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HEADLINE: Saved by the kettlebell: Low-tech tool promotes fitness

By Bill Reed

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(MCT)

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. _ A kettlebell isn't much to look at _ it's basically a cannonball with a handle.

And yet, this decidedly low-tech device has become a hot fitness trend. Kettlebell guru Jessica Huthmaker swears that the cast-iron weight is a key that opens a world of fitness opportunities as you swing it, fling it and hoist it.

A 300-year-old workout invented by Russian strongmen and later adopted by the Russian military and Olympians, the kettlebell is getting a new life among American athletes and fitness fans. Thanks go mainly to kettlebell missionary *Pavel Tsatsouline*, who has been preaching the benefits of the humble kettlebell for several years.

Then, about a year ago, kettlebells caught on in the celebrity circuit, with Sylvester Stallone, Jennifer Lopez and the always-shirtless Matthew McConaughey among the many stars who adopted the antique Russian weights into their workouts. Iron Core, an all-kettlebell gym, opened in California, and mainstream stores such as Target recently started stocking kettlebells in the fitness aisles, in bright yellows, reds and oranges to dress them up a bit.

Huthmaker represents the new wave of kettlebell enthusiasts. The vast majority of her clients are women who look more like aerobics class refugees than Russian strongmen, and their goals are typically toning and weight loss rather than bulging muscles.

She thinks women are more open to anything that works _ and "anything that will make my butt smaller."

Even Jule Albretsen, a kettlebell instructor who teaches at the tough-guy Colorado Fight Factory, said half his clients are women. Kettlebell aficionados "look at strength differently," he said, "and it's more of a functional strength."

Huthmaker found kettlebells about four years ago and got hooked.

"I'll never go back to regular old training," said Huthmaker, who began as a weightlifter and bodybuilder. "This is a lot more fun. I'd call it the most efficient way to burn fat and get in shape."

But, really, what's the attraction to flinging around a bowling ball for a half-hour?

Huthmaker lists the benefits, as she sees them:

_It's fast. It is an efficient workout, combining cardiovascular and strength and flexibility conditioning. So it saves time.

_It's fun. It offers challenge and variety because the moves can be changed endlessly, and if it gets too easy you can always add more weight.

_It's functional. A kettlebell workout is based on functional movements. You might never use an arm curl in real life, but kettlebells should train your body to handle picking up Junior and the briefcase while chatting on

the cell phone.

_It's mobile. Take a single kettlebell to the park or on vacation and you can still do your workout.

_It's safe. Using kettlebells is low impact, and if done correctly, a kettlebell workout is easy on the back.

_It beefs up performance. Huthmaker trained elite athletes for many years, and she says explosiveness and agility can be enhanced by kettlebells.

_It works the core. It gets results because it is a core workout, and it builds up muscles that burn fat. The basic kettlebell swing burns in the thighs and midsection. But don't worry _ there are plenty of exercises to make your arms hurt.

Erin Hagmaier thought she had a bruise on her arm the first time she grew a muscle large enough to cast a shadow on her skin. Hagmaier wasn't working out at all before she started training on kettlebells with Huthmaker in September. Since then, she says she's lost several inches as well as 7 pounds of body fat. And she has those muscles she never had before.

Now, she's working out with kettlebells three or four days a week.

"I like that when I get to the gym, 40 to 50 minutes later we're done," Hagmaier said. "A lot of the guys working out are there two or three hours a day to get the same results I'm getting."

A kettlebell program can be cheap or expensive, depending on how much face-to-face motivation you need. Huthmaker, for example, charges \$50 per hour for private lessons and \$20 for a group session, and she recommends working out three to four times a week for 20 to 45 minutes.

But trainers are also reaching out to do-it-yourselfers _ Huthmaker is producing a DVD due out this month that is designed to help people put together their own workouts, and many other trainers have done the same.

So, after a handful of sessions with a trainer to learn safe techniques, one could simply buy a DVD and a single kettlebell (starting at roughly \$50) and train with that until they're strong enough to need more weight.

Hagmaier, however, prefers working directly with a friendly but tough instructor such as Huthmaker instead of a TV screen.

"She definitely kicks my butt."

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Highlights: Pavel Tsatsouline