

Hang Tough

Kettlebells are one of the quickest—and most taxing—means to peak athletic form. By Josh Dean

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It had been maybe three minutes since I started swinging what appeared to be a cannonball with a cast-iron handle, and already my heart was pounding as if I'd just spent half an hour chasing a squirrel through the woods. I was sweating profusely and Carl Wilson, an Englishman with a master's in exercise science, was chuckling at my surprise. "Your heart doesn't know whether you're running or using kettlebells," he said of these odd metal orbs, which were all but unheard of in the States just a few years ago.

Wilson, a trainer and one of the kettlebell experts at New York City's Equinox gym, tells me that the core of the regimen is the swing. It seems simple enough: Beginning in a squatting position, you swing the kettlebell (in this case, a 12-kilogram model) like a pendulum from between your legs to eye level, over and over, either in a set or for a predetermined period of time. In competition, muscleheads will swing far heavier bells for upward of 20 minutes.

I barely survived two. Wilson reminded me that if I was feeling it in my shoulders, I was doing it wrong. Swinging should come from the lower body—he compares it to a punch, in which the force comes from the hips and legs. The idea is never to lift the bells, but rather to let momentum do the work.

The Russian word for strongman, *girevik*, literally translates to "kettlebell lifter," and there is no shortage of photographs of 19th-century Russians sporting spectacular mustaches and singlets hoisting these strange weights. Pavel Tsatsouline, the world's preeminent kettlebell proselytizer, explains that, more recently, they were used to train the athletes of the Soviet sports machine as well as the Spetsnaz, Russia's special forces.

Tsatsouline, based in Minnesota, is the guy nearly everyone—himself included—credits with launching kettlebells in the U.S. The lithe 38-year-old Russian émigré who used to train Soviet soldiers says it all started in 1998, when he published an article in an obscure weight-lifting publication. "We started just marketing to hard-living people—military, fighters, et cetera," he says. "I didn't think anybody else would be tough enough to use them." Tsatsouline, who refers to the initiation of a new kettlebeller as "de-sissification," ticks off a long list of success stories: **Marc Bartley, a world-record weight lifter, added 44 pounds to his bench press after taking up the bells; one of his trainers lost 100 pounds in 10 months; he's even seen people train for a marathon "with no running. Just by working kettlebells. By the way, I do not advocate this."**

It only takes a few one-hour sessions for me to see how effective these things are. Wilson had me hammering my hamstrings with squats and lunges, and my lower-body flexibility increased

dramatically thanks to the twice-weekly sessions. It was too soon to really notice muscle gain, but I was quickly increasing my weights—from 8- and 10-kilogram bells to 12 and 16, which Tsatsouline says should be the primary weight for an average-size male. (If the weights seem bizarre, it's because they are; they're based on an old Russian measurement known as the *pood*, equal to about 36 pounds.)

Adam Cronin wasn't surprised to hear of my results. He is a partner in Kettlebell Concepts (kettlebellconcepts.com (<http://kettlebellconcepts.com/>)), which turned Equinox onto them and trains its trainers, Wilson included. Cronin explained that unlike any machine or dumbbell, the kettlebell creates centrifugal force, which works the decelerating and stabilizing muscles that are "completely taken out of the equation with traditional weights." During high-intensity, real-world activity, you're dealing with motion in all directions—lifting and placing a heavy suitcase, reacting to a juking runner (or child) and then changing direction. Dumbbells and weight machines work only in a single plane, but kettlebells are dynamic. They also absolutely punish your core. The result is a "lean, athletic, powerful, and highly functional body," Cronin explains. "Plain and simple, it is the fastest way to change the shape of your body and enhance performance."

One recent convert is Richard Reyle, a Merrill Lynch executive who moonlights as a bike racer. He took up the bells because, like many who are bored with the bench press, he "pretty much loathed traditional weight training." Working with kettlebells, he says, "not only builds the muscle and leaves your heart screaming, but you feel like you're actually doing something."

Later, when I speak with Tsatsouline again, I asked him what makes these crude antiques so effective. "In the kettlebell community we have a saying," he said. "It's the 'What the hell?' effect."