



What's So Great About Kettlebells?

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The old school Russian Kettlebell is one of the finest, and simplest tools ever devised for fitness. A kettlebell, is a cast iron weight that looks like a cannon ball with a handle and a flattened base. It's use in the Russian Special Forces for physical training is one of the main reasons Russian Special Operators are justifiably feared for their incredible conditioning and almost super human strength. Kettlebells are compact, simple, portable and virtually indestructible. The Soviet armed forces strength-training manual pronounced kettlebell training to be "one of the most effective means of strength development" representing "a new era in the development of human strength-potential".

Although by no means limited to tactical training, kettlebells address all tactical fitness attributes with a high degree of specificity. Explosive power and extreme endurance are the least you can expect from basic kettlebell training. Russian scientists have demonstrated empirically the benefits of kettlebell training.

Voropayev (1983) observed two groups of subjects over a period of a few years. A standard battery of the armed forces PT tests was used: pull-ups, a standing broad jump, a 100m sprint, and a 1k run. The control group followed a typical military oriented physical training program that emphasized the above exercises. The experimental group just lifted kettlebells. In spite of the lack of practice on the tested drills, the KB group showed better scores in every one of them!

Vinogradov & Lukyanov (1986) found a very high correlation between the results posted in a kettlebell lifting competition and a great range of dissimilar tests: strength, measured with the three powerlifts and grip strength; strength endurance, measured with pull-ups and parallel bar dips; general endurance, determined by a 1000 meter run; work capacity and balance, measured with special tests.

Soviet scientists stated that kettlebells improve balance, coordination, and agility (Luchkin, 1947, Laputin, 1973).

Kettlebells develop professional applied qualities and general physical preparedness (Zikov et al, 1986, Griban et al, 1990).

Kettlebell training used to be standard fare in North American gymnasiums, and old time strongmen, such as Eugene Sandow, Arthur Saxon and Sig Klein extensively used kettlebells in their training. Kettlebell training accomplishes what other weight training systems cannot easily do. It conditions the body for extreme decelerations. Dynamic loading sets up the hip muscles for powerful contractions. The hip thrust is the warp drive of athletic performance, whether the athlete is jumping, kicking, throwing or punching, kettlebells develop explosive power like nothing else. Kettlebells movements build deep neuro-muscular foundations for athletic strength and power. Kettlebell training requires a great degree of mental focus, something completely lacking in machine training, and even in many sports athletic program drills. Kettlebell training forces the athlete to concentrate on various factors such as breathing, multi-planar muscle movements, force acceleration and deceleration, hand eye coordination and abdominal pressurization. This maximizes body awareness and coordination.

Kettlebells develop very strong, resilient backs, a vise like grip and bulging forearms, without the highly damaging use of steroids and questionable body building supplements. The offset center of balance imposes a high demand on stabilizing muscles.

Kettlebell ballistic exercises like the swing, clean and overhead snatch are the kings of high intensity anaerobic conditioning, burning body fat like a butter in a hot oven. If you want to get lean, you'll get lean, if you want to bulk up, you'll bulk up. Voropayev (1997) studied top Russian gireviks, 21.2% increased their bodyweight since taking up kettlebelling and 21.2% (the exact same percentage), mostly heavyweights, decreased it.

Many athletes and sadly, the average American, have extremely weak hamstring and gluteus muscles. This is principally due to a mostly sedentary lifestyle, and the fact that most Americans do very little, or no manual labor requiring the use of the posterior kinetic chain. Female athletes tend to have strong quadriceps development and relatively weak hamstring development, resulting in non-contact ACL tears and torn hamstrings during high velocity activities such as sprinting. Kettlebell training addresses this due to its foundational base in heavily loading the gluteus and hamstring muscles. Try accelerating and then decelerating a heavy kettlebell to and from the overhead snatch position and you'll see what I mean.

Much is said about being "muscle bound" as if there is something wrong with being muscular. Many people confuse the useless musculature of steroid pumped bodybuilders with the highly developed and tightly integrated muscles of true athletes. Functional strength and muscle mass are not necessarily connected. The old time strongmen would today be described as "muscle bound," however there is no comparison between the two. Today's machine bred, supplement pumped bodybuilders literally couldn't hold a candle compared to the likes of Arthur Saxon who could bent press over 300 lbs!

Strength is a skill, and must be learned. Kettlebell exercises teach the athlete the fundamentals of strength training while at the same time delivering brutal conditioning. Proper kettlebell training teaches the athlete how to tension the muscles just enough, and then relax them, repeatedly. Correct breathing technique must be incorporated into kettlebell lifting otherwise the athlete will not derive the full benefit from the movement. Remember that **we train movements, not muscles** in kettlebell lifting. Kettlebell lifting is more like a martial art or yoga than it is "weight lifting."

As a kettlebell instructor I have often heard people say things like "I don't want to be strong like you, just look good." What is wrong with being strong? Nothing, of course! The human body was designed to be strong. The Romans didn't march across Europe conquering everyone in their path by being weak, nor were they stopped in their tracks by wild Celts who just wanted "to look good" while swinging massive battle axes and clubs.

I remember the words of Vladimir Vasiliev, the head of the Russian Martial Art Systema in North America and former hand to hand combat trainer for the Soviet Special Forces. It was my first time training in Systema, and Vasiliev kept coming up to me and punching me very hard (they do that a lot in Systema) and saying things like "Strong! very good, yes."

During one particularly brutal session, I was practicing body hardening strikes with an MMA fighter. Vasiliev came up to us, looked at the MMA guy and said, in heavily accented English, "Why weak, why? Better strong!" and punched me hard in the solar plexus. Exactly Vlad! Why weak when you can just be strong?

Looking good is a side effect of high intensity functional training, not the goal. If you only train for looks, then you will probably not be strong or fit, however training for strength and conditioning will make you look good. There is no other way. Your body *will* adjust. Weakness is for losers. **Be strong, be Kettlebell strong!**