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AT THE GYM

SWINGING THE KETTLEBELL

Weight-lifters rediscover benefits of cast-iron balls from bygone era

BY JOHANNA KING For the Journal

There's nothing revolutionary about a Russian kettlebell. Trainers who work out with the oldschool piece of exercise equipment describe it as a cannonball with handles.

But the simple cast-iron weight is revolutionizing the way many people are exercising. People like city firefighters Zar Horton and Tige Watson and contractor J.J. Blea, who believe so strongly in kettlebell training they have opened a specialty gym and are preaching its benefits to anyone who will listen.

It isn't hard to buy their pitch. Check out pictures of Blea before and after he began working out with kettlebells, or take a gander at Horton's arms as he demonstrates some basic moves, and you too might be tempted to step back in time and train like a Soviet Union Olympic athlete.

"This is a low-tech, highconcept exercise," says Horton, who is one of a handful of certified Russian kettlebell trainers in New Mexico. "It's an iron ball with a handle, but it's amazing what it does for your health."

During a recent class at Fire Bellz Russian Kettlebell Training, 536 Jefferson NE, a dozen believers of all sizes and shapes follow Horton's lead as he firmly grips the handle of a kettlebell and squats, stands, cleans and presses.

"Let's grab the bell by the horns," Horton commands above the heavy breathing. "Hold the weight at chest level; keep your back straight, lean forward from the hips and squat."

The next exercise: hot potato with an overhead press. Participants grab the round part of the weight and toss the ball from hand to hand. After 10 tosses, they push the weight above their heads, bring it down slowly and begin the routine again.

The foundation

The cornerstone of kettlebell training is the swing, an aerobic move that also works the arms, shoulders, legs and core. Horton demonstrates: Standing with his feet about 16 inches apart and strongly braced, he takes a kettlebell and swings it backward between his legs. As the kettlebell goes backward, he bends his legs slightly at the knees and leans forward from the hips, keeping the back flat and head up. From this position, he swings the bell forward and brings the body to an upright position. The kettlebell swings chest high straight out in front of him. He allows momentum to swing the weight back down and repeats the movement. Those who perform the move correctly say, as they struggle to catch their breath, that they can feel it working the entire body.

Horton says kettlebells are nicknamed "the hand-held gym" because they can be used for strength training,

conditioning and aerobic exercise. Ballistic moves such as the swing raise the heart rate and are great for conditioning. Muscles are engaged and strengthened when using more deliberate moves such as the Turkish Get Up, which involves slowly rising from a supine to a standing position while holding the kettlebell above the head.

“With this you have to be present and focused,” says Horton. “It’s not like when you’re in the gym and you’re thinking about everything else but your workout.”

Kettlebells, which date to czarist Russia, began to gain popularity in this country about five years ago, thanks to Pavel Tsatsouline, a former trainer for Russian Special Forces. Pavel, as he is known, conducts kettlebell training primarily for military and law enforcement personnel across the country. He has also created several videos and certifies instructors through his California-based company called Dragon Door.

Pavel first demonstrated kettlebell training in Albuquerque a few years ago during a session conducted for the Department of Energy. Horton and Watson became converts, swearing off dumbbells and weight machines, after they saw how this type of training helped rehabilitate and then reshape the body of a colleague who had undergone knee and shoulder surgery.

“It was like nothing we had ever done,” Horton recalls. “We had to relearn everything we knew about fitness. You can get the whole body done with one piece of equipment. And the effects are pretty immediate.”

Horton and Watson, instructors at the Albuquerque Fire Department academy, began incorporating kettlebells into training for recruits.

Watson, who also is a certified kettlebell instructor, says he likes the philosophy behind the Russian training: Do the most with what you have. “Exercise should be functional,” he says. “Why try to build people up and add additional weight? That’s not functional. We need to help the body adapt to the job we’re doing. Most people just want to be toned and healthy.”

Watson says another benefit of kettlebell training is its use of lifts and exercises that mirror real-life moves. Because the bells aren’t balanced, working out with them involves non-isolating, odd-load lifting, which is much more like the kind of movements people use everyday. “Whether you’re putting groceries in the car, picking up your kids or pulling people out of burning buildings, this is real-world training,” he says.

This type of exercise isn’t gender specific, and people of all ages can do it, the trainers say. It is popular among athletes like soccer and baseball players because it helps develop explosive hip power. But it also helps beginners develop balance, strength, speed and flexibility.

Kettlebells come in poods, an old Russian measure of weight that equals 16 kilograms, or roughly 35 pounds. It is recommended that an average-size man start with a 35 pounder, progressing eventually to a 53 pounder, which is the standard issue size in the Russian military. An averagesize woman should start with an 18 pounder. Beginners can start with kettlebells that weigh as little as a couple of pounds.

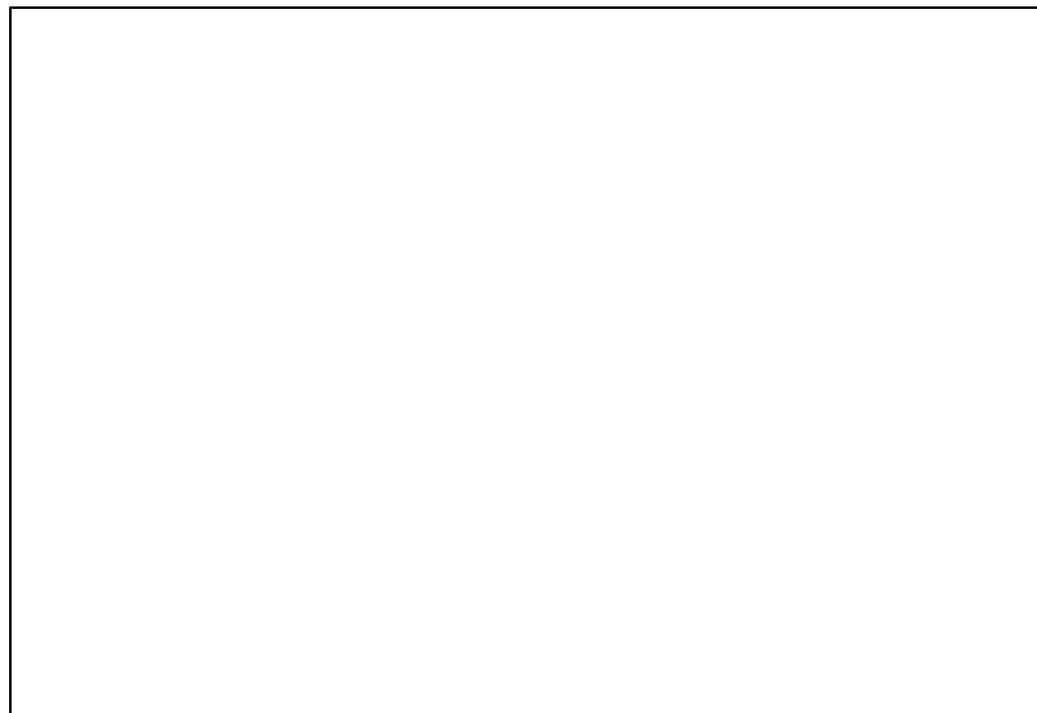
Working with kettlebells is quick and efficient, the trainers say, in part because there’s so little equipment required for a complete workout. The kettlebell takes on the role of barbells, dumbbells, belts for weighted pull-ups and dips, thick bars, lever bars, medicine balls, grip devises, even cardio equipment, the trainers say.

Because training with kettlebells works the entire body, workouts can be short and to the point. Though a personal training session typically lasts about an hour, Horton says an individual can get a good workout in just a few minutes a day.

“You can kick your own butt in 15 minutes,” agrees Blea, who was introduced to kettlebell training through his friendship with Horton. He was so sold on the workouts, he went into business with the two firefighters and recently opened Fire Bellz. The gym, west of San Mateo and south of Lomas, has a retro feel with its climbing ropes, punching bags, rings and jump ropes. “There are no weight plates clanging around here,” says Horton.

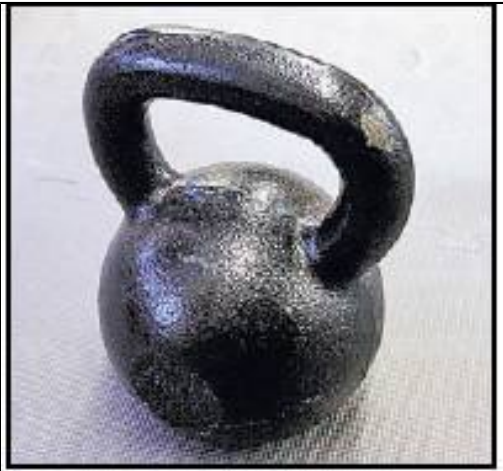


ROBERTO E. ROSALES/JOURNAL Instructor Zar Horton, bottom, leads a class in kettlebell training.





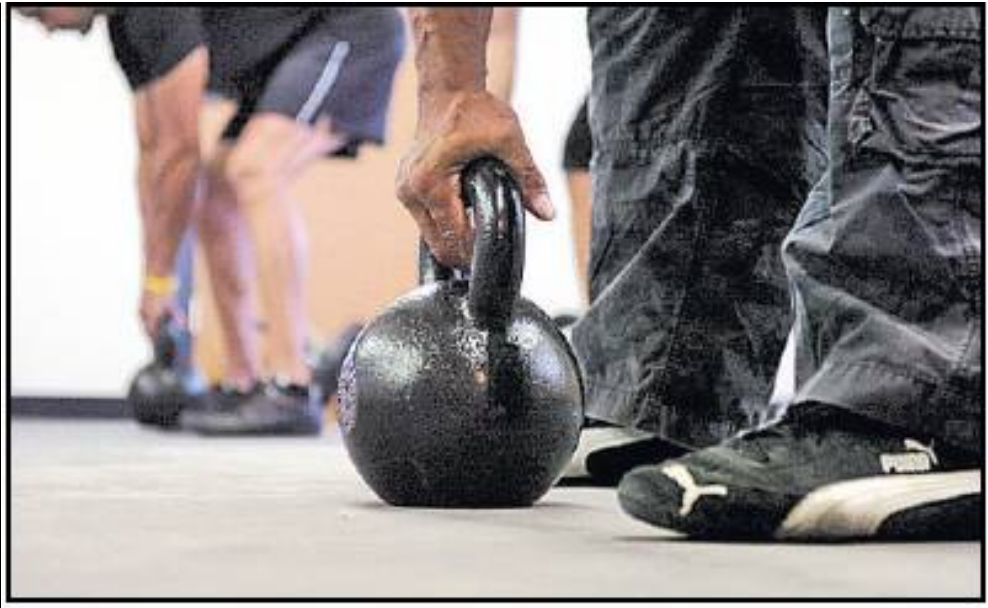
Heidi Rothenberg, center, grimaces through a move during a class at Fire Bellz Russian Kettlebell Training.



A kettlebell is measured in poods, an old Russian measure of weight that equals 16 kilograms, or roughly 35 pounds.

More information

People interested in joining Fire Bellz Russian Kettlebell Training need to set up a training session with one of the certified instructors. For information, call 232-9494, or contact J.J. Blea at jj@firebellz.com or Zar Horton at zar@firebellz.com.



ROBERTO E. ROSALES/JOURNAL Proponents of kettlebell training say the low-tech exercise equipment can work an entire body.