Kettlebell Training for Martial Artists
Tae Kwon Do/Hapkido Specific

What is the RKC™ system?

The Russian Kettlebell Challenge™ is the elite certification created by ex-trainer to the Soviet Special Forces, Pavel Tsatsouline. The complete story is available at dragondoor.com. The RKC™ has been described as a "system of strength" because it is a comprehensive set of principles, techniques, and applications that accelerate human performance. The Russian Kettlebell is the equipment, but the RKC™ system is the instruction manual. Without instructions, you've got an iron ball with a handle. A kettlebell without an instructor will improve your performance as much as a punching bag without a martial arts instructor would improve your ability to fight.

Why is kettlebell training ideal for hard-style martial arts?

The RKC™ system is a 'hard-style' training method, in the same way that TKD and Hapkido are 'hard-style' martial arts. That is, both emphasize using focused muscular tension to generate force. The underlying principles of force generation are similar in both systems, so the kettlebell conditions the body while the training method conditions your nervous system. The combination will improve your physical fitness as well as your ability to control your body. Your instructors and I feel that the addition of the Russian kettlebell to your existing martial arts practice will safeguard your health and accelerate your technical improvement.

Whether the perfect strike or the ideal kettlebell snatch, the ideal technique is the most motor units within a muscle activated the fastest with the maximum synchronicity and the optimum sequence which transfers all possible forces up the line at the point of impact—every bit of force that *all* of the muscles in your body are able to generate *driving against the ground*.

How is kettlebell training similar to martial arts practice?

The goal is perfect technique. The method of achieving this is constant mindfulness during training. Constantly striving to perfect your technique is the first principle—we say that technique is the way in which strength is displayed.

What RKC™ principles will enhance your martial arts practice?

- Strength is expressed through technique
- Rooting—better awareness of your connection to the ground (Two Hand Swing, Single Leg RDL)
- Linkage—to sum up forces generated from legs and core (Turkish Get-Up, Snatch)
- Joint compression—balance and injury prevention (Military Press, Single Leg RDL, Windmill, Turkish Get-Up)
- Safe ballistic exercises—including swings, pulls, clean, snatch. Most weight training is slow, unlike the extreme forces generated during a violent encounter. Sports medicine has generally recognized that specificity of training is important so the kettlebell allows unprecedented gains in explosiveness and the 'sharpness' or 'crispness' of movements.

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What can you expect from consistent kettlebell training?

In a word, STRENGTH.

Recognize that speed, endurance, and even balance are types of strength. Strength means the ability to exert force and does not have anything to do with physical size. Since force is exerted in the world, strength is always exerted through technique. We say that technique is the medium through which strength is displayed. Explosiveness, for example, can be expressed as a reverse punch or a vertical jump or a slap shot.

As you become stronger, what will you notice in your training and daily life? That is, how will your strength manifest itself hen there are no weights around?

1. Improved **proprioception**. You will notice that you are more aware of your muscles and joints and how they move; I sometimes refer to this as *internal awareness or internal body control*.
2. Your **balance** will improve. You will pay attention, perhaps for the first time, to the muscles in your feet and how they interface with the ground.
3. You will learn to protect your joints with muscle tension. Consistent kettlebell lifting leads to increased tendon and ligament strength as well as bone density. Users often comment that they feel as if kettlebells have made them more dense and compact. During grappling and joint locking, you will be more resistant to injury and stronger at extreme positions once you are aware of how to compress and strengthen your joints with maximum muscle tension.
4. You will become denser, physically harder, and more **resilient.**
5. You will be harder to move.
6. You will notice an improvement in your ability to tolerate high-intensity exercise such as sparring, wind sprints, high-rep calisthenics, etc. Kettlebells allow you to safely generate what we refer to as 'high-quality fatigue', or breathing so hard that your back teeth hurt. Ultimately this feeling of lactic acid flooding the system to the point of feeling panicked, or even poisoned, is the reality of a physical confrontation. Kettlebells are perfect for martial artists because they condition the hard to measure but vital quality I refer to as **'discomfort tolerance'.**
7. High-rep swings alternated with easy jogging or rope jumping are *the working person's cure for excess body fat*. Quite simply, there **is** a number of kettlebell swings that you can achieve on a regular basis which will dramatically increase your metabolism, stripping any excess body fat you are not still feeding. In my experience, most clients show significant weight loss at 1,000 reps per week, and it becomes dramatic above 250 reps per day. To put this in perspective, 10 sets of 25 reps, while taxing, only last forty seconds per set. This means that the total work time in this 'heinous' schedule is 400 seconds—less than seven minutes. Be honest with yourself about how your body composition affects your health and your martial arts practice, and decide whether you have ten minutes of 'discomfort tolerance' per day. If not, you might want to play Ping-Pong. Think about it.

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Two Hand Kettlebell Swing

Position the kettlebell between your feet, behind the line of your big toes.

Stand upright with your heels slightly wider than your hips, feet turned out slightly. Practice rooting, consciously, every time you begin. Think of gripping your big toe into the ground, or imagine your big toe, ball of your foot, and inside edge of your heel as nailed to the floor.

Safety first: it is vital that you learn the arched back position and maintain it through all deadlifts, swings, etc. *The arched back position is crucial to all safe lifting*. If at any time you feel unable to maintain a tightly arched back **stop the exercise**.

Arch your back by pulling your shoulder blades down and together, opening up your chest. At the same time stick your butt out, completing the curve of tight muscle from your tailbone to your neck. This position in which the muscles along the spine are tight pushes the discs in and protects the back with tension.

Next pay attention to safe knee position. For the time being we will consider the knee joint safest when it is directly over the ankle. Minimize any deviation; especially learn to sit back away from the knee rather than allowing it to flex forward.

Look straight ahead, keep your back arched, and push your butt back and down until your thighs are roughly parallel to the floor. Your shins should still be perpendicular to the ground or very close.

At this point drop your hands straight down between your legs without looking down.

Grip the kettlebell. Tense your body so that as soon as you begin to drive your heels into the ground, the bell is squeezed off the ground at the same rate. This is known as *pre-loading tension*. Practice it before lifting anything to prevent a sudden jerk being transferred directly to a joint.

The start position for the swing is the top of the basic safe lifting position: back **arched**, chest out, arms locked, head up, tension through hips and legs especially, weight on heels.

Begin the swing by sitting back and down and pushing the bell back between your legs, accentuating the momentum by slightly cocking your wrists as if you were snapping a football.

The far back and down position is the bottom of the basic safe dead lifting position: legs bent at the knees because the hips are thrust strongly backwards, torso sharply forward

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with back tight and arched, looking forward, with maximum tension in the hamstrings especially.

As you reach the end point, and the maximum amount of energy stored in the hips and legs from receiving momentum, reverse direction.

Drive the bell upward by EXPLOSIVELY extending your knees and hips. You can think of pushing your feet into the ground and your hips sharply up and under your body, like a vertical jump.

Your arms stay fully extended and your shoulder blades retracted, tight in their sockets. The swing should never feel like an arm or shoulder exercise—this is not a front delt lateral! All arm motion comes from the thrust of your hips against your forearms.

During the swing (if performed correctly), the bell will seem to float up, almost weightless at the top from the momentum you have imparted to it with hip drive.

Benefits of the Two Hand Swing

Think of the Two Hand Kettlebell Swing as the ultimate exercise to strengthen the *posterior chain*, the largest and strongest set of muscles in your body. The posterior chain is composed of your hamstrings, hips, glutes, lower and upper back. All versions of the kettlebell swing rely heavily on these muscles, strengthening them for long duration efforts better than standard weight training techniques.

Swings teach you hip drive, full body muscular tension, how to catch and re-direct energy, and more. They strengthen your grip more than conventional lifting because centrifugal force tries to pull the kettlebell from your hand. With every swing, think *hips, back, and grip*.

Swings also help remedy a quad-hamstring imbalance present in almost everyone, which contributes to two widespread conditions—tight hamstrings and knee injuries (which often occur when the hamstring is too weak and the knee ligaments receive too much sudden force).

Swings can be combined with several other training methods to great advantage. The swing creates a full-body, background fatigue and increased metabolism that can be used to dramatically increase your fitness level. Some examples we favor:

- Two Hand Swing for time (30-60 sec.) alternating with jump rope, same time
- Two Hand Swing for reps alternating with calisthenics such as push-ups or pull-ups. One example is a ‘reverse ladder’—10 swings then 10 push-ups, 9 swings and 9 push-ups, etc.
- Two Hand Swing and Plank or Single Hand Swing and Single Arm Plank

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Turkish Get-Up

In a sit-up you sit-up, in a Get-Up you_____.

Look at the kettlebell at all times, and keep your arm locked tight, sucked into the shoulder socket, and pointed directly at the ceiling. This is vital to safe performance. **Do not be distracted by mirrors!**

To start with right hand, begin drill by lying on back with kettlebell at right shoulder.

Roll to your right side; put your right hand in the handle of the bell and your left hand over both. Pull your shoulder tight in the socket and suck your arm tight to your body by flexing your armpit.

Roll onto your back again, now holding the bell with both hands directly over your shoulder, which will remain tightly compressed for the entire exercise.

Use two hands to position KB and press to lock out; the KB will be perpendicular to the ground. Suck your shoulder tight in the socket. Left leg is flat, right leg is bent with heel close to right buttock.

Maintain locked arm and use right leg drive to initiate rollover to left hip, then shoulder/side and onto left upper arm then hand. Throughout exercise, right arm remains locked and pushing kettlebell vertically *while actively pulling shoulder into socket*.

Use left arm to position the upper body into sitting position.

Bridge up between right foot and left hand; raise your body enough that you can draw your left leg under you into a lunge position. Stabilize yourself here before standing up

Stand up. Bring legs to parallel position.

To get back to prone position bring left leg back into reverse lunge position and kneel.

Find ground with left hand and lower left hip to ground to lower the center of gravity.

Slide left hand along ground to gradually lower body.

Roll onto back and repeat steps 3 – 5 for desired number of repetitions. When finished, lower kettlebell to the right side with two hands.

Breathing: Breath in a **shallow** fashion: "sip" air while maintaining tight abs and core. Don't exhale completely at any time while performing exercise.

Military Press

As with all lifts, begin by rooting consciously. Ideal position is heels together.

Stabilize joints—ankles tight, kneecaps pulled up, butt locks pelvis in, shoulder blades

Rack position is arm tight against side, kettlebell resting low on the hand, wrist completely straight

Shoulder blades are pulled down and together, chest open

Press up, keeping elbow under fist and wrist hard

Forearm stays perpendicular to ground, elbow inside the line of the body

Shoulder stays down—think of pressing the bell up at the same time as your shoulder blade down

The Military Press is a *grind* lift, meaning it depends on constant muscular tension and not speed

Single Leg RDL/Stiff Leg Deadlift

Stand on one foot with a slight bend in the knee of the base leg. **Root** especially strongly thinking of your big toe, ball of your foot, and inside point of your heel being attached to the mat

Hold a kettlebell in the opposite hand from the foot on ground (bell in right, left foot on ground, for example. This way the KB is somewhat of a counterweight)

Compress the base leg. Muscular tension should surround and lock the ankle and knee joints. Controlled tension at the hip will allow you to raise your leg slowly and under control.

Maintain a flat or arched back

Raise your heel, maintaining the same slight bend in your base leg. Keep your moving leg in line with your torso—when it stops rising, your torso should stop inclining forward

Return to standing by using hamstrings and pushing hips under your body until you are upright again.

You should feel everything in your hamstrings and glutes—if you feel anything behind your kneecap, your base leg has straightened. If you feel a stretch in your low back it means that you are bending further than your back leg is rising. Keep all the tension in the back of the base leg.

Miscellaneous

The first type of strength is *stability*. **Stability** (*static* or *isometric strength*) is the ability to exert force to maintain a posture or position—locking your body into place and resisting gravity. The Plank is the best exercise for developing this type of strength.

Plank position on knuckles on mat
- Breathe shallow to hold tension
- Tighten feet and ankles
- Draw up calves
- Pull-up kneecaps
- Squeeze butt
- Breathe shallow
- Belly-button to asshole
- Suck shoulders into sockets
- Screw hands into ground

Balance is a more active form of stability and involves maintaining optimum position and posture in a dynamic environment

By properly firing muscles, strength can be increased—the amount of force exerted can be enhanced by learning, not just training and/or muscle size

Technique is not what is discarded under heavy load, but that which is emphasized—whatever the technique calls for in terms of tension, increase as load increases. *To be strong—practice being strong.* This is different than practicing to resist fatigue; you must understand this.

General Safety Notes

Police the area around you throughout the session

Safety is first and last priority

Discretion is the better part of valor, always

If you are going to be stupid you'd better be tough

Be aware of your grip and the (potential) path of the KB

Keep your hands and bell dry and use chalk as necessary

Nothing is perfect; risk reduction is the ongoing goal

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Training Suggestions

Party Minimum

Five sets of 20 Two Hand Swings
Alternated with
Five one-minute sets of Turkish Get-Ups

This workout is called the "Party Minimum" and is recommended to be performed three times per week if you do no other conditioning. The total time should be no more than 12-15 minutes. This illustrates the 80/20 rule, in that this small amount will give a large portion of the benefits of kettlebell training to beginners. It will also maintain fitness in those who have built up to a higher level.

Basic Old School Lead-In

30 sec. Two Hand Swing
Alternated with
30 sec. Plank on knuckles
Perform three continuous sets (total of three (3) minutes)

30 sec. One Hand Swing
Alternated with
30 sec. *One Hand* Plank (similar to position for one-hand push-up)
Perform two sets per side (total of two minutes)

This entire series—5 sets of swings, 5 sets of planks—takes five minutes when done by the timer and will improve your striking power *in half a dozen workouts or less.* To take this to the next level, hit the bag after each set of planks for 30 seconds, then rest for 30. The sequence then becomes Swing—Plank—Heavy Bag—Rest, 2 minutes total, and the whole thing will take ten minutes. *Ten minutes, three times a week, for two weeks, and you will hit harder.*

Foot and Ankle Strength and Stability

5 Single Leg RDL/Stiff-Leg Deadlift
Followed by
5 Pistol Squats on the same leg
Followed immediately by
15 hops on the ball of the same foot.

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