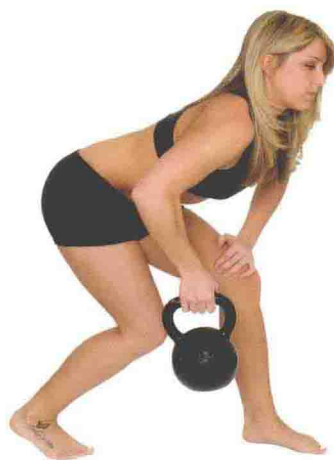


# KETTLEBELL TRAINING FOR ATHLETES



**DEVELOP EXPLOSIVE POWER AND  
STRENGTH FOR MARTIAL ARTS, FOOTBALL,  
BASKETBALL, AND OTHER SPORTS**



**DAVE BELLOMO**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE CURTIS**

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New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City  
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# **An Introduction to Kettlebells**

**K**ettlebells have been around for more than a century. They were used extensively by the performing strongmen of the circuses during the late 1800s. Some strength historians will argue that kettlebells have existed for many centuries, dating back to when the Celts made them from stone. Whatever the case may be, kettlebells are making an amazing comeback in the strength and conditioning of athletes as well as in the everyday fitness programs of people around the world.

In recent years martial artists have been using kettlebells extensively in conditioning programs. These programs are designed to build strength and stamina without adding the unnecessary bulk of conventional bodybuilding programs. Also, the Russian sport of Girevoy has increased in popularity in those same circles. The object of Girevoy is to perform the highest number of repetitions you can with a fixed weight in the events of the clean and jerk (two kettlebells), the single snatch, and the single push-press. It is a very popular sport in Eastern Europe and has been growing in the United States as well.

Kettlebells, also called ring weights, come in many shapes and sizes. From cylinders to square blocks, the most common design resembles a cannonball with a handle on one side. This design has many advantages over the others, including the absence of sharp edges as well as an easier fit to the user's body.

These implements differ from dumbbells because the weight is distributed to one end rather than being even. This makes them ideal for performing ballistic, whole-body exercises such as cleans, snatches, and their variations. Kettlebells can be used either individually or in pairs. Unlike dumbbells, kettlebells are user friendly for performing movements such as the squat-pull

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because the weight distribution allows for comfort and correct body positioning.

These Old World weights are not just for the elite strongmen seen on television. Anyone who is healthy enough to strength train can learn to use kettlebells. Whether you are a great athlete or a great-grandmother, these simple tools will help you produce the most extraordinary results you have ever seen.

Kettlebell training is arguably the most effective and efficient form of strength training ever created. It is based upon whole-body, real-life movements that would be labeled as functional by today's so-called fitness experts. It is not that we are inventing this kind of training, only rediscovering it.

Fitness machines typically work in only one plane of movement, such as forward and backward or side to side. Many kettlebell exercises, however, incorporate movement into more than one plane, just as people move in real life. These implements can be used in a slow, controlled manner or explosively. They can be used to isolate a muscle, as well as for big, whole-body movements. Kettlebells are not only versatile but also extremely durable and cost-effective. They are so space efficient that they will even fit under your bed when you are finished with your workout.

## **My Kettlebell Journey**

I first encountered kettlebell training when I enrolled in a sport judo program, approximately a decade ago. I like to refer to this period in my life as my early midlife crisis. I was too old for college-level sports programs, but I still had some competitive energy left in me. I figured that my background as a competitive powerlifter and my prior athletic experience would give me a huge advantage. I could not have been more wrong. Every class I took my first few months was the physical equivalent of being in a minor car wreck. I hurt everywhere and was getting very discouraged.

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My wife saw me walk in my front door one night bleeding from my feet and hands and hobbling like I was a hundred years old. She asked, "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

My response was, in my trademarked stubborn tone, "I'm going through this until I am able to do this to someone else." It was really an artificially brave face. I was almost ready to quit.

Sensing I was unhappy with my progress, my instructor finally walked into my office and said, "You're strong, but you don't have the right kind of strength." After my ego recovered, I realized he was absolutely correct. There are many different types of strength, and each sport or task requires something different. I was strong for powerlifting. I had a strong press and a strong back and thighs to grind out a big squat, but I lacked explosiveness as well as twisting power in my trunk that was required for throwing. Also, my grip was strong, but I needed more strength in my fingers and more crushing strength to hold on to my opponents. I was very weak in the high-pull position, or pulling up from waist height to the chin, and it is critical in most major throws. Last, I was as slow as a three-legged tortoise in July.

The next time my instructor came over, he was carrying two kettlebells. He said, "Do you know what these are?"

"They're kettlebells," I replied. "What do you want me to do with them?" Being a fan of old-school strength training, I had seen them in books but had very little exposure to them.

"Lift them," he responded simply. He didn't like to elaborate too much or bore me with details. So with almost no instruction, I did. I must have come within an inch of breaking both wrists, my shin, and putting a hole in the floor. Little did I know these simple tools would completely redefine my training philosophy. At first I started to play around with the kettlebells, performing the few basic movements I had picked up. I tried single snatches, kettlebell sport cleans, presses, and rows. I was disappointed with my progress and decided not to bother with them for a while. They were light, fixed weights, and there was a learning curve to using them. Often, as students, we avoid

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things that are not easily learned only to find out that they are usually the most worthwhile of things to know.

A few months later I took a second look at the kettlebells. The tool was not the problem, but the limitations I had placed on how to use them were. I went back to the basics and asked myself what I wanted to accomplish. I, of course, wanted to be stronger, but I needed a much more functional strength that would allow me to pick up, twist, and turn much more effectively. I needed more explosiveness in whole-body movements. Power differs from strength because it includes the element of time. To become more powerful, I needed to add speed to my strength and teach the muscles of my body to work together as efficiently as possible. I also needed stamina. I never had much luck running, and other forms of cardio bored me to tears. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” I thought.

I looked at the kettlebells. They were 35 and 50 pounds, respectively—a bit too light for my taste. I wanted something heavy enough so I would feel like I was actually grappling with an opponent. I asked a friend of mine if he could make me something heavier. He said he could, but not to expect anything uniform or exact. What I ended up with was a slightly irregular ball of iron with a handle. It weighed a total of 66 pounds, and it was beautiful.

Next I looked at the exercises I had previously performed and decided they did not have enough relevance to my goals. I needed to come up with my own movements that would give me the type of strength I wanted in the motor patterns that I needed to practice. Performing a concentration curl would have less value to me than a whole-body movement that included pulling, pressing, and an explosive extension of the hips and knees. I wanted the kind of strength and power that would enable me to grab a grown man and rip him off of his feet using one hand. I am not that big of a guy, so I definitely set my sights high.

I tried to forget what I thought I knew about strength training and to start over. I took the skills that I needed to perform and deconstructed them into their basic elements. I started with

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the clean. I liked the ballistic element of barbell power and hang cleans, but I needed something that I could perform both with one and two hands. Also, I needed to include some rotation of the trunk to more closely simulate grappling. Last, the exercise needed to be not only powerful, but also something that could be repeated as many times as my stamina would allow.

Conventional types of barbell cleans didn't have the trunk rotation I needed nor did they have the ability to be safely performed with one hand or for many repetitions. Dumbbell cleans lacked the feel of grappling and didn't have the right weight distribution. Dumbbells are weighted on both ends, and as one end comes up, it is pulled along by the other end coming down. This doesn't allow for a smooth pull. Again, I was back to kettlebells.

I examined the kettlebell sport clean that I had learned previously. It is a great exercise consisting of a type of shoulder-width stand-up, followed by dipping back down, and looping the kettlebell around your shoulder. As a stand-alone exercise, this clean variation works many big muscle groups and is great for explosion and stamina. It didn't, however, give me the pulling power I sought nor did it give me the larger range of motion I was looking for. What I did then was to create a version of the clean that worked for me. That is the beauty of kettlebells. They are so versatile that you can do few things that are absolutely wrong. There only are techniques that are more appropriate than others for a given task.

The clean that I developed was more of a high-pull than a pull over the shoulder. In my mind I would think "grip and rip." Grip the handle tight, and rip it off of the floor. I would imagine grabbing my opponent's gi (a martial arts uniform) and pulling him right off of his feet. It took a little work to smoothen it out, but this is the technique that I teach my students to this day. I changed other movements to make them suit my needs, and I left others alone. Whatever your goals are, though, one thing is for sure: kettlebells are extremely effective training tools and will transform your strengthening and conditioning program.



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# Getting Started

To get started in kettlebell training, you really need only a strong desire to better yourself and a kettlebell of appropriate weight. However, a few things will make your kettlebell quest go a little smoother:

1. Make sure you are in good health and that it is OK for you to pursue a vigorous exercise program.
2. Make sure you have sufficient space if you are training inside (although outdoor training is great). You will want at least a 6-foot-by-6-foot area that is slightly higher than arm's length overhead.
3. A rubber mat is a good investment and will help prevent damage to your floor.
4. Some loose clothing such as sweatpants or shorts and a T-shirt are good for comfort and range of motion.
5. You will need some kettlebells.

## PURCHASING A KETTLEBELL

Kettlebells come in all shapes and sizes. The most common form you see today is a ball with a handle. Some are hollow, and their weight can be adjusted. Others are solid and of fixed weight. I prefer fixed weights, personally. If you can afford it, start with at least two kettlebells of different weights. Most average male athletes will start with 35-pound and 50-pound weights or 50-pound and 65-pound weights. Women usually start with 15-pound and 25-pound weights or 25-pound and 35-pound weights. These are just very rough guidelines, and you should go with the weights you are most comfortable using, because you can always progress in weight later. When you are able to perform single movements with the heavier of your two kettlebells, you may want to consider buying a third kettlebell that is equivalent in weight to your lighter one. Now you will be able to do double work, or kettlebell exercises that require two kettlebells, such as double cleans, double snatches, alternating

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cleans, double presses, double rows, and so on. Over time your kettlebell collection will grow, as will your strength, and you will end up passing these durable tools of physical development on to others. A kettlebell really is an entire health club packed into a little iron ball.

## **POSTURE AND BREATHING**

I am frequently asked, “When should I breathe?” There are different schools of thought regarding breathing. Some coaches say to inhale on the upswing of a snatch. Other coaches say to always exhale when you are exerting, which contradicts the prior statement. A case can be made for both. You definitely do not, however, want to hold your breath throughout a set. You will get light-headed and be at an increased risk for injury. What I tell my clients is to just breathe. You will find a rhythm that works for you. Just make sure that every repetition receives one full breath. Whether you inhale or exhale going up is less important than breathing smoothly and regularly.

## **LEARN BY DOING**

The best way to learn how to use kettlebells is by training with them. This book is organized into an eight-week workout plan. It is designed to introduce you to the basic elements of kettlebell training week by week. With each set of new exercises, photographs show the critical points of each movement. At the end of the exercise descriptions, each exercise has a Key Points section that reviews the exercise technique. This repetition helps you remember the major steps of each kettlebell exercise. Following all of the exercise descriptions are more kettlebell exercises, as well as sections on program design and sample routines. This, along with a kettlebell, is everything that you need to get started. With proper technique and lots of hard work, you can transform your workouts and make progress that you never thought possible.

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Work out with each exercise list, three nonconsecutive days per week to start. Perform each exercise for 3 to 5 repetitions. Take as long as you need for a rest break between exercises. Work through each list of exercises three to five times, top to bottom. Gradually add repetitions, weight, or both, but always keep technique as your top priority. Practice makes permanent, so make sure you are practicing perfect form.

When you have completed this eight-week kettlebell program, you will have developed the foundation for all of your future training. The first eight weeks are meant to teach you the fundamental kettlebell movements that all the major movements are based on. This period is also meant to condition your body for the next training phase—something that every good program does.

The next step is to decide how you would like to proceed. You need to think beyond the first eight weeks. As your strength and skill improve, so should your program. Kettlebell training allows for adaptation and flexibility like no other. You need to set goals and map out a plan. If you have a specific sport in mind, you can use one of the sample programs explained later in this book or you can start completely from scratch. The choice is yours.

Ultimately, each program must be fine-tuned to meet the specific needs and characteristics of the athlete using it. What works for one person might not work exactly the same way for another, so feel free to experiment to find out what works best for you. Choose a direction of training that will most benefit your particular sport, such as strength, power, endurance, or a specific combination of these traits. Simply start within a modest range of intensity and volume; then gradually challenge yourself as your body adapts. You will be amazed at what levels of physical and mental stress you will be able to tolerate. These small but permanent changes will add up to great sums of work over time and will, without question, greatly improve your sports performance.

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# BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

**1**  
**WEEK 1**

**I**n this chapter you will learn the small yet critical point that whole-body explosiveness is based upon: the ability to channel momentum through the body by coordinating the extension of the knee and hip. These two joints must be activated as efficiently as possible for any of the ballistic movements to be performed correctly.

The deadlift is the simplest example of this. It forces you into the body position that you will use for all of the major movements. I sometimes refer to this as the linebacker position. Like a linebacker, you want to have a balanced stance with your shoulders, knees, and feet stacked over each other. You want to look straight ahead or up slightly because, very simply, you lean where you look.

From the deadlift you move on to the squat-pull. It is an extension of the deadlift and incorporates many muscle groups of the upper body. It teaches you to take the power you have developed from the floor and channel it into the muscles of your upper body. Eventually you learn to then transfer this power