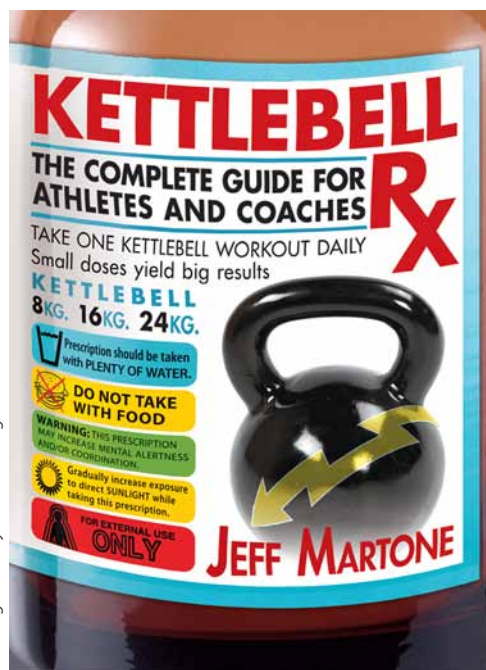

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All About the 'Bell

T.J. Murphy reviews Jeff Martone's new kettlebell manual.

By T.J. Murphy

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Kettlebell RX: The Complete Guide for Athletes and Coaches, by Jeff Martone. 320 pp. Victory Belt Publishing. \$34.95.

As reported by Jeff Martone in his new book *Kettlebell RX: The Complete Guide for Athletes and Coaches*, the kettlebell—or *gyra* in Russian—got its start as a functional piece of equipment not created for exercise but as a tool for measuring grain. The standard weight of grain was 16 kilograms, a “pood,” and the kettlebells—sometimes built by welding handles onto cannonballs—were easy to incorporate into strength contests that were held at Russian folk festivals. By 1897, “Girevoy” had been established as the national weightlifting sport of Russia, with a national championship.

The kettlebell typically holds a special place in the heart of the CrossFitter, as the introduction to the essential technique of the kettlebell swing is also an introduction to a key foundation of CrossFit: the preference for compound, core-to-extremity movements versus isolated movements. The concepts articulated thoroughly in early *CrossFit Journal* articles become viscerally clear upon the completion of a first met-con involving nothing more than an athlete's body weight and a kettlebell: a simple, one-piece, cast-iron weight, properly used, is a more effective tool than, for example, a gleaming triceps-training machine costing thousands of dollars.

Martone is the CrossFit kettlebell subject-matter expert and creator of the CrossFit Kettlebell Trainer's Course. He knows kettlebells. He's used kettlebells to train federal law-enforcement officers, coached the American Kettlebell Club, and created a system of kettlebell juggling (Hand-2-Hand Kettlebell Drills—something that might earn you burpees without the expressed written consent of your coach). Martone is an elite athlete when it comes to kettlebell competition.

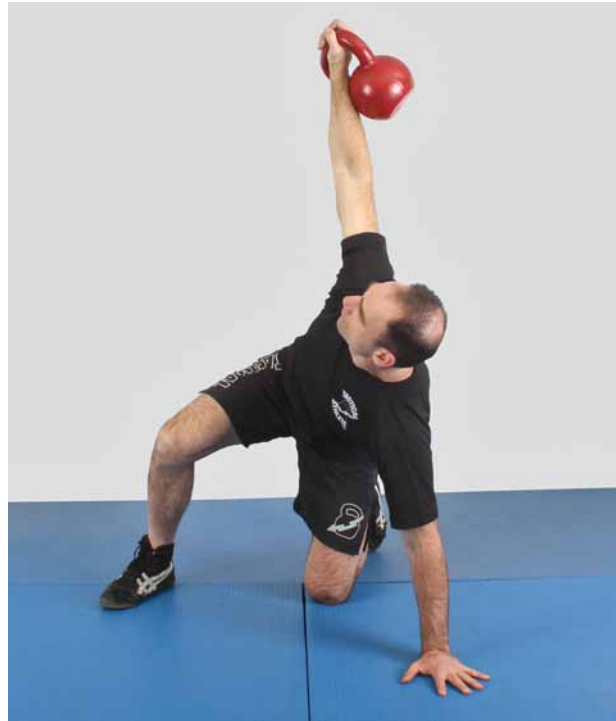
Martone's book is divided into three parts, the first dedicated to CrossFit athletes and coaches. In this regard, *Kettlebell RX* can be defined as a supporting manual to his CrossFit Trainer's Course: it's an extensive and detailed resource for the nuances of adopting into one's programming an assortment of new movement patterns using a kettlebell.

One type of reader who is likely not ready for *Kettlebell RX* is the athlete, like me, in his or her first year of CrossFit. While I found the step-by-step instructions generally clear and easy to follow and almost painfully thorough, certain types of advanced concepts of position and movement left me wanting more.

For example, simple cues—"Keep your chest open"—along with more complex foundational concepts such as midline stability made me recall my experience of first trying to do most of my CrossFit workouts alone at an L.A. Fitness versus later being coached at an affiliate. For me, the latter was an exponentially more effective and efficient process. Reading about how to do a deadlift, for example, as opposed to being shown how to do a deadlift and corrected in the process can yield two completely different techniques.

A beginner just starting to gain kinesthetic awareness of core concepts and how important they are—like midline stabilization, for example—may try and follow Martone's instructions but unintentionally go off track. Bad habits can be built despite the best intentions of the author and the athlete.

Again referencing myself, coaches at CrossFit Elysium first had to undo some of the poor mechanics I had inadvertently developed when I was more or less self-coached and referring only to books and videos. That said, if you're a beginner working out in a garage gym with no access to an affiliate or coaching, specialty books like *Kettlebell RX* might be the best option to nail down the nuances of a movement.



The Turkish get-up requires amazing shoulder stability and core strength, especially when the load is human.



No medicine ball? Martone has devised a wall-ball substitute using a kettlebell.

With the above in mind, I think *Kettlebell RX* will mostly appeal to CrossFit trainers in need of a reference source for refining proper mechanics with a kettlebell and more advanced CrossFit athletes who have a solid kinesthetic understanding of fundamentals. It will also offer coaches options on kettlebell exercises to keep their programming “constantly varied.”

Consider, for example, the “wall-ball substitute,” a motor-recruitment-pattern simulation of wall-balls that uses a kettlebell. Martone starts off with a brief description of the exercise, followed by two sequences of 12 photos that introduce the move, the first shot from in front of the demonstrator and the second from the side. Martone takes you through the points of performance from the starting position to the breathing pattern to the end position. And now you’re just getting started in the lesson. Again, this may be a fountain of possibilities for the professional coach but just informational overload for the CrossFit beginner.

Another example is how Martone breaks the wall-ball substitute down into two parts, as drills, recommending that you master them before weaving them into the complete sequence. The first drill is “swing release, half-flip catch, push press,” and the second is a “front squat.” Martone goes through the two drills in explicit detail, focusing on common errors he sees when the drills are attempted (each highlighted by photos and text explanations). Then he covers the corrective actions for the mistakes and rounds out the entry with sample Tabata workouts using the wall-ball substitute.

One of the more valuable sections for CrossFitters working out of a garage gym, either with partners or alone, is the section on the Turkish get-up. Martone starts out with a personal story, relaying how for 15 years his right shoulder was prone to chronic dislocations, in his sleep no less, and he was bracing himself for a third surgery. It was then that he was told that about the critical nature of the Turkish get-up in the history of weight training and set a goal of being able to perform the lift at 105 with either hand. Martone explains that he built two 105-lb. kettlebells at home and in a year’s time had achieved the goal.

“Now ten years later and by God’s grace, I’m even stronger and still surgery free!” he writes.

As to how much Martone can credit the get-up for this recovery is arguable, but the value of the exercise as a tool for developing proper shoulder rotation, stability in the shoulder and range of motion is solid. A subsequent 30 pages are devoted to a microscopic explanation of proper form and movements between the stages of the Turkish get-up.

The get-up is a challenge to strength and mobility for sure, but it also places heavy demands on the three stages of learning that Martone describes early in the book: the cognitive stage, the associative stage and the autonomous stage. For first-timers, the get-up is somewhat like learning a new swim stroke. For those wishing to get a hold on the movement and work toward mastery, or the “autonomous” stage, the breakdown of the get-up in Martone’s book could be an invaluable aid.



Move beyond the kettlebell swing with Hand-2-Hand kettlebell drills.

Crossfitters interested in applying their training to a sport may find various nuggets offered in Part 2: Rotational Power Development and Part 3: Introduction to Kettlebell Sport. In the former, Martone details how, in addition to developing strength in the posterior chain, an athlete can use Hand-2-Hand kettlebell drills to develop skills like hand-to-eye coordination, hand speed, and athletic capacities like rotational power and cardiovascular conditioning.

Martone reserves the final chapter as an introduction and invitation to CrossFitters to try their hand at the sport of kettlebell. Martone explains kettlebell sport is different compared to the “six-second” nature of Olympic weightlifting in that kettlebell lifting—the heart of which apparently requires highly oxidative 10-minute efforts—might be similar to the feeling of certain met-cons.



About the Author

*T.J. Murphy is the editorial director of **Competitor Magazine**, **Triathlete Magazine** and **Inside Triathlon**.*