

the **CrossFit**[®]

JOURNAL ARTICLES

The Kettlebell Press

Jeff Martone



Pressing weight overhead has been one of the classic tests of strength for centuries. Pressing barbells, dumbbells, kettlebells, sandbags, logs, bodyweight, etc. all have their place in a well-balanced training program, and all offer slight variations in stimulus and technique. Kettlebells, like dumbbells, have the advantage of permitting either one-arm or two-arm lifts, and they are biomechanically easier on the elbows and wrists than barbells and most odd objects. Regardless of the implement used, the tips and techniques outlined in this article will increase your strength and safety while pressing your implement of choice. The difference is in the details.

I know many people who have completely removed pressing movements from their training programs because they tend to aggravate a chronic wrist, elbow, shoulder, or back injury. If this is true for you, try the exercises below and pay attention to the subtle techniques of generating maximal tension before completely throwing in the towel on presses. Begin with a light weight, be patient, and practice the high tension skills outlined below.

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The Kettlebell Press (continued...)

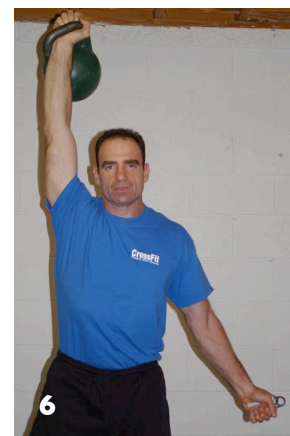
Execution

1. Clean one kettlebell to the racked position at the shoulder (i.e., with your hand below your chin, elbow in contact with your torso) (photo 1).
2. Pause motionless in this position for long enough to make sure you will not be using the momentum generated by the clean for the press. Be sure to keep your focus straight ahead.
3. Press the weight upward with your knees locked. Grip the floor with your feet, contract your quadriceps and pull your knee caps upward. Keep your glutes and abs tight, minimizing back bend (photo 2).
4. Recruit your lats, biceps, and grip while pressing. (See the strength tips listed below.)
5. Actively exhale (i.e., through clenched teeth) while pressing the weight up.
6. Lock out your elbow and pause motionless with the weight overhead (photos 3 and 4).
7. Working in the same line of action, actively pull the weight back down to the racked starting position.



Strength Tips

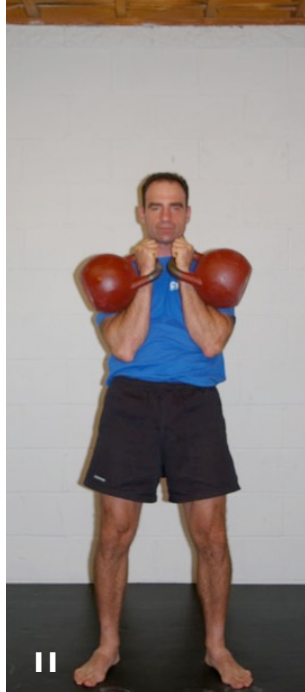
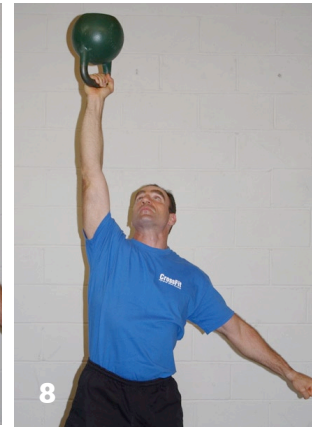
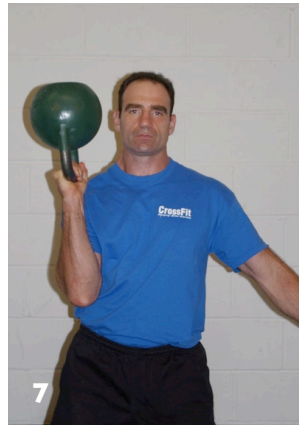
- It is important to instantly contract your abs, glutes, and armpits (lats) when you receive the kettlebell. This action is similar to that of taking a body punch; exhale on contact. You can practice heavy kettlebell cleans to help improve your skill at loading the tension for the press.
- Recruit your grip.
 - Crush the handle of the kettlebell, especially at the sticking point.
 - Make a fist with the free hand in one-arm presses, especially at the sticking point.
 - Try squeezing a gripper or a ball in the free hand.



The Kettlebell Press (continued...)

I found this practice to be extremely helpful in overcoming sticking points (photos 5 and 6).

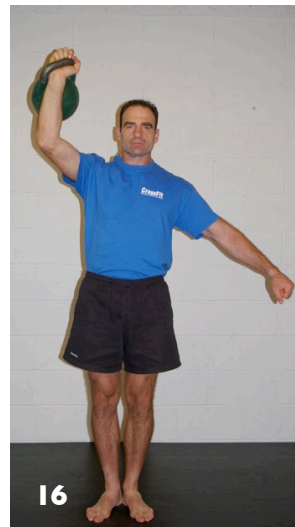
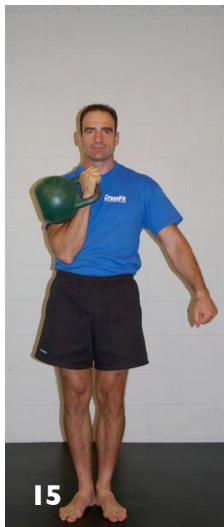
- Recruit your biceps.
 - Keep your forearm vertical at all times.
 - Don't press a kettlebell straight up but slightly to the side and spiral it upward. It makes for a more efficient use of your shoulder and biceps strength.
 - Practice "bottom up" presses (photos 7-10).
- Recruit your lats.
 - Keep the weight of the kettlebell on the heel of your palm.
 - Practice "see-saw" presses. Press one kettlebell overhead while having the other in the rack position. Actively pull down the overhead KB while simultaneously pressing the racked KB. This is not an alternating press. As one comes down the other is going up, passing each other at about head height (photos 11-13).
 - Try alternating sets of clean and presses with sets of weighted pull-ups.



The Kettlebell Press (continued...)

Assistance Exercises

- Walk with one or two kettlebells pressed overhead to increase shoulder strength, flexibility, and stability.
- Practice Turkish get-ups (see [CrossFit Journal issue 57 \[May 2007\]](#)).
- Practice pressing two kettlebells simultaneously (photo 14).
- Practice military presses with your heels together. (It is called a military press because the feet are pressed together in the position of attention.) Be sure to press your heels and legs together to generate maximal tension in the legs. You will be amazed at the stability and strength you'll have after practicing the press this way for a while (photos 15-17).



Sets and Reps

There's no magic number or set regimen for working your kettlebell press. Do as many as you can with perfect form. If your tension is high, your reps should be low, in the range of about three to five. Multiple sets of singles or doubles are great for building pure strength.

The sport of kettlebell lifting is one of strength endurance more than pure strength, and kettlebell work is particularly good at developing your ability in this realm. While training with world kettlebell champion Valery Fedorenko, I witnessed him press the 32-kg bell for 35 reps with each arm nonstop in ten minutes. That was motivating! So, here's another approach to developing strength endurance. Let's say you can perform five reps with the biggest kettlebell in your arsenal. Set up in front of a big clock, pace yourself for the greatest number of reps you can perform in one minute; then switch hands and repeat. Learn to pause and relax in the rack position. Instantly generate maximal tension needed for the press, and then relax, pause, and repeat. In only a couple of weeks, I went from pressing the 24-kg bell 10 times per side in two minutes to doing 25 reps per side in two and a half minutes. Granted, these numbers are pathetically weak in the kettlebell sport world, but the improvement shows the effectiveness of training with time under tension.

Whichever method you choose, stay focused on the details and never compromise good form for numbers or time. May you all reach new personal bests.



Jeff Martone, owner of [Tactical Athlete Training Systems](#), was one of the first certified senior kettlebell instructors in the United States. He is best known as the creator of "hand-2-hand" kettlebell juggling, SHOT training, and the T.A.P.S. pull-up system. He is also the author of six training DVDs. He was the first to implement kettlebell training in a federal law enforcement agency and now offers instructor-level certifications. He has over 15 years of experience as a full-time defensive tactics, firearms, and special-response-team instructor.