

the **CrossFit**

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Kettlebell Basics

Drills for Improving Your Swing

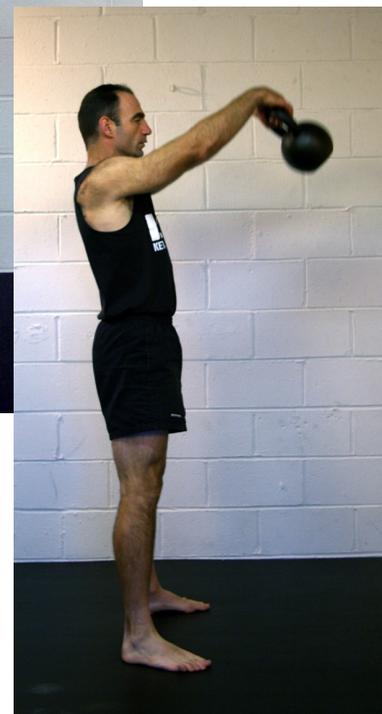
Jeff Martone

The purpose of this series of articles is to share specific kettlebell training tips and progressions to assist the CrossFit community in maximizing the full potential of their kettlebells. The kettlebell is an extremely versatile “old school” strength and conditioning implement. Used properly, it can build functional strength, stamina, flexibility, and amazingly rehabilitate old injuries. Used incorrectly, it can aggravate old injuries or quickly create new ones. The difference is in the details.

Remember, attention to detail and mastery of the fundamentals is what separates world-class performers from the rest of the pack. It is also the key to minimizing risk of injury. The goal is to train, not maim (ourselves or anyone else).

Veteran CrossFitters are very familiar with the two-arm swing. The swing is the foundation of kettlebell exercises. You will reap big dividends if you invest a lot of time in this drill. Uncorrected technical errors in the swing will only be magnified as you progress to the more sophisticated kettlebell lifts such as the clean, jerk, snatch, hand-to-hand (H2H) drills, etc. World War II veteran Sergeant Steve Prazenka said it best: “Learn it right, and you will do it right the rest of your life. Learn it wrong, and you’ll spend the rest of your life trying to get it right... and in battle, you meatheads that get it wrong—the rest of your life will be very short.” Listed in the “Rules of Engagement (following page) are proven teaching progressions that will help you to learn it right the first time and address common errors before they become habit.

This article addresses proper body alignment, proper breathing, and how to effectively recruit and stretch the hip flexors. If you study and apply the training sequences as prescribed, you will be well on your way to a more powerful and efficient American Swing. (Refer to issues 20 and 25 of the *CrossFit Journal* to see why the American Swing is CrossFit’s swing of choice.)



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Kettlebell Basics: Drills for Improving Your Swing *(continued)*

Rules of Engagement:

- Master each drill, in sequence, before progressing to the next drill.
- Limit the number of swings in your learning sets to 10 repetitions or less. At this point, the goal is perfect form—not a workout.
- Do not allow the kettlebell to swing higher than chest level (this is sometimes known as the Russian swing).

Note: There is a time and place for the overhead swing (aka American swing), but not until the Russian one is mastered. The most common error with swinging to overhead is for trainees to become so focused on *lifting* the kettlebell overhead that they forget all about driving through with their hips and overcompensate with their deltoids. The tell-tale signs are the infamous “droopy bell” and “smoked delts.”

- Focus your attention on the mechanics and nuances of generating maximum power from your hips.

Drill #1: Wall squat

This simple drill enforces proper movement patterns and discourages bad ones. It reinforces proper back and knee alignment and forces you to keep your weight on your heels. Perform 1 to 3 sets of 5 repetitions as a warm-up. This exercise also serves as an excellent remedial drill for the bad habit of allowing their knees to track in front their toes.

1. The stance.

Begin by standing in front of a wall with your toes about 3 to 6 inches away from the wall. Keeping your feet parallel, take a shoulder-width stance. As you become stronger and more flexible, you'll be able to perform this drill with your toes touching the wall. This is the same athletic stance you would take prior to performing a swing, deadlift, or standing vertical jump, etc.

2. The squat.

Jack-knife at the hips and slowly squat, keeping your weight on your heels. Maintain an “open” chest throughout the movement by pinching your shoulder blades together. Proper technique will keep your kisser from hitting the wall.

3. The hold.

Hold the bottom position of the squat for 5 seconds. Feel the glutes activate, and *do not* relax into the bottom. Definitely do not let your lower back round (i.e., don't let the tail tuck under). Keep your chest open.

4. The lift.

Slowly return to the standing position. It is critical that you “lock out” at the top. In other words, your

knees should be straight, quads and glutes maximally contracted. Some find it helpful to imagine pinching a coin between their cheeks (glutes).

5. The plan.

Repeat for 1 to 3 sets of 5 reps before proceeding to the deadlift.

Application: Deadlift.

Once you've established the proper “groove” with the wall squat, it's time to apply the principles to the deadlift. Deadlift the kettlebell for 5 reps. Do not worry about the weight (or lack thereof). Keep your head up, chest open, back straight, and your weight on your heels throughout the movement.



Drill #2: Hip flexor recruitment drill

This drill will teach you how to effectively engage your hip flexors during the “loading,” or descending, phase of the swing. It will also teach proper back alignment and optimum hip flexor activation.

1. Begin by lying on your back. Place the fingers of each hand on the creases of your hips. This will help you feel whether your hip flexors are firing during the drill.
2. Raise your feet off the ground and flex your feet back toward you. If you have a partner, have him hold your feet by grabbing the top of your foot with a thumbless grip, palms down. You won't get the right stimulus if he holds your feet by the heels with palms up. If a partner isn't available, use a resistance band to assist (see photos).
3. Starting with your legs straight, feet flexed, slowly bring your knees to your chest. The band or your partner is to provide a little resistance. Properly executed, the hip flexors should feel like they are cramping by the time your knees make it to your chest. Hold this contraction for about 3 to 5 seconds and make a mental note of that sensation.
4. Repeat 3 times. Take a short break and then proceed to the wall squat.



Application: Wall squat

Go back to the wall and perform one set of 5 reps of the wall squat. This time purposefully engage the hip flexors every time you descend. In other words, *pull* yourself down “into the hole.” Don't just yield to gravity. If you can't feel your hip flexors firing, repeat the hip flexor recruitment drill until you can. Shake out any tension, and then proceed to the deadlift.

Application: Deadlift

Deadlift the kettlebell for 5 reps, actively engaging your hip flexors. Proceed to the swing.

Application: Swing

Perform a set of 8-10 Russian swings. Start with very low swings and gradually build up the height with every rep. Keep your chest open, arms straight, shoulders relaxed, and allow the kettlebell to swing freely.



Drill #3: Hip flexor stretch (shoulder bridge)

Here are two great stretches that will help unlock the full power of your hips. Tight hip flexors are reaching epic proportions in twenty-first-century America. All the time people spend sitting causes neural shortening of the hip flexors, which in turn causes us to short stroke our swing. The end result is loss of power. This drill will help you find and get rid of these power leakages.

Stretch #1:

This drill will dramatically increase your ROM (range of motion) and power output. The total time invested is less than a minute. So, get ready to release the “parking brake” and unleash the power.

1. Lie on your back, with your feet flat and heels close to your glutes.
2. Place a small medicine ball between your knees and squeeze hard.
3. Perform a shoulder bridge. Slowly raise your hips toward the ceiling, keeping your shoulders and head on the floor. Hold for five seconds, and then relax as you return to the starting position.
4. Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Stretch #2:

Here is a more powerful variation of the previous stretch and my personal favorite. However, if you have acute lower back problems or are obese, you may want to stick with the previous stretch. This type of stretch will yield better gains in less time. Perform steps 1 through 3 as you did in Stretch #1. This time, add a 5- to 10- second isometric hold at the top position. More specifically:

1. When your hips reach the limit of your ROM, place the fingers of each hand on the front part of your hip bones. Keep your arms tight against your body and apply downward pressure by driving your elbows towards the ground. Maintain that position and be sure to maximally contract all the muscles of your lower body (i.e. glutes, quads, hamstrings, etc.) for 5 to 10 seconds.
2. Release your fingers off your hips and exhale (out your mouth), while continuing maximal glute contraction. Executed properly, your hips should float to a new ROM. The harder you hold the isometric contraction, the greater the ROM gain will be when you release the hold.
3. Repeat this drill 3 to 5 times.

4. Immediately stand up. You should notice an immediate change in your posture when standing. You will feel taller as your posture returns to its original vertical alignment.

5. Proceed to the deadlift.

Application: Deadlift

Deadlift the kettlebell for 5 reps, actively engaging your hip flexors. Now proceed to the Russian swing.

Application: Russian swing

Perform a set of 8 to 10 Russian swings. Start with very low swings and gradually build up the height with every rep. You should feel an immediate sense of freedom of movement and power from your hips. If you do not feel more power from your hips, then repeat the above sequence then practice a few standing vertical jumps. This should yield noteworthy results



Kettlebell Basics: Drills for Improving Your Swing *(continued)*

I cannot overemphasize the importance of these drills. They will serve you well if applied prior to each training session or WOD.

Breathing tips

Proper breathing is essential for safety and maximal power. However, it is commonly overlooked and often not emphasized.

It is important to develop the habit of inhaling as 75-100% of your lung capacity prior to loading your muscles (i.e., lifting). Inhale through your nose on the descent prior to the deadlift or while descending during the swing

Rather than exhaling all of your air at once, forcefully exhale a tiny stream of air through your clenched teeth, while pressing

your tongue to the roof of your mouth. This will contract the diaphragm and the muscles of the abdominal cavity and increase your intra-abdominal pressure thus increasing the stability of the trunk and the transfer of force through it. On the upward portion of the swing, exhale a little bit of air, similar to a fighter exhaling on contact.

Make drill #1 and drill #3 a part of your daily routine. Employ proper breathing in all exercises. The difference is in the details, so work toward achieving perfect form. Think of each training session as just that: a "training" session, not a workout. Once you've mastered the kettlebell swing and these basics, you'll be ready for the many variations and challenging routines that I'll discuss in future articles.



Jeff Martone, the owner of [Tactical Athlete Training Systems, Inc.](#), 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 kettlebells into 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.