really want to get to before we wrap things up is I'm curious how the internet and technology in general has aided you guys? And you can talk about specific websites; parts of specific websites. Maybe it's a piece of technological gear that you use to help yourselves out when it comes to improving your

game. I'm curious. Obviously, technology keeps getting more and more prevalent in smaller parts of our lives. For me personally, teaching has definitely been affected.

So I'm curious as students of the game, what are maybe 2 or 3 areas that technology has really helped you improve? John, let's start off with you.

John: I can answer that a couple of ways. Technically it's obvious. There are sites like yours with the podcasts, and sites like FuzzyYellowBalls that have the video content. And even the talk tennis message boards that have an infinite array of people. I think you can get something out of all that. I've become a big video nut. I've learned that because of video, I can't stop lying to myself on the [inaudible] [laughter] When I think I'm doing something--and literally, when I go out on the ball machine and think: 'Hey, I'm doing this right. This is perfect. That's what the pro was talking about!' I'll go back and look on the video and say, 'No. I'm not even close to what I'm supposed to be doing. So that's immensely helpful.

But from the more mental or psychological thing, I've just got to say that all of these resources on the internet and the 3 sites I have named, I've used all of them pretty regularly, but I really enjoyed the shared experience. So you know how tennis is. You can have good days and some days it's just going to spike you in the chest with a volley. [laughter] Because nothing's working!

And in either case, if I have a good day, I can go on the message boards and chat about a great USTA win I had. Everybody comes back [laughter] with some hi-fives. Great going!

Or I can have a really crappy day and go talk about my experiences, and somebody will come back with: 'You think that's bad, let me tell you about my experiences!' [laughter]

So it's a nice motivating resource. If you feel good, it makes you want to go out and play again. If you feel bad, it makes you feel: Hey, you're just like everybody else! Tomorrow is another day.

Ian: Alright.

John: That's what I've gotten out of it.

Ian: OK. The community feel that's available online, no matter what you happen to be into, is definitely a huge plus. Just to be able to interact with different people from all different backgrounds, and different specialties. They have different strengths and weaknesses. It's definitely an awesome part of the internet. Obviously, we're seeing stuff like Twitter and Facebook take off in little niche areas like tennis or...Well yeah, we're talking about tennis. It's a great way to use technology to be able to be like you were talking about, get picked up when you need it or hi-five when you need it. Good stuff.

Steve, how about you? Technology and your improvement. What has been most helpful?

Steve: Yeah, I spent a lot of time probably like John and like a lot of folks that frequent ET forums and XYB and all that stuff. Watching a lot of video and looking for the magic formula to what Roger Federer is doing and how I can look that. That has not helped me out as much as...I think just solid --I don't want to say mental instruction--but just the kind of thing that the podcasts do. Just exploring what's going through your brain when you're on the tennis court.

Like I said, I'm a natural athlete and I don't have problems getting the ball or hitting a shot. Whether I can hit that beautiful down the line forehand winner once or twice, or how many out of 10 times, I know that I hit once I can do it. You know? It's possible. But not relying on that, but just the mental aspect, and learning about just taking information with the podcasts, and I guess the more mental aspect of the game. Making myself actually think on the tennis court is to react. Learning how to do that and the kind of thing that you teach, and that Will teaches, and things like that have been more helpful, I would say, than trying to look at top level players and emulate what they're doing.

Ian: OK. Good stuff.

Well we're a little bit overtime, so I'm going to wrap things up. But I want to thank you guys very much for giving me part of your time tonight to record the show. I know that everybody listening appreciates it very much as well. John, thank you for your time and Steve, you as well. I look forward to spending more time with both of you back on the forums and helping you guys improve. So John, thank you.

John: Thank you, Ian. I really enjoyed the chance to share these experiences, because that's why we get involved anyway.

And Steve, it was nice to finally be your doubles partner, even if for just 30 min.

Steve: [laughter] I think maybe 2 on 1 we could take Ian. What do you think?

John: As long as he's got the frying pan, we've got it!

Ian: Ooh. We might have to do that some day. That'd be fun. [laughter]

Alright. Steve, thank you for your time as well.

Steve: Thanks for having me. Like I said, I say a lot if my mistakes can serve as a warning to others, then something's worked out. I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you very much.

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Ian: That does it for Episode #115 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you for your support of the show by downloading it and giving it a listen this week. I hope it was

enjoyable and informational to you.

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Alright. That does it for this week. Thanks again everybody. Take care. And good luck with your tennis.

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