

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Swingers and Kippers

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The most strident objectors to the kipping pull-up advocated by CrossFit have been the kettlebell swingers. They despise our “sloppy” pullups. Other communities have been confused by kipping but are ultimately receptive to it after an explanation of our reasons. The reaction of the Kettlebell community has been to call us a cult. I know how much they love swinging kettlebells, so here is my attempt to show that their flavor of Kool-Aid is really not that different from ours. The trajectories of the kettlebell swing, snatch, and clean are eerily similar to the trajectory of a kipping pull-up. Both use horizontal displacement to generate momentum along an arc that ultimately produces vertical displacement. In simpler terms, the backswing adds power to the movement. My grandpa had a good term for this motor recruitment pattern. He called it “the old heaveho.”

Dragon Door’s brochure claims, “Amazingly, the Russian kettlebell will make you good at many things you have not practiced. Gireviks report on our Strength Forum that they run faster, bend sixty-penny nails, bench or deadlift heavier, etc., just from lifting kettlebells. The only time they see the barbell, a nail, or running shoes is during the test!” I put emphasis on the heavier deadlifts because it goes to show that the ballistic loading of kettlebell swings can improve your limit strength. If you look at Dragon Door’s testimonial page, you will find no less than eight happy customers who report new personal records on the deadlift following a period of nothing but kettlebell work.

Robb Wolf of [CrossFit NorCal](#) had a personal best on weighted pull-ups of +90 lbs. After bringing his kipping pull-up numbers up to 44 reps at bodyweight,

he retested his weighted pull-ups and lifted a staggering +135 lbs. The analogy between kipping and swinging is evident in both the movement and in the results.

In the following pictures of the kettlebell swing and kipping pull-up, I have overlaid depictions of the trajectory of the shoulders and the kettlebell.

I see three distinct phases of each movement. The first is the backswing. In this phase, you are gathering momentum in the horizontal plane that will propel you into what I call the “power arc.” In the kipping pull-up, it is important to actively pull yourself forward with your upper and lower back into an arched position. On the kettlebell swing, you pull the weight back between your legs using your lats. These techniques help you extend your swing slightly farther.

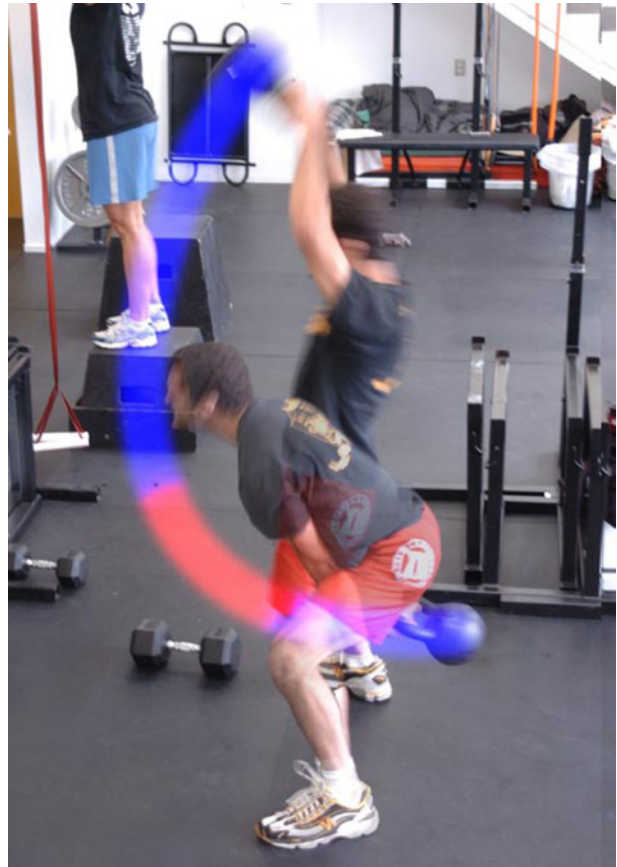
In the second phase, the “power arc,” you explosively pull yourself upward while simultaneously turning your hips under (from arch to hollow). In the kettlebell swing, you snap your hips up and forward to propel the bell to its destination overhead. I have colored the power arc red in each photo sequence. In both cases, the arms are still locked at the beginning of the power arc. As Mike Burgener teaches in the Olympic lifts, “when the arms bend, the power ends.” In the case of the KB swing, the arms never do bend. If we were to turn it into a snatch, the arms would bend only after the hips have extended. In the case of the kipping pull-up, the arms bend only after the swing has reached the apex of the arc. Then the upper back contracts and the hips snap from arch to hollow. When you look at all of these movements, take into consideration the “core to extremity” principle to be discussed in a future CrossFit Journal.

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Swingers and Kippers (continued...)

The third and final phase is the ballistic phase. You have already fired off your big muscles at their point of optimum leverage, so now you are guiding yourself to the top. Do not confuse this with relaxing. Even though your body or the kettlebell has picked up some momentum, you still need to apply force to keep it moving. This is where your arms come into both the kipping pull-up and the KB swing.

As you can see, the swing and the kip are incredibly similar in both trajectory and force application. Robb Wolf has observed that good Olympic lifters pick up the kip quite naturally and good kippers learn the Olympic lifts quickly as well. The crossover between the two is profound. Louie Simmons says that the kettlebell swing naturally teaches you to do what great deadlifters do instinctively. Likewise, kipping pull-ups will teach you proper pulling form so that you can avoid the pitfalls of becoming an arm puller. It is ironic that kettlebell lifters are so resistant to kipping, but once they try it, I'm sure they'll like it.



Notice that the path of the kettlebell swing is an elongated mirror image of the path of the kipping pull-up.

