

Building Muscle with Kettlebells

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There is magic to sets of 10 to 20 quick kettlebell lifts. Retired powerlifter Phil Workman, RKC, 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. Rock climber Kevin Perrone, RKC, was not amused when kettlebell clean and jerks put 15 pounds of beef on his wiry frame.

In 1952, *Ironman* founder and editor Peary Rader reported on a muscle builder who "used the clean and jerk as an exercise in a weight gaining experiment. Jim has always been a 'hard gainer' and found it almost impossible to make progress. He went on this program of cleans and jerks... with all the poundage he could use correctly for the required number of reps (about 15 to 20). He immediately began gaining weight very rapidly and was amazed that the practice of this one lift or exercise could have such a profound effect on his body. Subsequently, others have made similar experiments with this lift and found that not only was it a good weight gaining medium, but it also developed strength, endurance, speed and timing like nothing else. We also found it to be the toughest workout we have ever had." These words carry weight given the fact that Rader was one of the first in the iron game to heavily promote high rep barbell squats.

You may have read in *Hard Style* about the extraordinary deadlift accomplishments of powerlifter Donnie Thompson, RKC. Nine months after dropping deadlifts from his training and replacing them with kettlebell pulls, Thompson took his deadlift from 766 to 832, unprecedented progress for a world class power lifter! Shortly after that, Thompson won the professional world super heavyweight title.

But did you know that Donnie also added 100 pounds to his bench press? In three months, he gained 26 pounds of muscle on a routine that emphasized kettlebell quick lifts. Lee Haney, RKC, a 51 year old former college champion shot putter and Thompson's coach, added 15 pounds of muscle on the same routine.

I asked Haney to what he attributed his lifter's phenomenal progress. He replied, "Kettlebells work the muscles without killing them."

When I taught a kettlebell seminar at the world famous powerlifting Westside Barbell Club in Columbus, Ohio, I asked Louie Simmons the same question. Simmons is the West Side Barbell mastermind. Thompson has trained under him and has been following the Westside template. Louie said to me, "Kettlebell lifts are slower than plyometrics, slow enough to work the muscles." And you thought faster was always better!

True plyometrics must be very "touch-and-go" in order to teach you to recruit your muscles more explosively and make better use of stored elastic energy. They are not meant to build muscles for that reason because, at the intensities involved, you could not put up a high enough volume safely. (If you are interested in the complex science of plyometrics, read *Supertraining* by the late Mel Siff, Ph.D.)

Unlike plyometrics that are too quick and too low for reps, repetition quick lifts work the muscles most thoroughly. "Usually the athletes lift barbells and then immediately drop them. This takes several seconds," comments Dmitri Ivanov who interviewed Vasily Alexeev, the #1 weightlifter in the world of the 1970s. "According to Alexeev's method, the athlete finds himself under the weight for a period of two or three minutes. The entire body must sustain this prolonged effort, as the athlete completes several consecutive exercises without letting go of the equipment. The weight of the barbell is relatively light, but the varied work with it affects every muscle cell."

By the end of the two week session, all Alexeev's students had increased their bodyweight as a result of muscle growth, and at the same time, they increased their abilities to complete the lifts. Sultan Rachmanov, world weightlifting champion, had these words to say following a repetition quick lift program: "At first, I trained my own way. I didn't believe that Alexeev's advice would help me. Now I believe... My shoulders, my back, everything is filling up with strength."

Repetition quick lifts with the deceleration component build muscle fast, probably due to a unique combination of the muscular stress and the just right hormonal environment. The Russian kettlebell is the ideal tool for such training.

Why? Kettlebells can be swung between the legs. Such deceleration builds powerful hips. Try this with a barbell and see what happens! Kettlebells can be cleaned for many reps without stress to the wrists. Kettlebells demand that you rack them with your arms pressing tight against your torso. This position enables you to safely absorb the shock when dropping the kettlebells to your chest following a jerk.

Where this differentiates from the technique of barbell Olympic Lifts is that the OLs tend to deteriorate rapidly once reps go up. Russian National Weightlifting team members stick mostly to doubles on these days. Kettlebell quick lifts also usually get better with more reps.

With that said, here is a general prescription for building muscle that is as strong as it looks with kettlebell quick lifts.

1. **Do 10 to 20 reps per set, 50 to 100 per workout.** Experience shows that this rep range works best for building muscle with quick lifts. The number 10 is nice and round. Louie Simmons has found that 20 was too many for him. He became too sore and fatigued, so he sticks with 10s. Take your time to work up to the recommended 50 to 100 reps per workout volume.
2. **Train a muscle group two to four times a week.** Again, learned in the trenches, and you too will have to see what works best for you and your client.
3. **Use the “hard style” of lifting.** Don't pace yourself, and don't use energy saving techniques. “Come up with tremendous power to lockout. Don't play passive.” That is how Thompson does his swings.
4. **Do the quick lifts that require you to decelerate the kettlebell(s) on the bottom.** Rapid eccentric loading is essential to the success of a repetition quick lift program. It does not mean you should never do snatches and cleans straight from the platform as do Olympic weightlifters. Just don't emphasize them.
5. **Use heavy kettlebells. Double kettlebell drills are ideal.** Double kettlebell swings, snatches and cleans and jerks force your lower body to work harder and help you to get the right metabolic environment for muscle growth.
6. **Rest for one to two minutes between sets.** When training for strength, rest a lot between sets. Five minutes are standard, three are pushing it, 10 are not unheard of, and you can't beat resting for half an hour to an hour between sets. Conditioning is just as simple. Rest as little as possible. If you are not panting, you are slacking. Muscle building is a little trickier. Resting too long interferes with the production of muscle building hormones. Resting too little forces one to use lighter weights. A compromise is in order. The idea is to get pumped with a heavy weight. One to two minutes usually does the trick.
7. **Use hybrid lifts at least some of the time.** Combos will smoke you! Below are some double kettlebell hybrids from which to choose. You can invent many more. Note: “Grinds” like presses and squats are mixed in, but quick lifts make up the meat of the list.
 - Clean & Press
 - Clean & Jerk *(see Figures 1, 2 and 3 below)*
 - Clean & Front Squat
 - Jerk & Front Squat
 - Jerk & Overhead Squat
 - Clean & Press & Front Squat
 - Front Squat & PUSH Press
 - Snatch & Overhead Squat
 - Snatch & Press *(see Figures 4 and 5 below)*
 - Front Squat & SOTS Press
 - Snatch & Front Squat
 - Snatch & Press & Front Squat
 - Clean & Front Squat & Jerk
 - Snatch & Overhead Squat & Press
 - Snatch & Overhead Squat & SOTS Press
 - Snatch & Overhead Squat & SOTS Press & Front Squat & Press
8. **Eat!** Kettlebell lifting is very demanding. Most comrades will not put on muscle unless they eat... a lot!



Figure 4

Figure 5

The following is a sample six week strength and muscle building routine for individuals who are accustomed to heavy, high volume training. Adjust it to your strength and conditioning. Note that the workload goes up for three weeks, then backs off and builds up again.

A Fast 10s Program for Muscle and Power

EXERCISES	WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4	WEEK 5	WEEK 6
MONDAY						
1. C & P	2 x (5, 10) *	3 x (5, 10)	4 x (5, 10)	3 x (5, 10)	4 x (5, 10)	5 x (5, 10)
2. SN & FSQ	2 x 10 **	3 x 10	4 x 10	3 x 10	4 x 10	5 x 10
WEDNESDAY						
1. SN & P	2 x 5	3 x 5	4 x 5	3 x 5	4 x 5	5 x 5
2. C & J	2 x 10	3 x 10	4 x 10	3 x 10	4 x 10	5 x 10
FRIDAY						
1. SN	2 x 10	3 x 10	4 x 10	3 x 10	4 x 10	5 x 10
2. FSQ & PP	2 x 5	3 x 5	4 x 5	3 x 5	4 x 5	5 x 5

* 2 x (5, 10) means two series of 5 and 10 reps: 5, 10, 5, 10. One clean plus one press count as one rep.

** 2 x 10 means two sets of five reps. One squat and one press equal one rep.

As strongman Bud Jeffries, RKC, says, "Lower and repeat until you're convinced you're a better man for doing it or your wife calls you in."

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