

## Developing Explosive Hip Power Using Russian Kettlebells for Basketball Athletes

By Sherwin Vasallo



Everyone knows that in the sport of basketball is all about speed, strength and power (power endurance, as well). Also, the only athletes that succeed in this sport are the fastest, strongest and *most explosive!*

In my time as a Strength Coach and basketball player, I have seen and trained many talented athletes. From little point guards to behemoth posts, I have seen one commonality shared by the majority of these basketball players - below average hip power output (this average is based on my unattainable standard that I set for all my athletic clients!)

In the high school scene and even University, I have seen fast players and strong players but it has been a rarity to find that athlete that comes complete – speed, strength, and power! This article will outline how using a Russian Kettlebell (KB) can develop explosive hip power - to give you a lightning quick first step, ankle breaking agility and spring-like hops!

*Note: Before performing any Kettlebell lifts, one should have a **Certified Russian Kettlebell Instructor** properly demonstrate the lift techniques to avoid any unnecessary injuries.*

Before we begin, let's quickly explore the KB history and what it looks like so that everyone is on the same page and not confused about what it is that I'm talking about!

**What is a Kettlebell?** A Russian 'kettlebell' or girya (Russ.) is a traditional Russian cast iron weight that looks like a cannonball with a handle.



This exercise tool has been around for quite a long time too. As the 1986 Soviet Weightlifting Yearbook put it, "It is hard to find a sport that has deeper roots in the history of our people than kettlebell lifting." So popular were kettlebells in Tsarist Russia that any strongman or weightlifter was referred to as a girevik, or 'a kettlebell man'. "Not a single sport develops our muscular strength and bodies as well as kettlebell athletics," wrote Ludvig Chaplinskiy in Russian magazine Hercules in 1913.

Ok, now that we've got that out of the way and everyone is clear on what a KB is and looks like, let's get some terminology out of the way so that we are clear on what power is, what strength is and what speed is.

*Power* - the amount of work done or energy transferred per unit of time. Example – jumping, cleans, snatch.

*Strength* - the ability of a person or animal to exert force on physical objects using muscles. Example – maximal lifts on bench press, deadlift or squat.

*Speed* - rate of motion, or equivalently the rate of change in position, often expressed as distance  $d$  traveled per unit of time  $t$ . Example – sprinting

If you are in the know in strength training, you can easily see that all three of these intertwine to develop the complete athlete. But you may ask yourself, "How is it that an athlete can have the strength and/or speed but lack power?!"

This is really quite easy to explain – most athletes lack the ability to activate the proper hip musculature to achieve maximal hip power! All too often, I see athletes, when they jump, flex their lumbar spine (lower back) to generate jumping power instead of hinging at the hips! Think about it, many athletes are recruiting the minute muscles of the lumbar spine – muscles that are responsible for stabilization, not power - for jumping and accelerating.

Just below your lower back you'll find your gluteus maximus, the deep rotators of the hip and the hamstrings – the glutes and hamstrings are also popularly known as your *posterior chain*. This is where the 'engine' is located. This is where speed, strength and power are found!

I'm sure every single one of you has heard that urban legend – do calf raises every night before you go to bed and your vertical will increase by leaps and bounds. I know I was a believer in my junior high years, doing calf raises until it felt like my calves were close to explosion! *Fact*: the calves play only a

minor role in jumping for a rebound or throwing down a tomahawk jam. The vast majority of the work is coming from the posterior chain.

So, where do kettlebells fall into this mess? Simple, kettlebells develop the explosive power that all basketball players are looking for! How, you might ask? By training the posterior chain in the same manner as jumping – explosively!

Observe....

### The KB Swing



### The Act of Jumping



Compare the 2 pictures and note the immediate similarities between the movements and you will see just how kettlebells can develop explosive hip power required for jumping and accelerating. Furthermore, notice how both athletes hinge at the hips, or shoot their butts back to get into that proper athletic/power position.

Many of my clients have noticed a remarkable increase in their explosive power after only a few bouts with Russian Kettlebell training!!

The beauty of KB training is that, it forces you to employ proper technique and in some cases, becomes self correcting with the use of a heavier KB. I should also mention that KBs are great exercise tools to build resiliency, correct any biomechanical asymmetries and functionally lengthen tight musculature which can limit you from reaching your true potential!

The foundation exercise for all KB lifts is the KB swing! I will explain (simplified version) how to execute the KB swing!

If you look back to the previous KB picture, note his starting position. The athlete has shot his hips back, maintained a 'straight' spine (not to be confused with an upright spine), and flexed his knees. To get the KB to shoot upwards and out, the athlete extends his hips and knees, as if to stand up tall, and maximally contracts his glutes, hamstrings, quads and abdominals. Synchronize breaths so that sharp and quick exhalation occurs at the top of the swing. The KB should shoot up to solar-plexus level, once there the athlete will change the direction of the KB, back to starting position. During the swing, the power is coming from the hips – the arm is not lifting the KB at any time during the movement. This is a very high velocity movement and should be done in succession to optimally exploit the stretch reflex to tap into your body's naturally stored power!

So the next time you think about training to increase your vertical jump, enhance your first step or you want to bulletproof your back/posterior chain, consider Russian Kettlebell training. You'll thank me for it when you throw down your next dunk!

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