

## Kettlebells and Climbing

By Kevin Perrone RKC, HFI

Climbing is one of my favorite activities but for the last 9 months it's been on the back burner. I've been climbing for about ten years but throughout the past decade I've come across several times when it wasn't possible to train. Starting college, starting a new job, starting a new relationship, and of course experiencing my share of injuries. This last time was due to a combination of work and injury, I broke my ankle during a fall and wasn't able to climb for quite some time and plus I had just started a new job. It was during this time that I got more into kettlebells and really focused on them, with the intent of going to [the RKC certification](#).

Usually every time I'd have to take a break or climb less frequently, I'd push myself just as hard as where I'd left off when I'd come back. This frequently left me feeling burnt out and frustrated. Typically I'd drop about 2 grades in climbing every time I took a significant layoff. Generally anytime someone asks how to get better at climbing the answer is to climb more. It's not always possible to do that. This time I've actually maintained right where I left off and I attribute this to kettlebells and a little bit of 'the WTH effect'. Kettlebells have let me maintain my grip strength and have worked my entire body as a whole in a similar fashion to climbing. There have been other benefits to the kettlebells as well.

Another aspect was addressing my weaknesses i.e. climbing is a lot of pulling I had to start working on pushing to complement. At my biggest discrepancy I was able to do a few one-arm pullups on each arm but couldn't do as much as military press 60% of my bodyweight with both arms. Besides doing things like using Ironmind's Expand Your Hand Bands™ or opening and closing your hand in a bucket of sand plus a few others mentioned by John Brookfield, kettlebells offer a lot of benefits and it should go without saying that presses and jerks would naturally offset some of the pulling. However, I've come across some drills that I really enjoy and made up other variations that as far as I know haven't been done or at least I haven't seen them done by others. Some of the drills are very climbing specific and others are intended for balance and overall health. I looked for exercises that either mirror the opposite motions of climbing or mimic aspects that I feel are beneficial. So before I ramble too much more here are the drills I've been doing.

### Drills

**Renegade Row** – climbing requires core flexion with pulling and it's hard to beat this exercise. Before trying this exercise I recommend doing it without any weight. Assume the top part of the pushup position but spread your legs apart some, the closer together they are the more difficult the exercise will be. Now while keeping your back straight, flex your abs and glutes and suck your shoulder in. Focus on pushing into the ground with one hand while lifting the other. I find

it helpful to use the analogy of drawing a bow and arrow, as one arm pulls back the other pushes forward, the only difference is that your body remains parallel to the ground. I like doing these without weight as well and I've found that they have increased my ability to do pushups. Once you have the weightless version down, try it with the kettlebells. As you row with the kettlebells try to keep your body parallel, if you twist as you row you miss out on a lot of the core stabilization. Also you may find you want to keep the bells closer together so the points that are touching the ground resemble the outline of a trapezoid than a rectangle. If you're having trouble keeping tight go read or reread [The Naked Warrior](#) a few dozen times, it'll help a lot or check out [More RKC](#) or Mike Mahler's [Aggressive Strength](#) DVD.

**Bottoms Up Snatch** – I've really come to enjoy the balance to all the pulling in climbing that the snatch counters but there are variations that I find somewhat more applicable. Climbing involves a lot of pulling down and towards the body, while the snatch is pulling up and away. The first is the bottoms up snatch. It may go with out saying but I'm going to say it anyway make sure you are comfortable with the bottoms up clean. Unless you can do that safely don't try the bottoms up snatch. You will really have to focus on gripping the bell tightly at the top to avoid having it come crashing down uncontrollable on your arm or head.



**Bottoms up Snatch** . begin in the same fashion as a normal snatch, but don't punch through, it is more of an extended high pull with a slight wrist flip to end with the bell in the bottoms up position overhead. Once again, don't try to salvage a questionable rep, you find it helpful to use chalk until you get the hang of it.

**Ratcheting Front Snatch** – After the first time I did the front snatch it felt like someone had beaten my shoulders with a 2x4 the next day but in a good way. I've started doing them in a ratcheting fashion. I do a front snatch with each one being just slightly higher than the previous so I do about 6 different levels until I've snatched all the way overhead and then reverse. I also will do a double front snatch in this method as well.



**Ratcheting Front Snatch.** perform front snatches at various levels, with each rep go progressively higher and then reverse and go lower until you are back to the bottom. Try to pause briefly at each level.

**Double Farmers Walk** – Hold two kettlebells in each hand and take a nice stroll as soon as you have to put them down do a drop set so you then pick up one for each arm and walk a little further.

**Carpet Spins** – I read an article a while back which mentioned doing dumbbell spins in the air; I thought they hurt more than they helped. What I've taken to doing is to place a kettlebell on the ground and stand over it. You can use your free arm to brace yourself and grab the bell and while it's still on the ground supinate and pronate your wrist. The resistance of the weight on the ground seems to remove most of the momentum that gave me problems when I tried doing spins in the air.

**Double Kettlebell Flip** – Don't try this until you have the basics down. The [Hand-to-Hand Kettlebells](#) DVDs by Jeff Martone are an excellent and thorough resource for all types of kettlebell passes. I really enjoyed doing the one bell flip and catch but the ability to coordinate two bells simultaneously is much more difficult and naturally more dangerous, I questioned even including this one in my list but I really do think it has value. Be prepared to drop the bells a lot. Remember, fast feet are happy feet.



**Double Flip and Catch** - With feet together, swing bells to the outside of the legs, as the bells reach chest height, release and give them a flip by pulling back slightly so the handles rotate down and away from you, catch them as the handles return to upright and repeat. Be careful not to try to recover any questionable reps.

**Overhead Alphabet** – being comfortable holding a bell overhead has helped my stability in my shoulder considerably. Rather than just doing supports I've found trying to write out the alphabet with small letters using my arm as whole to aid greatly in my shoulder's health. Pace yourself and don't try to go through the whole alphabet the first time.

**Alternating Towel Rows** – Run a towel through the bell's handle, assume the same position as you would for a bent over row with one end in each hand. One arm will be straight and the other arm will be bent. With the bell off the ground switch the arm positions in a seesaw fashion, one arm rows up and the other arms straightens out, the bell should stay in about the same position throughout

the exercise. Try to vary the tempo and see what works well for you. This is a good one to get the blood pumping just try not to fatigue your lower back too much.

Lastly, even though it doesn't deal with kettlebells I have to add in opening and closing your fists as done in the fashion of [Super Joints](#). Climbing exposes your fingers and hands to a high amount of intensity so do your joints a favor and expose them to an easy intensity with a high amount of volume. I like to do a couple of sets of 100.

No amount of instruction can ever replace sound judgment. Start out light and progress slowly. I haven't included a recommendation toward reps and sets, use the party's accepted protocol of less than 5 for grinds and your own judgment for ballistics. Do the exercises where the bell will be overhead first and those that require the most coordination first. Don't do something like wear your grip out with double farmer's walks and then try bottoms up snatches.



**Alternating Towel Rows** . Start with a staggered grip, as one arm lowers the other rows upward, the goal is more getting a good rhythm and moving quickly rather than going extremely heavy and fatiguing the lower back. Note that the bell should stay at the same level throughout the exercise.

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**Kevin Perrone** has been climbing for over a decade and became an RKC in June 2005. He spends his time working on becoming a well-rounded climber with grip strength, kettlebells, and GS, and practicing random stupid human tricks. He is available for climbing training consultation, one on one kettlebell instruction, small group instruction, and program design based on individual goals. Feel free to email any questions to [kevin\\_perrone@yahoo.com](mailto:kevin_perrone@yahoo.com).