

Physical Culture | Gear Test, Kettlebells

1 of 8 ◀ ▶

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TO gymgoers used to sleek, bright equipment, the kettlebell is downright intimidating. The cast iron weight rose to prominence in Russia and has long been used by serious bodybuilders. It was also the preferred workout tool of Soviet soldiers.

“Traditionally the kettlebell is used in hardman training,” said Pavel Tsatsouline, a kettlebell trainer and former instructor for the Russian special forces who helped introduce kettlebells to the United States.

Despite their daunting appearance and history, kettlebells are easy to use and, proponents say, an effective way to get a full-body workout. Their popularity has exploded since hitting the United States market about 10 years ago, especially among women looking to tone and firm from head to toe with one piece of equipment. Kettlebells can be used like dumbbells for many maneuvers, but their handle allows users to swing the weight in any direction.

“It’s challenging,” said Mr. Tsatsouline, who helped develop Dragon Door kettlebells. “It challenges the heart, the muscles, everything. You get a workout quickly. But you have to work. You can’t sit and watch CNN and do kettlebells. It feels very liberating. I think people are tired of sitting around like gerbils on machines.”

Lorna Kleidman, two-time winner at the Girevoy (Kettlebell) World Championships, tested some kettlebells for ease of use and grip. Everyone will notice differences in grip and feel, and choosing a type is “all based on personal preference,” Ms. Kleidman said. *By KATIE ZEZIMA*

Physical Culture | Gear Test, Kettlebells

2 of 8 ◀ ▶



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ETALON \$125 to \$165, adjustable weights; www.usgsf.com. The official kettlebells of the United States Giveroy Sport Federation, these are the bells used in competitions. “A must for those who want to practice lifts with old-school Russian-style bells,” Ms. Kleidman said. The bells are larger than most, with a 35-millimeter handle. The hollow weights can be made heavier by unscrewing them and adding sand or coins. Ms. Kleidman called these the best choice for competitors who want to master traditional lifts.

Photo: Donna Alberico for The New York Times

Physical Culture | Gear Test, Kettlebells

3 of 8 ◀ ▶



GO FIT \$29.99 to \$89.99, 10 to 45 pounds; www.target.com. The brightly colored balls have black handles, which Ms. Kleidman found to be "the most slippery." She doesn't like the "flat edges on the side of the weight's body," as it "changes the inertia of the bell." The bright-colored rubber coating is thick, and good for home exercisers who don't want to scratch their floors.

Photo: Donna Alberico for The New York Times

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Physical Culture | Gear Test, Kettlebells

4 of 8 ◀ ▶



MUSCLE DRIVER \$30.95 to \$63.95, 10 to 35 pounds; www.muscledriver.com. The handles on these kettlebells are the thinnest of the group, and may cut into the user's hands after a long set, Ms. Kleidman said. The handle is "not my favorite" and "rolls around the hand a little more than I like." It may present a grip problem for people who perspire a lot or are working out for an extended period. The brand's fitness version features red vinyl-coated bells.

Photo: Donna Alberico for The New York Times

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Physical Culture | Gear Test, Kettlebells

5 of 8 ◀ ▶

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DRAGON DOOR \$75.95 to \$295.95, weights from 10 to 106 pounds; www.dragondoor.com. This bell is “very comfortable and well balanced,” Ms. Kleidman said, making it “one of my favorites.” This expensive brand, she said, sells out quickly. The handle is very smooth, which “may make it difficult, especially for beginners, to perform certain movements.”

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Physical Culture | Gear Test, Kettlebells

6 of 8 ◀ ▶



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KETTLEBELL CONCEPTS \$23.99 to \$87.99, 10 to 79.2 pounds; www.kettlebellconcepts.com. This less-expensive kettlebell is a “must have,” and the “best value,” Ms. Kleidman said. She praised the handle’s smooth finish, which was “neither too slick nor too rough” and feels “great in the hand.” She recommends ordering the gray kettlebells, as the black finish can chip off.

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Physical Culture | Gear Test, Kettlebells

7 of 8 ◀ ▶



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POWER MAX \$38.80 to \$206.25, weights from 8.8 to 110 pounds; www.gillathletics.com. The kettlebell is “very well balanced,” due in large part to its slightly thicker handle. They are “easy to manage” and a good start for exercisers new to kettlebells, Ms. Kleidman said. The handle is a “little bit rough,” Ms. Kleidman said, and may require some sanding. But that roughness can “help your hand feel where the bell is going when you swing it overhead.”

Photo: Donna Alberico for The New York Times