

# Kettlebell Training for Gymnasts

The kettlebell is the most perfect training aid for competitive or recreational gymnasts. From total body strength, explosive ballistic power ( much like gymnastics itself),whole body coordination under load, unsurpassed stabilizer and core strength development and a variety of cardio respiratory and work capacity increases, kettlebell training is as good as it gets.

Add in the relatively simple movements (especially for gymnasts) to learn, and the forgiving technical nature and almost everybody can get the benefits very quickly.

Gymnasts need a lot of relative as well as absolute strength. The kettlebell delivers both. Gymnasts also have an unbelievable demand on the shoulders, lats, triceps, biceps, forearms, hand and wrists as well as an insane need for shoulders and rotator stabilizers like steel. Try doing a handstand on the rings and just "pushing away", keeping your body straight as you swing down through a hang back up through an arch all the way to another handstand. Straight-arm giants. Talk about evil. The requirements for total body strength and stabilization are huge.

Classic kettlebell work is about swinging. Just like gymnastics. Everything in gymnastics revolves around keeping your body tight, applying force at the most optimal time to create the movement; just like a kettlebell snatch or clean. In gymnastics the apparatus stays still as you swing around it. Kettlebell swings works with you in a fixed in place and the apparatus moves around you! A great opposite movement pattern that compliments your gymnastics patterns very well.

The most basic kettlebell move, the **two-arm swing** is **just** like doing a cast to handstand on high bar or parallel bars! Very few things in gymnastics develop the hips very well although there is a huge need for it, especially for the power in the floor exercises and vault as well as ALL landings (if they are to be safe). Kettlebell swings build hip leg and back strength very quickly.

The combination of swings, snatches, cleans and press variations, pistols and weighted pull-ups will be an excellent method of developing the most important performance and injury proofing motor qualities a gymnast wants in the minimal time possible. Add in dead lifts and handstand pushups and you have a solid program that will get you very strong, very powerful, safeguard your vulnerable joints and coordinate your body so that throwing around your body weight will be much easier. You can also do isolation type movements (like kettlebell laterals and flys to develop Iron Cross strength) much more effectively than with dumbbells.

Too much gymnastics weight conditioning though seems to revolve around bodybuilding hypertrophy training and endless bodyweight conditioning; way too may reps, isolation movements and not enough overhead work. The unique center of gravity of the kettlebell makes it much easier for the overworked shoulders of the gymnast to tolerate even more shoulder stress of strength training.

The high rep methods of traditional Girevoy (completive kettlebell lifting) also compliments very well the gymnasts need for total body explosive power that can last for the 60-90 seconds their 11 plus move routine takes. You must be very well conditioned to apply maximum power for the full routine and still have something left for that all-important dismount! Doing KB work sets for 30-50 reps (or 40-90 seconds) and slowly decreasing the rest periods will force you to get in shape for those routines. And it's much easier on the joints than back-to-back routines with minimal rest (which can also be dangerous).

Here are the kettbell exercises **Mark Reifkind**, former captain of the University of Iowa gymnastics team and current record holder of the Florida state all-around recommends for each event.

## **FLOOR EXERCISE:**

### **2 arm swing:**

This really feels like the push back for a back handspring, the drive upwards into a back salto and builds power for all backwards tumbling.

### **2 KB snatch:**

This will really develop great driving power for reaching into back handspring and flips as well as develop great stabilization of the shoulder girdle for strong pushoffs.

### **2 KB power cleans:**

This is great for strength on the pushoff for tumbling or vaulting as well as leg strength and proper body position for the all important landings. MANY injuries occur here due to weak legs and backs unable to hold the correct shock absorbing posture. Heavy lower rep 2 arm cleans will help this.

### **One KB swing:**

Same as the 2 arm swing, but this requires more stabilization and coordination

### **2 KB swings:**

Even harder than the one arm or one KB swing, this really emphasizes the hip drive.

### **Pistols and KB front squats:**

This should be obvious, the stronger your legs and hips are the better your tumbling and vault strength, as well as your landing strength. Dead lift training is great here too.

This is especially important for tumbling as there are no apparatus to help you. It's just you and your ability to maximize tension, force and power.

These exercises will give you legs of steel.

### **Windmills:**

This is another exercise that will really go a long way for the floor exercise competitor developing the key areas for twisting, the obliques and lower back. As well as keeping the shoulder girdle tight and engaged while the core works. Windmills from the floor or overhead will develop total body tightness and kinesthetic sense.

## **POMMEL HORSE**

The event most hated by non-side horse specialists! It is the only event that swings in the transverse plane and not the sagittal .A total gymnastics anomaly, side horse requires strong shoulders (especially the deltoids and serratus anterior) triceps, pecs, obliques, wrists and forearms. You are CONSTANTLY pushing down while you are swinging transversely (or at least you better be!). The upper back gets worked tons as well as you are leaning back with your hips up!

### **Two Kettlebell Presses**

This is perfect exercise for this event, especially if you do them like the old time Olympic presses did and squeeze the glutes, push the hips forward, lean back a bit and press straight up. You can also do them in see-saw fashion alternating arms. There's lots of work for the deltoids, triceps, upper back and glutes.

Low reps here to develop absolute strength and maximal tension. Side horse is probably, next to still rings, the event MOST about total body tension.

### **Bottoms Up Press:**

Pressing KBs in this manner is very specific to pommel horse as the KB handle and the pommel are almost exactly the same dimensions! Pressing the bell overhead this way is like a reverse push on a pommel. Doing two at a time is an advanced way, just watch out for your face!! Low reps and total tension is the rule here as well.

### **KB Snatch**

Applying shoulder force through a long arc is essential for good pommel horse circles and the high rep kb snatch is great for develop the ability to apply not only high force but max tension as well.

### **Around the knee pass**

Using this simple exercise will develop shoulder tension through a large range as well as do double duty hitting the all important obliques (no oblique strength, no good circles!). It also has a unique feel very similar to swinging on a horse (just with bad posture! LOL!)

### **Renegade Rows**

This basic row exercise mimics the need to push and pull simultaneously while swinging horse. You must also keep the rest of the body maximally tight while doing the pushing and pulling. Just like horse.

### **Still Rings**

Swing, swing, swing and swing some more. As much as the KB's resemble pommels they even MORE feel like still rings, especially in a handstand where the back of the rings press against the forearm. Just like the KB feels when it is overhead.

The hip snap used to develop max power in swings and snatches is closely resembles the tap swing for the rings (in reverse). In a shoot to handstand, this is followed by a violent shoulder flexion, JUST LIKE A KB SNATCH.

### **One KB Snatch**

Will really develop individual arm strength and even out strength deficits. The shoulder stabilizers as well as the prime movers are worked tremendously as well as the core and trunk muscles.

### **Two KB Snatch**

Probably the most sport specific KB exercise you can do for any event. Very similar feel to a straight-arm swing to handstand or a giant. Hold the top for better handstand strength. Trying to stabilize two KBs overhead is very similar to how the rings feel.

### **Bottoms-up clean and press**

Done with either one or two KBs this is very similar to the simpler bent arm shoot to handstand or giant. Having to balance the upside down kettle is very similar to trying to hold the rings stable as you press to the handstand. BE VERY CAREFUL WITH THIS ONE, ESPECIALLY THE TWO HAND VERSION!!!

### **Bottoms-up Press**

Again, about as specific as it gets.

### **Two KB Press**

Low slow reps for maximal tension. Graduated reps will help a lot as well. You know, two inches up one down, repeat through out the range of motion.

### **Two KB swings**

Again, a very specific exercise for the rings. The higher the bells swing the better.

## PARALLEL BARS

Another event where the feel and direction of the swinging is very similar to the basic KB swings.

### **Two KB Swings**

Done with parallel hand grips instead of the pronated grip it resembles the basic p-Bar swing very closely. You could also do it on the outside of the legs for even more specificity. This is much harder to control though.

### **KB Presses**

Just like the above events, using one or two KBs will develop great shoulder strength and pressing balance needed for the P-Bars.

### **KB Swing to Overhead Bottom up Position**

This is a very difficult move done with either one or (much harder!) two kettlebells. It is basically a snatch without turning the KB over. Swing the weight up and balance it a handstand position in the bottoms up position. Again, a very specific move. Practice this where you can easily drop the bell. Huge demands on your wrist and forearms strength, not to mention your shoulder girdle!

### **KB Jump Shrugs**

A very important concept for good P-Bar swing technique is the shrug DOWN in the bottom of the swing. As you swing through the bottom position you shrug down bending the bars. As you hips come up in front of you, you push out of the shrug, developing power and increasing the swing. The jump shrug will help develop these muscles and the timing.

Hold two KBs at your side and squat down to a quarter squat position .Jump up while shrugging hard, letting elbows bend naturally. Repeat making sure to hold your arch and let your knees flex as you land. This is also excellent for developing strength for tumbling and dismounts.