



Staten Island Advance

For whom the bell tolls

Kettlebells are the latest fitness trend that date back several centuries in Russia

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- At first, Vicky Wilson stared at the curious-looking, flat-bottomed cannon ball with a handle. In the high-tech world of fitness, the cast iron kettlebell was not sleek or sexy. It seemed intimidating.

That was three months ago. Today, Wilson, a 39-year-old stay-at-home mother of three, grabs hold of an 18-pound kettlebell with both hands and circles it around her head several times -- known as the halo maneuver -- to warm up her shoulders.

Not bad for someone who describes herself as starting at "zero fitness level."

Wilson, like many others around the country, is discovering the newest fitness trend that dates back several centuries in Russia.

"I was looking for an overall workout that would incorporate endurance, strength and stamina all in one," says the Tottenville woman.

She got that and then some after her first kettlebell workout with trainer Donald Girard, a fitness coordinator for the South Shore YMCA in Eltingville.

"I was exhausted," says Wilson. "It actually targeted areas that I wasn't aware of."

Kettlebells come in "poods." A pood is an old Russian measure of weight which equals 16kg, or 35 pounds. For comrades who really like to throw their weight around, kettlebells go up to 48kg (106 pounds).

Women usually start out with an 8kg (roughly 18 pounds) kettlebell, says Girard, while men typically hoist a 16kg one.

HIP ACTION

From her warm-up, Wilson progresses to two-arm swings. The movement -- grabbing a 26-pound kettlebell from a squat position, swinging it back between her legs and then up to shoulder height -- is powered by rapid-fire hip thrusts.

"It's all about the hip snap," says Girard, who counts Wilson among four clients he trains exclusively with kettlebells. "It's the hips that give the arms the momentum to swing up."

Three minutes pass. She keeps swinging.

The workout conditions every part of Wilson's body, targeting the muscles from all angles, explains Girard. It also gives her a cardio boost.

"Ten swings and your heart rate is through the roof," says Girard.

The swings, along with movements such as the clean, press and Turkish getups, provide the basis for even more grueling workouts.

While kettlebells have long been a tradition of strength training in Russia, their emergence here goes back only a decade.

In 1998, Pavel Tsatsouline, a Russian fitness trainer and writer, wrote "Vodka, Pickle Juice, Kettlebell Lifting, and Other Russian Pastimes" for the niche publication MILO: A Journal for Serious Strength Athletes.

The article's popularity led to a book deal with publisher John Du Cane of St. Paul, Minn.-based Dragon Door Publications (www.dragondoor.com) for "The Russian Kettlebell Challenge." Du Cane, a martial arts enthusiast, was sure the hardcore workout would be a hit. Tsatsouline was skeptical.

"It's a very hard type of training," says Tsatsouline, who came to the United States in the early 1990s from Latvia, one of the former Soviet republics. "I really didn't think that people would be willing to work so hard."

START OF A TREND

Three years later, the book was a small-scale success, Dragon Door was producing American-made kettlebells, and a somewhat motley crew of fitness seekers were flocking to Russian Kettlebell Challenge (RKC) classes offered by Du Cane's company.

"In the beginning all our students looked like they were in the federal witness protection program," says Tsatsouline by phone from his Los Angeles home. "All these guys with busted noses and ears and kind of scary looking."

Word of the kettlebell workout's effectiveness soon brought a more mainstream crowd including -- to Tsatsouline's surprise -- women.

"In Russia it's traditionally kind of a macho thing," says Tsatsouline, who's trained members of the Soviet special forces with kettlebells.

Today, women make up half of the students in RKC instructor certification classes. Nationwide, there are

about 460 RKC-certified kettlebell instructors. The rigorous three-day training program has a 30 percent failure rate, says Tsatsouline, chief instructor of the classes.

Wilson readily admits to being done in by her first workout, but now looks forward to her twice-a-week, 40-minute drill at the Y.

"My body has changed drastically," says Wilson. "I've lost nearly 30 pounds. I've gone down three sizes. I love it."

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