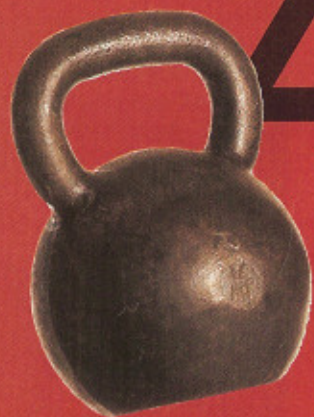


The Red Zone



Russian Pavel Tsatsouline's Unique Perspective on Muscle Building, Strength and Kettlebell Training

by Ori Hofmekler • Photography by Michael Neveux

Pavel Tsatsouline is a former Soviet Special Forces physical-training instructor, currently an SME (subject matter expert) for the United States Marine Corps, the National Nuclear Security Administration/U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. Secret Service. Pavel brought to the U.S. a traditional Russian training method that historically produced some of the toughest and strongest men on earth. He makes his "low-tech/high-concept" fitness programs available to civilians through his best-selling books that include

Power to the People! and *The Russian Kettlebell Challenge* (Dragon Door Publications, dragondoor.com). Pavel's approach, in particular his kettlebell training, has been considered by many sports and strength experts to be brutal and effective.

The following discussion presents ideas that may be controversial or even revolutionary. Nevertheless, body-builders who are looking for alternative training methods to help break plateaus or gain strength will most likely find this information quite intriguing and useful.

OH: What is a kettlebell?

PT: A kettlebell is a cannonball with a handle. It's an extreme handheld gym. Kettlebell training is like saying: "I'm sick of your metrosexual gyms! I'm a man, and I'll train like a man!" Lifting a kettlebell is liberating, and it's as aggressive as broadsword play. It's a manifestation of your warrior instinct.

Traditionally, guys name their kettlebells the way warriors used to name their weapons. They paint them with their unit's coat of arms. They get tattoos of kettlebells. The Russian kettlebell is the Harley-Davidson of weights.

OH: With such a passionate definition of kettlebells, can you tell me the benefits of kettlebell training?

PT: Kettlebell training can deliver extreme all-around fitness, all-purpose strength, staying power, flexibility and fat loss without the dishonor of aerobics. All these benefits could be accomplished in no more than one to two hours of weekly training—all done with one compact and virtually indestructible tool that can be used anywhere.

On top of that, there's an expression among *gireviks*, or kettlebell lifters, called the what-the-hell effect. WTH is about getting better at things you have not practiced. My students powerlift heavier, hit harder, run faster, bend nails and so on just from lifting kettlebells.

Powerlifter Donnie Thompson stopped deadlifting and started kettlebelling. He took his deadlift

from 766 to 832 in less than a year. One of my students, Steve Knapstein, ran a marathon without practicing running.

OH: How can you explain those benefits?

"A kettlebell is a cannonball with a handle. It's an extreme handheld gym."

PT: I can't explain how such seemingly nonspecific training made this happen. But in our brotherhood we don't wait for explanation. If it works, we do it. If the WTH effect is the best explanation there is, so be it.

The what-the-hell effect notwithstanding, as a rule you'll do your best by mixing kettlebell training with specific practice of the exercise you want to excel in. To use a martial arts analogy, you will never be able to express all your strength in a punch if you do not work with a heavy bag.

OH: Is it possible to gain substantial muscle mass with kettlebells?

PT: Yes, you can get outstanding muscle mass gains, provided your training protocol is designed accordingly and you throw enough protein and calories down the hatch. As a rule of thumb, to build beef, one should do slow kettlebell exercises (grinds), fives (five reps) or quick lifts of 10s (10 reps). Keep your rest periods minimal either way.

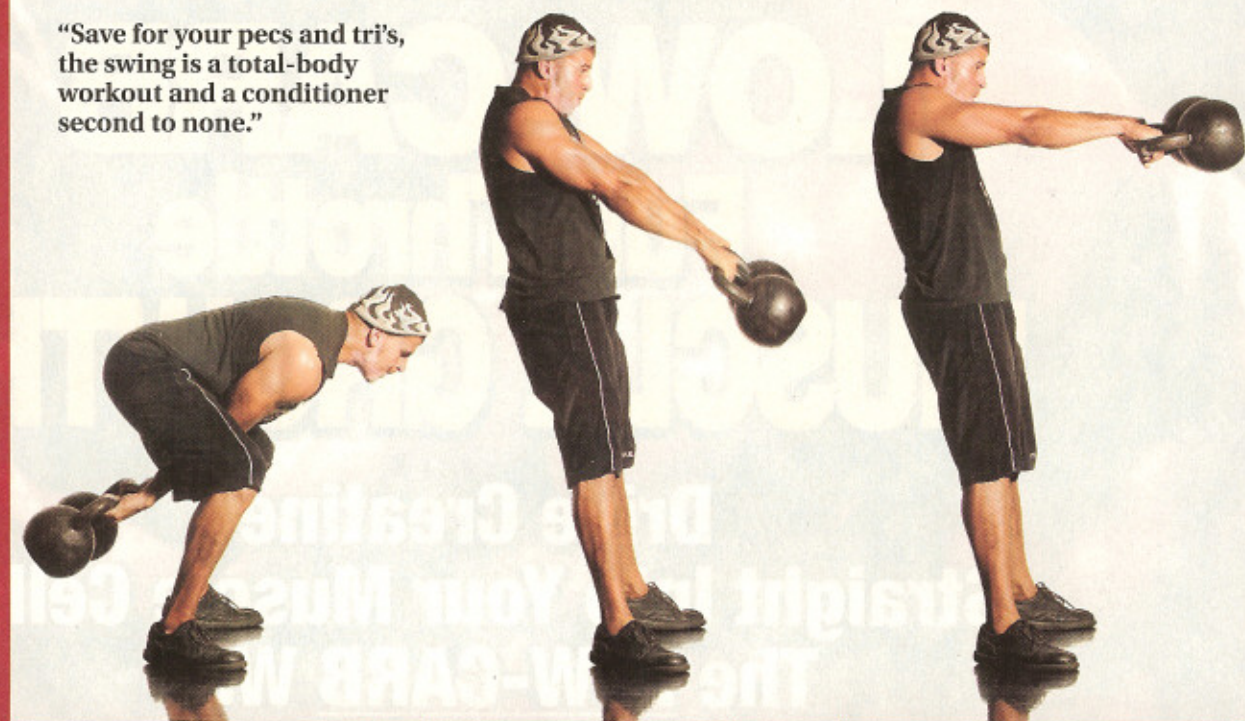
OH: Define "minimal rest periods."

PT: As short as you can handle. Russian researchers in this area concluded that training against the clock is significantly more effective than self-paced training with near complete recovery between sets. Note that the study involved strength-endurance and conditioning, not

one-rep-maximum strength. Charles Staley has the best technique for compressing the body-building rest periods just right. His site is EDTSecrets.com.

OH: Do you know of people who gained substantial muscle

"Save for your pecs and tri's, the swing is a total-body workout and a conditioner second to none."



MOORE: Mike Kohler

mass with kettlebells?

PT: Thompson gained 26 pounds in three months on a routine of approximately 10x10 of kettlebell swings and snatches. His training partner Haney, a 51-year-old former college champion shot-putter, added 15 pounds of muscle on the same routine. Retired powerlifter Phil Workman, who already carried more muscle mass than a human body has the right to, started doing multiple sets of clean and jerks with a pair of kettlebells. His shoulders swelled up to the point where he was accused of taking steroids. Note that I'm talking about elite athletes who are not spring chickens here. If it works for them, it should work just as well for a beginner.

OH: What is "sustained strength"?

PT: Sustained strength is a conditioning concept that describes the strength to hit hard in the 10th round, not just in the first. Repetition kettlebell swings and snatches crank up an elite wrestler's heart rate to 200 in seconds. There is no better conditioning method, period.

Just to get an idea of how tough it can get, the U.S. Secret Service Counter Assault Team developed a special gut-check test for its operators: 10 minutes of one-arm snatches with a 53-pound kettlebell. You

may switch hands anytime you want, and the total of both arms is recorded. The team's record exceeds 250 reps, and if you can't put up 180 to 190, you're nobody.

OH: In a related matter, kettlebell training has shown how a relatively light weight can be great for flexibility and overall conditioning, but what about brute strength?

PT: Inventive *gireviks* don't need a heavy barbell to provide progressive resistance. One of my senior instructors, full-contact champ Steve Cotter, built a pair of legs as strong as any with a grand total of 140 pounds of weight. How can it be? Cotter does rock-bottom one-legged squats, or pistols, with two 70-pound kettlebells. And yes, kettlebell strength has a great transfer to other applications. The man flipped an 850-pound tire the first time he tried it.

OH: Given your special-ops background, it seems odd that you are biased toward strength rather than endurance. Please explain yourself.

PT: A warrior needs both, but he can't afford to ignore strength. Because the demands of military service are so endurance oriented, it's easy to focus on conditioning

100 percent. The point that most soldier-of-fortune types miss is that without a base of strength they become very injury prone. It's no secret that by the time a special operator hits 40, his body is wrecked. A friend of mine got a medical discharge from the U.S. Navy Seals after a severe back injury. Today he's as good as new, thanks to a mix of kettlebell lifts, deadlifts and Olympic lifts.

Note that unlike other strength tools, the kettlebell develops strength along many planes and angles and in the extremes of the range of motion. This "in-between strength," as Marty Gallagher has called it, makes kettlebell practitioners unusually resilient.

And if you've had injuries, you'll snap back a lot faster once you start kettlebelling. My senior instructor, Jeff Martone, teaches physical training, close-quarter combat and a few other things at a federal agency. To say the man has lived hard is an understatement. Jeff has had at least 20 nose fractures, his knees and shoulders have more zippers than a biker jacket—you get the idea. Four years ago Martone was contemplating a different line of work as his mileage was catching up to him. Today he can do things he could never do many years and injuries ago—thanks to the Russian

"The one-arm kettlebell military press is the Russian ego lift, akin to the bench in the U.S."



Photo: Mike Fisher

kettlebell and our special techniques. Jeff's story is typical.

OH: Can kettlebells be integrated with dumbbells or barbells for strength training?

PT: There are two ways to train with the Russian kettlebell. One is to do it in the context of a sophisticated program that implements other strength tools. That's appropriate for athletes and coaches who have the education, the experience and the hardware. Ethan Reeve's strength program at Wakeforest University is a powerful example of that approach.

Special operators, martial artists and other minimalists prefer to use the kettlebell as a stand-alone tool. The kettlebell can do anything a dumbbell can do at least as well and with some technical advantages. For

example, the kettlebell provides an unsurpassed range of motion on the military press: It doesn't restrict your shoulder on the bottom, and it stretches it on the top. Hang a kettlebell on your foot, Russian spec-ops style, and you don't need a belt for weighted dips or pull-ups. As the Philadelphia Kettlebell Club's credo goes, "We train with kettlebells in case civilization is temporary—don't rely on anything you can't carry."

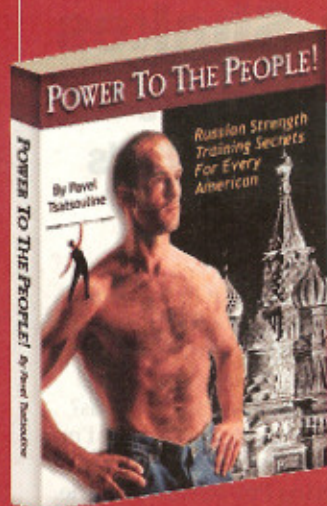
OH: How do you define a minimalist? Does it mean one who wishes to get maximum impact from minimum exercise?

PT: You have only so much time and energy for training. If you're pursuing multiple goals at once, find exercises that enable you to kill two or more birds with one stone.

For instance, if your goals are improving your deadlift and your grip, the one-arm deadlift is an exercise that serves both of your needs. If you want to build up your bench and your biceps, the maximum powerlifting legal width bench press would address both of your goals.

OH: What are the top kettlebell exercises?

PT: The swing is the foundation of Russian kettlebell training. It's exactly what its name implies: a swing of a kettlebell from between your legs up to your chest level. The arm stays straight and loose, and the power is generated by the hips. The motion is akin to the standing vertical jump, except the energy is projected into the kettlebell rather than being used to lift



Pavel's books are available at www.dragondoor.com.

tri's, the swing is a total-body workout and a conditioner second to none. You must experience the swing to appreciate its power.

The one-arm kettlebell military press is the Russian ego lift, akin to the bench in the U.S. The rules are simple: the fist must be lower than the chin at the start of the press, and the knees must remain locked. That's a lot harder than it sounds. An overwhelming majority of the bodybuilders who took our 88-pound kettlebell military press challenge at Arnold's expo could not do it.

OH: What kind of physique should one get from kettlebell training?

PT: The kettlebell swing plus the Russian-style military press make up a great program for an aggressive minimalist who wants to be ready for whatever life throws at him and who chooses a doer's physique along the lines of antique statues—broad shoulders with just a hint of pecs, back muscles standing out in bold relief, wiry arms, rugged forearms, a cut-up midsection and strong legs without a hint of squatter's chafing.

OH: Can you give an example of a basic training routine?

PT: Here's the routine: 5x5 presses per arm, 5x10 swings per arm, wrap up with another 5x5 presses. It's up to you whether you want to clean the kettlebell once for each set of presses or once before each

rep. Don't fail. If you can't make the prescribed reps, do more sets of fewer reps to make up the total; for example 3x5, 1x4, 2x3 for a total of 25. Rest as little as you can between sets. Start with a lot lower numbers and build up slowly. Train three times a week. Stretch. Eat a cow. Every fourth week take it easy—this means do half the reps on all your sets.

OH: What about variety?

PT: If you want variety, no problem. The kettlebell's design, namely a thick, smooth handle removed from a compact center of mass, enables you to do a great variety of powerful exercises. You can swing it between your legs without worrying about taking your knees out. You can hold it like a regular dumbbell or bottom-up for a grip challenge, or you can palm it like a medicine ball. The position of the handle allows dynamic passing of the kettlebell from hand to hand for a great variety of powerful juggling-type exercises. Those drills develop dynamic strength and make the body injuryproof along many planes, unlike conventional linear exercise.

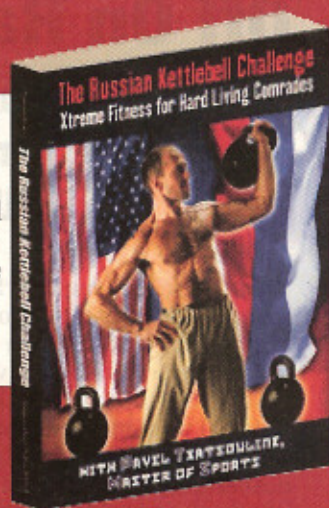
The kettlebell will give you an infinite freedom of lifting. It has been said that kettlebells are to traditional free weights what barbells and dumbbells are to machines.

OH: What's the difference between your RKC system and other modern styles of kettlebell training?

PT: As in martial arts, there are hard and soft styles of kettlebell training. The traditional Russian soft style is characterized by maximum efficiency; keeping the unused muscles relaxed; circular, wavy movements. It evolved into *girevoy* sport, the sport of repetition kettlebell lifting. I was nationally ranked in G.S. in the 1980s.

My RKC is a hard style of kettlebell training born in the spec ops of the Soviet Union. Hard style refers to high muscular tension, forceful breathing and crisp, linear movements. RKC was designed as a strength and conditioning system for combative applications. If tra-

According to Pavel, "The kettlebell will give you an infinite freedom of lifting."



ditional kettlebell training is akin to aikido, RKC relates to karate. A U.S. Secret Service instructor described the RKC system as "simple and sinister."

Today RKC is a school of strength. I have a top-notch team of eight senior instructors who have developed their own branches of the RKC system and helped me refine the foundation. These Americans are advancing Russian kettlebell training as the Brazilians have done for Japanese jujitsu.

OH: How can one get started in kettlebell training?

PT: Our site, RussianKettlebell.com is your one-stop shop. Books, DVDs, a directory of certified instructors, free training articles, a forum, it's all there. See what you're made of.

Editor's note: Next month Pavel discusses fat burning, strength vs. muscle, breaking training plateaus and his favorite training program.

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