

# KETTLEBELLS... WHAT ARE THEY?



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## What is a Kettlebell?

You may be thinking what on earth is it! Where has it come from? And, what is it used for? Well you can be excused for not knowing everything about the kettlebell, although I can assure you that in time you will be seeing more and more of this old time training tool. This isn't because it's a fad either, oh no, the kettlebell has been around for hundreds of years, possibly even thousands!

The aim of this article is to give you some background knowledge of the kettlebell, its history and then discuss the benefits of it.

The history of this cannonball like lump of metal is enough alone to make you want to pick one up. Where to start is hard, because although not 100% proved as yet, kettlebell enthusiasts are suggesting that they date as far back as ancient Greek times. The thought is that they were used within the ancient Olympic Games, possibly in throwing events. This speculation goes a long way to satisfying the belief that they have always been around in some form or other as a weight.

Thankfully I have some more definitive historical moments to clarify the Kettlebells age. In 1704 the word Girya (meaning kettlebell) appeared in the Russian dictionary, the men that used Girya were known as Giveriks. There are tales from ancient Russian times of Strongmen competing against each other in local village contests. Russian people valued their strength and it was an honour to be the strongest man. The best and strongest were known as bogatir which means 'strong and honourable man'. These men were honoured for their strength and it's said that they used this strength for good to fight against evil. In the very early days of Kettlebells there were no official competitions as such, just local festivals and shows where the men would demonstrate their skill, endurance and strength. In Russia this went on for many years and it was only until the 1960's that Kettlebells started to be used more widely, spreading from the villages to schools and universities. Competitions became more regulated with rules. But there was no national standard and although results were recorded they had little value. In the 70's however the kettlebell sport became part of the United All State Sport Association of the USSR, but they didn't set up a recognised set of rules. This meant that athletes could not achieve the Master of Sport accolade with Kettlebells as they could with Olympic lifting. The Master of Sport is the highest accolade for a Russian athlete to achieve and comes with a huge amount of honour. In 1985 the Committee of Kettlebell Sport was set up and finally an official set of rules, laws, regulations and weight categories were produced. The first National Kettlebell Sport Championship was held in Lipetsk, Russia in November 1985. Kettlebell Sport consists of three lifts,

the Snatch performed with one bell, Jerk and Long Cycle (clean & jerk) both performed with two bells. The professionals use 32kg Kettlebells, traditionally known as 2 poods, a pood being 16kg and a Russian measure of weight. The amateurs use 24kg Kettlebells, known as a pood and a half.

But fear not any westerners out there, we're not just copying the Russians. The kettlebell has been around in the western world for hundreds of years as well. From the 1900's onwards there is some great text and even pictures of traditional strongmen using Kettlebells. Men like Arthur Saxon and the great Eugene Sandow can all be seen in pictures lifting Kettlebells, there are some fantastic images of the old gyms, known as physical culture centres where you can see racks of Kettlebells lining the walls. It's an inspirational site to see such awesome old time strong men like the two mentioned above, performing some ridiculous feats of strength that any mere mortal would quiver and break just thinking about it. The 'Milo Barbell Company USA', one of the first western manufactures of barbells and dumbbells were famous for their globe shaped weights. In 1902 they manufactured their first kettlebell, called the milo Kettlebell, with a wooden rotating handle and an inner plate loading system they were very different to the traditional girya, but as with all weights with a handle outside of the mass of the weight, they still had similar benefits.

We can look even deeper into the history of Kettlebells and touch on the competitions such as the Highland games where competitors have been throwing a kettlebell like weight above their heads and over a bar for hundreds of years. You can look at the Asian nations and still watch today the art of movement performed by the Shaolin Monks where one of their key training tools was a padlock, basically a concrete block with a handle on it. With further research I'm sure you will see that the padlock has been around for centuries as have the men that used them.

The main point I'm trying to get to here, is that what ever and where ever they have come from. They have always been around in some form, whether they were just used for holding down a farmer's horse, or just keeping a fisherman's boat ashore. Men being men like a challenge and when a weight with a handle is laying on the floor, what does a man do? Pick it up!

So with the history of Kettlebells intact, one thing is clear they are here to stay. What has happened in recent years is that they have become more mainstream, from the typical gym goer or home fitness enthusiast to the top level elite athletes. Everyone is starting to realise the benefits of this truly awesome tool.

## So what makes the kettlebell so good?

It's all to do with the mass of the bell, because the handle is outside of the mass it creates a longer lever further away from your centre of gravity. This ensures exercises become very dynamic and challenging, recruiting more muscles and importantly the right muscles. The kettlebell moves as you will see if you start using one, the bell moves around the hand and creates a very different training effect to a dumbbell, one that is not only very natural, but also immensely beneficial.

Kettlebells are fantastic for all sporting pursuits and have some great crossovers to athletic performance and movement. An athlete in any sport needs to have many qualities. The kettlebell works many of these qualities, like strength; power; speed; muscular endurance; range of movement; energy systems and coordination. Our bodies are designed to move, we have evolved to stand on our two feet for good reasons. So we should train this way and with Kettlebells we do exactly that. The core exercises are performed standing and moving the way our bodies are designed to.

The core exercises are the Swing, Snatch, Clean, Military Press (and variations of presses) and Front Squat. If you do any strength and conditioning program for sport it should definitely include a combination of these movements.

Almost all sports are done dynamically and quickly, we don't tackle an opponent on a rugby field slowly, we don't throw a punch in the ring slowly and we don't hit the ball in tennis slowly. Swings, snatches and cleans are all performed dynamically, working at speeds that correspond perfectly to athletic pursuits. As sportsmen or women we are subject to huge forces across our body and often end up in extreme positions that require strength across a huge range of movement. All kettlebell exercises are designed to focus on training the body to come to a full range of movement, to achieve optimal alignment and maintain balance across our body in all of our kinetic systems.

## So where should you start?

The key thing is to get moving, the more you move, the more you'll improve. Our body adapts quickly and effectively when we lift Kettlebells. So don't hold back, get lifting! Picking the right kettlebell is important as a badly designed one can spell injury and pain. A good kettlebell, will still give you pain but of the good muscular sort. You'll know what I mean after your first session! Look for a kettlebell which when sitting in the rack position the mass of the bell rests on the fleshy part of the forearm and not the bony prominence of the wrist. Ensure you can achieve a good grip in the corner of the handle and that the handle has a smooth finish.

Good luck and get lifting!



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Performance Training Institute Pty Ltd PO Box 881, Cronulla NSW 2230  
P 02 9544 5577 F 02 9544 5588 [info@performancetraininginstitute.com.au](mailto:info@performancetraininginstitute.com.au)