

## *Kettlebells just might fit the bill*

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7/10/2008 - 7/11/08

Amy Christian squats in a field with what looks like a small cannonball in her hands.

She belts out an audible, forceful breath, and pitches the odd-shaped device, which has a handle, as far as she can.

Mastering proper form is harder than it looks. She fetches the kettlebell, as it's called, and starts over. She hikes the 26-pound chunk of cast iron between her legs, swings her arms upward, snaps her hips and watches the black kettlebell crash onto the earth before her.

In this explosive fashion, she travels across the field.

"Doesn't this feel totally Russian?" she says to her comrades. "I feel like we should go drink some vodka."

Instead of wearing heavy boots in the snow, though, these militants are barefoot in the sun-scorched grass at Patrick Smith Park near Canyon Road. The group meets now at Torreón Park off of West Alameda.

They're here to get fit. And their commander, Keira Newton, is a small woman with floral tattoos — hardly the brutish drill sergeant you might imagine.

"This is a really intense workout, because you're using the maximum force in every move," she tells an introductory class of six. "You're not doing one thing the whole time; you're asking your body to do intense interval kind of training, sort of like sprints. You're using a lot at one time, recovering and then doing it again."

Pavel Tsatsouline is the Russian behind this fitness fad. When he was an instructor with the Soviet Special Forces, he used "kettlebelling" as a conditioning technique.

In 1998, Tsatsouline first told America's strongmen about kettlebelling in an article for the magazine *MILO*. Then, in 2001, he promoted the kettlebell to a broader audience of Americans through his book, *The Russian Kettlebell Challenge*. That same year, his publisher, Dragon Door, began manufacturing and selling kettlebells in the United States, and Pavel's instructor certification program got established.

In New Mexico, Newton is one of five Russian-kettlebell-certified instructors trained through Tsatsouline's program.

The kettlebell has been whipping Russians into shape since the turn of the 18th century — and now its portability has developed a great appeal for busy Americans, who are bored with their weight benches and too tired to get to the gym.

For Christian, a professional aerialist and Wise Fool New Mexico's artistic director, weightlifting has always seemed dull: "No. Yuck. Not interested." And between work and raising her daughter, she doesn't have time to swim anymore.

Killer strength and phenomenal flexibility are already in her possession, but at 42, she is falling short on aerobic conditioning, she admits. When a colleague at Wise Fool told Christian that kettlebell drills combine all three, she was intrigued and signed up for Newton's two-hour introductory class.

In 2002, *Rolling Stone* called kettlebells the "hot weight of the year." Today, kettlebell lifting competitions are held in many countries. And from Boston to L.A., there are studios devoted to kettlebell classes for the average person.

"There are tons of them in California. It's just blowing up," Newton said.

Many kettlebell Web sites feature beautiful, bulky men who can't help but gaze at their ripped navels all day. But here in Santa Fe, Newton's typical client is a mother with a career.

For the past few months, Newton has held classes in various city parks. "The beauty of kettlebell is you can do it in a small space at home," the mother of two said. "But I love doing it in a field."

### **Using the whole body**

From the deltoid to the lateral epicondyle, Newton's upper arms are nicely proportioned and lithe. Her 108-pound frame is tight and powerful.

For herself and her classes, she designs routines that produce long, lean muscles. "Most women are fearful that they're going to bulk," she says.

She mixes in pushups and other exercises so clients don't get bored or overly fatigued.

Results are seen quickly, because you use the whole body with every movement, Newton says, and you swing heavy weights. The average woman starts with an 18-pound bell, which costs about \$80, unless you buy a knock-off brand.

Although 95 percent of Newton's clients are women, the kettlebell has a strong following among men nationally, including boxers, wrestlers and even martial artists, who can relate to the fluid movements and hip snaps.

For those who want The Hulk look, kettlebells can achieve that, too. You up the poundage and change the drills.

In Minneapolis, Newton just got her level-two certification, which gives her advanced training in more demanding workouts as well as corrective strategies and injury prevention.

Her other job is as a Feldenkrais practitioner at McGhee Therapy. Developed by a Russian-born physicist, this method of working with the human nervous system translates into her work with kettlebells.

#### **'Like some sort of torture device'**

The first time she saw a kettlebell, Newton wasn't impressed. As a student at St. John's College, her husband, Mark Bixby, caught the kettlebell buzz and went full-throttle with his workouts.

Newton thought he'd gone nuts. He'd take the kettlebells out in the snow and sling them around, and she wondered what drove him.

"I found it to be a little bit abusive and barbaric ... like some sort of torture device that once belonged to a caveman," she says.

One day, she tried it. In between diapering and feeding her baby she could get in a tough workout.

"It can be everything in one," Newton says. "It's basically your hand-held gym."

But then this workout wonder backfired. Newton developed tendonitis in her elbows.

Poor form was the cause of the problem. She didn't give up, though. She found Zar Horton, a Russian Kettlebell Challenge certified trainer at FireBellz in Albuquerque, and was "blown away" by the difference better technique made.

For eight months of her pregnancy with Cora, who is now 2 years old, Newton hoisted the kettlebells. She liked that her other daughter, Ruby, didn't have to get shuffled off to the gym.

"I had a nursing infant that I couldn't leave for long stretches," Newton said. "The kettlebell allowed me to get an intense, 15-minute workout in my living room and still be within five feet of my baby."

She gained 44 pounds during her pregnancy, but within four months of giving birth to Cora, she was back to her pre-pregnancy weight, thanks to the kettlebell.

"A year later, I had lost another seven pounds and three waist sizes," Newton said. "Most impressive to me was that as I was getting leaner, I was also getting stronger. After starting my kettlebell training with an 8-kg bell (18 pounds), I am currently using a 16-kg bell (35.3 pounds)."

#### **Wide range of appeal**

In her classes, Newton is a stickler about form. Flattening the back, thrusting out the hips, zipping up the belly, staking the knees over the feet, driving through the heel — these practices are key to preventing injuries.

Newton has her students wear flat shoes or go barefoot. Cushioned shoes can throw off one's balance, she said.

The hot potato, the slingshot, the dead lift, the swing and the squat are the first moves Newton teaches to beginners.

"You're probably going to be sore tomorrow. I'm going to suggest if you have a bell, swing it," she warned the class.

Only one person in the group, a man, had been lifting weights regularly.

As one woman tried the squat, she felt as though she was going to tip over. Newton said that was because the woman rounded her back when it should be flat.

Newton demonstrated the squat one more time.

"It looks like I'm using my arms," she said. "But the main part of the movement is in my hips and in my butt."

Stephen and Pam Trujillo, in their mid-30s, were hooked by the end of the first class. They liked that the workout engaged the core of their body, and that the kettlebell was a small piece of equipment that they could take anywhere.

Maida Rubin, 18, said she learned the value of kettlebells in the physical education program at Desert Academy, where Newton's husband used to teach with Newton's assistance. The drills produced outstanding results for the teenagers: weight loss as well as better scores in track and high jump.

"This is a lot more interesting (than lifting weights)," the former track runner said.

She encouraged her mother, 51-year-old Louise Rubin, to take the introductory class with her. Her mother is moving to Boston, which has a kettlebell workout studio.

Newton would like to open such a studio in Santa Fe, but she needs a place where the heavy bells won't bash polished, wooden floors and participants can spread out. And, in general, she's trying to recruit more men.

#### Noticeable rewards

Ana June, 36, has never cared for weight lifting. She took up yoga last summer after hip surgery, and this year turned to kettlebells to raise her fitness level a notch.

"In a month of doing this, I've far exceeded doing two months of yoga," said the mother of four and art director for New Mexico Free Press. "I can now put on a bikini."

Marja Martin, 43, runs a catering business and expends the rest of her energy keeping up with her 7-year-old son. "The thing that's amazing about this — I wasn't exercising at all. This is manageable with a business and a kid," she said. "That's the biggest selling point, and that's why we're almost all moms."

For the past two months, she has devoted at least 15 minutes to kettlebells three to four times a week. On Wednesdays and Saturdays she goes to Newton's class, which is an hour long. The other days she swings kettlebells at home or in the commercial kitchen where she works.

She admitted she was "devastatingly sore" for the first two weeks. But now, she has dropped two dress sizes without changing her eating habits, other than eliminating wheat. "I'm a cook; I don't do diets," Martin said.

Her reward: Having a fabulous time trying on dresses at Nieman Marcus in Dallas — and getting positive remarks from her petite, picky mother.

"It is noticeable, and I've only been doing it two months," Martin said.

That kind of efficiency is exactly what makes this Russian invasion tough to beat in the American fitness industry.

#### If you go

**What:** Russian kettlebell workout sessions with Keira Newton. To attend, you must have prior kettlebell training, preferably with a certified Russian kettlebell instructor.

**When:** 5:30 p.m. Wednesdays (all levels), 9:30 a.m. Saturdays (advanced), 10:30 a.m. Saturdays (beginners and intermediate levels).

**Where:** Torreon Park, 1515 W. Alameda St.

**Cost:** \$15 per session

**Information:** For additional details, or to schedule a two-hour introductory session for \$80, call 501-0180 or visit [www.dkbfitness.com](http://www.dkbfitness.com).