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JOURNAL ARTICLES

Kettlebell Clean

Jeff Martone

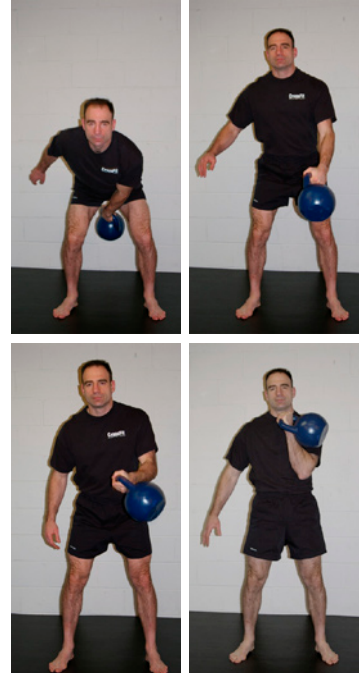
The clean is a traditional and versatile kettlebell exercise that everyone needs to master. Its original purpose was to provide a safe means to get one or two kettlebells in position for overhead lifts. The clean is the precursor for the military press, push press, double jerk, etc. The clean can be used by itself as an exercise for strength and endurance or in combination with bodyweight exercises or other high-repetition kettlebell exercises. Many combination exercises will be addressed in future articles. For now, let's concentrate on mastering the KB clean.

Contrary to the belief of many beginners, the KB clean is not supposed to be a forearm-toughening exercise! When properly executed, it should land as light as a feather and cause no bruising or pain to either the forearm or shoulder. Make a permanent "note-to-self": Sharp pain, consistent pain, or bruising usually means one thing—you are doing it wrong! Stop, assess the situation, make the necessary corrections, and then move on. The goal is training—not maiming.

The Standard

1. Start as if you were going to perform a one-arm Russian swing (described in CFJ # 53). All the points that apply to the swing also apply to the clean, minus the straight-arm requirement. The arms must stay loose, and the hips must do all the work of driving the kettlebell upward. Avoid the tendency to curl the KB.
2. The kettlebell should travel the shortest distance possible, following a vertical path, rather than an arc.
3. Pull the kettlebell into the body at shoulder height, allowing it to "roll" over onto the forearm on both the negative and on the positive. Do not allow the kettlebell to flip up and "crash" on your forearm.
4. The KB, the elbow, and torso must become one solid unit at the top of the clean. The shoulder must be pressed down, armpit squeezed tightly, triceps resting on the ribcage, and kettlebell resting between the forearm and the biceps, almost in the crook of the elbow.
5. Upon lockout, as the kettlebell lands on your forearm and upper arm, immediately tighten the abs and let out a little bit of air (similar to a boxer exhaling with a punch).
6. Keep the wrists straight and neutral; no flexion!

Tip: Contracting your glutes and abs hard will generate the power necessary to project the kettlebell.



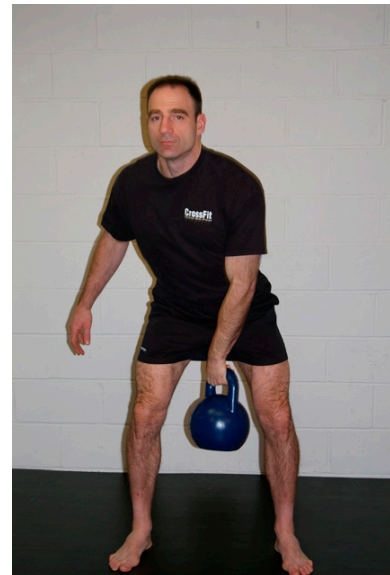
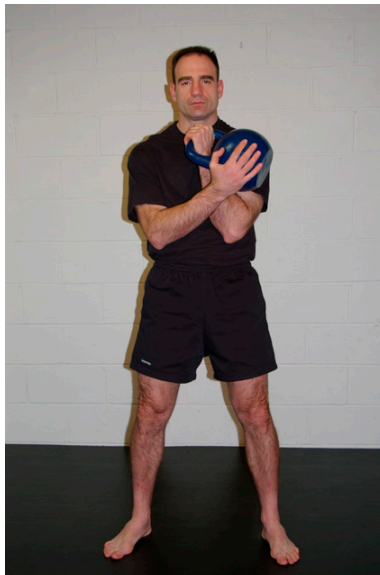
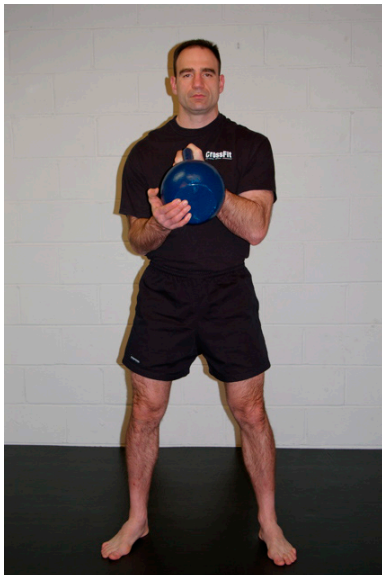
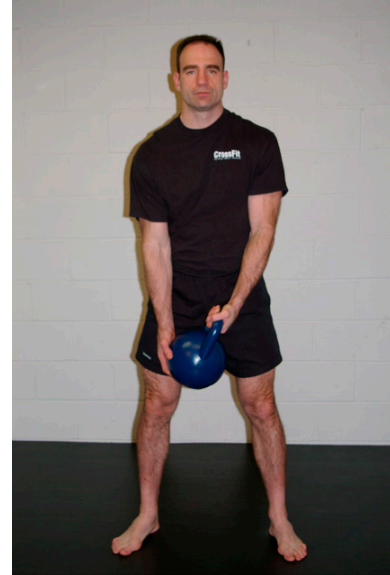
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Troubleshooting

Problem #1: The KB crashes on the forearm

Solutions:

1. Master the clean in reverse: Using two hands, set the kettlebell in the “rack” position. Perform only the negative portion of the clean. Allow the kettlebell to roll off your forearm, hinge at your hips, and allow the KB to swing between your legs.
2. It is important to slightly rotate the thumb toward the back as the KB swings between your legs.
3. Reset with two hands and repeat for 5-10 reps.
4. Switch hands and repeat steps 1 through 3.
5. Perform the entire clean from the rack position: first the downward phase and then the upward one, returning the KB to the rack position.
6. The kettlebell should roll around, not over, the hand onto the forearm.
7. Use slightly less power in your hip drive than is necessary for snatches. Keep full hip extension, but employ less power.
8. “Receive” the kettlebell (as in the childhood game of egg tossing); don’t let it bang your forearms.



Problem #2: The KB swings out too far forward

Solutions:

1. The kettlebells must travel the shortest distance possible—straight up, rather than arcing out.
2. Stand facing a wall while performing cleans. (Toes about 6 inches from the wall is about right.)

Caution: If you are too far from the wall, you won't get the desired training effect. If you're too close, your forehead will smack the wall. Hopefully, it will only take a rep or two for you to make the proper adjustment!



Problem #3: The KB swings too far outside the shoulder

Solutions:

1. Perform the clean while standing with your side close to a wall.
2. Squeeze your lats and press your upper arm against the ribcage. (Imagine you are holding a book under your arm. If you let your elbow flare out, you will drop the book.)



Problem #4: Your wrist hurts

Solutions:

1. Do not flex or extend the wrist. Keep it straight and neutral at all times.
2. You should be able to extend your fingers when the kettlebell in the “rack position.” It is important that the kettlebell handle is placed diagonally across your hand, similar to a “false grip” on the rings.



Problem #5: Your elbow hurts

Solutions:

1. Squeeze your fists, lats, abs, and glutes just before the KB touches your forearm.
2. Gradually build up to heavy weights or high reps.

The kettlebell clean is a great alternative to the barbell clean, especially if you have wrist flexibility issues. It teaches your body to generate power from the hip and to absorb impact and decelerate force. The benefits of these skills transfer to many sports and occupations. As with all foundational lifts, invest extra time learning the basics, and you'll soon be ready for the many variations.

Problem #6: Your lower back hurts

Solutions:

1. Sit back, rather than down.
2. Keep your shins nearly vertical throughout the movement.
3. Keep intra-abdominal pressure and glute tension high.
4. Keep your chest “open” by pinching your shoulder blades together.
5. Inhale through your nose as the weight descends.



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.