

Kettlebell Lockout Drills

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(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health Fitness Specialist, Corporate Wellcoach)



“One must achieve the ability to concentrate his mind on the muscles and take them under complete control.” --Eugene Sandow

I can't overemphasize the importance of locking out your body at the right time and in the right sequence. Elite athletes and martial artists know how to use higher percentages of contractile force more efficiently in this manner. They develop what has been called a "Super Stiffness." They get super stiff because they can generate a maximum volitional contraction (MVC) upon demand from years of proper conditioning of both muscular and central nervous systems (CNS).

The following drills can help you improve MVC and learn the "HARD-style" lockout which is so important for kettlebell safety and performance. I routinely use these for my KB 101 Workshops. These drills will help your body and central nervous system learn how much force is required, where to apply the force, and when to apply the force to get the hardest lockout possible. (A review of Newton's Laws of Motion would also serve you well at this point).

2-Arm Deadlift: One of the best drills for not only learning great KB form and correcting squat/hip dysfunction—but also learning a great HARD lockout. This is a very safe exercise when done properly even with heavier weight. It's simple; I like it.

- With perfect alignment (square feet slightly wider than hips, neutral spine in forward vector, head up, knees behind toes and over ankles, shoulders back), reach down and pick up the KB. Stand into a full upright vertical position using the HARD lockout to finish. Use short sets of only 3-10 reps—but focus on perfect HARD-style form.

Body Scan: This is often used by elite athletes as a mental relaxation skill to find unneeded "tension" that can rob performance, but in this case, it's used to find "softness" or *slack* that can cause force leaks and decreased performance. You can't have a true HARD lockout with force leaks! Your force needs to travel in the proper line. If it "leaks" to one side or the other, your body goes limp and loses snap—or lockout.

- Perform your KB exercise of choice; critically examine your body for any slack or "softness" in the wrong place at the wrong time that is causing your force leak. Tighten it up. Stay HARD where and when you need to be HARD.

Box Squat: Another simple yet effective drill. This not only teaches HARD lockout, but helps you to get the hips back instead of just down.

- Place feet square about hip width. Shift hips back then down onto box (or chair). Make sure box is secure and won't slide back. Stand up and into a HARD lockout as you forcefully push arms down to sides. Make sure to drive heels down *forcefully into ground* as you extend into the full vertical lockout. Be sure to clench glutes to finish!

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Crush Grip: This technique is useful for some KB exercises but not all. By using a forceful grip where you “crush” the KB handle, you increase the amount of push or pull force which helps your lockout. It’s often used with a Military Press.

- Military Press Example: Clean KB to shoulder rack position. Crush grip your KB as you press overhead in proper form. Keep tight grip as you “pull” KB back down into rack. Also crush grip the other hand that is not holding the KB. Interestingly, by over gripping the non-KB hand, you can increase your pressing force with the KB hand.

Face Down Bridge-RKC Style: This is a modified version of the standard face down bridge. It’s a nice change up when you want to really teach MVC—and I do mean MAXIMUM.

- Firmly bring legs together from ankles to upper thighs. Place forearms under face. Forearms will be at $\approx 45^\circ$ angles in relation to spine. Clinch fist HARD along with everything else in your body! Hold HARD for 30-60 seconds. If you tremble like a Chihuahua—then you’re doing it right! Shaking is allowed; dribbling is NOT.

Face-Up Fist Crush Bridge-RKC Style: A deceptively sinister drill Comrades! This technique takes the relatively moderate-demand face up bridge into the elite level of muscular contraction! *Enjoy the Pain!*

- Bring hips up into bridge position. Partner inserts clenched fist between knees as bridge person tries to “crush” fist between knees. Also clench glutes with MAX contractile force and keep hips UP into a full hip extension position. 30 seconds at true HARD style will humble even tight-core Comrades! If you don’t have a partner, use a yoga block, tennis ball, or tightly-rolled towel. I prefer using a partner because they can feel if tension fades and cue the bridge person to keep it TIGHT!

Glute Clench: My favorite drill for truly feeling what a HARD lockout is all about. When done correctly, it is powerful—almost violent. More than just “seeing” this lockout, people can “feel it” from yards away. It’s intense—as it should be. If you dig into the gnat’s ass (not joking) of pelvic floor lock with yoga gurus and people really into kettlebells, there is a lot more to this than just tightening your butt. Not only do you clench the glutes together, but you pull them inward into the anal sphincter and completely lockup the pelvic floor. There is even a slight upward pelvic tilt as you finish if done correctly—think of pointing your navel “up” instead of down as you finish. As crazy as it sounds, **there should be no force leaks even out of the anus!** The whole hip area becomes a solid lockout of strength tied directly into the core. I tell people to put a quarter between their butt cheeks and make a dime out of it! The “stopping diarrhea” example works for some too. Find something that represents MAXIMUM glute tightness to you then use this as a trigger for your clench drills. Keep it TIGHT Comrades! No leaks—because it could get messy! ☺

- Place feet slightly more narrow than hips. Dance around a bit as you bend knees—sort of like a ragdoll. Let body whip around limp, then on instructor cue or your own volition, snap up into a full vertical HARD lockout. From heels to scalp, you should finish HARD. There is a sequence to this drill as the force line comes back from the ground and travels basically from heels> knees> glutes> core> scapula. Within a split second, you should go from ragdoll to HARD—intensely—as it should be. “Pop it” Comrades! Make sure to keep neutral cervical spine—no chicken necks!

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Partner 1-Arm Ground Pull: It can be hard to teach people how to “pack” their shoulder by pulling the shoulder blade (scapula) back and into their spines. Too many people allow their shoulders to protract and roll forward which makes these joints weak and susceptible to injury—plus they have far less power, punch, and shoulder safety in the protracted position. This CNS drill can cue people in just seconds how to keep their shoulders packed for optimal power and safety.

- Have partner lie on back with legs firmly pressed together and straight while they extend one arm straight up in vertical line over their chest. Partner on the ground should have a *stiff and rigid body throughout the drill*. Grab their hand and wrist with a solid grip then lift their body off the floor in one straight *plank position*. If they give in, rotate the torso, or go limp, set them back down and tell them to LOCK UP, then pull them up again. Repeat until they learn how much force to apply to keep their body completely rigid and parallel with ground as they are lifted. Usually within 3-4 pulls, a person can learn the shoulder pack position from this effective CNS cue drill. If they are too weak to plank whole body in one line, they should plank from the waist up as they flex at the hip.

Partner Side Strike: This is a simple technique to cue people to lock up HARD and in the correct sequence. They “think” they are being hard, but they are not. Teach them—the HARD way!

- As they finish a glute clench lockout, use an **open hand strike** to the outside of their upper arm. Pop them hard enough so they get the message—if they are soft—your arm drives through them as they stagger away. If they lock up properly, your hand STOPS because they are tight. It usually takes about 3-5 strikes before a person figures this out. Tell them they can thank you later.

Partner Wheelbarrow Leg Drop: Big-time CNS cueing on this one! Getting people to really understand the meaning of a tight butt can be difficult! If you don’t know how to activate your glutes with HARD forceful contraction, you’ll never get the most out of your kettlebell training or have optimal safety for your spine. This is one of the best drills I’ve seen for quickly enabling a person “to get it” in just a few seconds.

- Place partner in face down bridge position using the RKC bridge forearm position with clinched fist and legs pressed together. Pick up their legs while they maintain a straight “plank” body position as if you were holding onto the handles of a wheelbarrow. Cue them to keep legs together even though you’ll be letting go of one leg. Quickly drop one leg then bring it back to level position with the other. Cue them again to LOCK UP and NOT allow the open leg to drop. Drop the other leg. Repeat until they get it! The first couple of drops are usually pretty bad until they figure it out. Don’t “over coach” this drill. Let them figure out “by feel” how much force to apply, where to apply it, and in what sequence. I usually drop the left and right in a fairly even pattern so it’s not too hard. For more challenge, don’t always drop the right then the left or drop in even patterns—surprise them. If they have the CNS and decent core stability, they will quickly figure this out and keep both legs equally together throughout the drill. When they stand up and do a glute clench or other lockout drill, they should be much harder because the CNS has learned what HARD MAXIMAL contraction truly means.

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Scapular Pull Ups-RKC Style: A great drill for teaching HARD scapular (shoulder blades) contraction. Yes, they are harder than they look. Keeping your shoulders in, back, down, and packed is *extremely important* to KB technique AND SAFETY! The sooner you learn this, the better and safer you will be.

- Hang under pull up bar with straight legs. With perfectly straight arms and locked elbows, bring scapula bones (shoulder blades) in, back, and down into center of spine. Release then retract again. ***It's not a full pull up! Arms stay straight at elbows!*** You only move the two scapula bones in and out. 10+ quality reps in true RKC HARD style will rip most people to the point of wanting to drop.

Toe Lift: You'll never get a completely HARD lockout if you can't drive your heels into the ground. The simplest and best way to cue heel drive is to just lift toes. It's that simple! And effective!

- These are great to practice with the 2-Arm Swings. As you swing, lift your toes which will keep heels driving into ground. This hard heel style will allow the force to come straight back up vertically off the ground and through your upright body facilitating a snappy and HARD lockout.
- Curb Drill: If you still don't get it, step to the curb Comrade! The curb will teach you—the HARD way! Use lighter KB than you normally use for your swings. I swing with a 24kg, so I use a 16kg for this drill. Dangle toes and balls of feet "off" curb. Proceed to 2-Arm Swings. If you don't drive your heels down guess what happens? You'll end up out in the street! See—the curb will teach you...the HARD way!

Towel Swings: It's common for people new to KBs to "lift" the KB with arms and shoulders during a swing instead of driving it with the glutes and finishing it with a HARD lockout. The towel swing will quickly teach you to use your glutes because if you try to lift the KB with the towel, it will hang and go obviously limp creating "*projectile dysfunction*" which is absolutely shameful Comrades! ☹

- Thread towel through KB handle. Choke up on towel so there is minimal towel length between handle and your hands. Proceed to the 2-Arm Swings. If you drive from the hips, the KB will finish as a horizontal extension of your arms. If you lift from the shoulders and arms, your KB will go limp, and well...you will shame yourself with the above described "*projectile dysfunction*"...not good! Don't say I didn't warn you!

Assistive Drills: While these are not actually "lockouts" themselves, they can play an important role in facilitating a HARD lockout.

- Feet: For optimal force transfer, go barefoot or use hard-soled shoes like *Converse*. Wearing running shoes with shock absorption soles puts the knees at risk for injury because of the kettlebell's ballistic force during swing patterns. I make everyone in my workshops take OFF their shoes unless they have Converse or equivalent.
- Breathing: There is a technique known to martial artists as "breathing under the shield" that is also used in kettlebells. Obviously, you must breathe in general when using a KB; however, the idea is to breathe without losing your abdominal wall integrity or hardness. Go ahead and breathe—just keep the abs tight and never totally exhale all of your air. Note there are times when you need to hold your breath

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for maximum force transfer. For example, as you begin to do a KB snatch, you should NOT breathe until after your lockout on the top of the snatch. Breathe under the shield as you return the KB between legs. True HARD lockouts have a lot to do with breathing when you really get into it. At first, it's probably not as critical because you're using lower rep sets with less weight. As you get into higher rep sets with heavier weight, you'll be forced to breathe correctly and at the right time to get optimal form and lockout. Incorrect breathing during V02 Max or a Secret Service Snatch Test will quickly burn you out prematurely. If you fail to learn proper breathing, then enjoy the pain!

- **Hands:** I prefer to use KBs without gloves so I can feel the KB and not lose any grip force. If you do use gloves to minimize skin shred, I would suggest gloves without padding. The most recommended gloves are the simple cotton gardening gloves with the fingertips cut off (without any rubber dots). They are pretty thin so will absorb minimal force and still provide some tactile sensory input. To be honest, KBs are hard on the skin of hands. Get over it. Use them often each week, and your hands will probably be fine without gloves unless you rip on really high-rep sets.

Recommendations: If you are serious about Russian Kettlebell training, I highly recommend getting "at least" the following two items. "Enter the Kettlebell" DVD by Pavel is the best exercise video I have ever seen bar none. You should also get the "Enter the Kettlebell" book by Pavel which gives even further background and explanation on the proper use of kettlebells with optimal safety. ***Do not take kettlebell training lightly Comrades! If you do not know how to use kettlebells properly—leave them alone!*** If you want to learn, invest in the two reference materials above (or more). If possible, also find a RKC in your area to help you learn kettlebells the right way. Even one introductory workshop can make a huge difference in your safety and technique.

➤ **Learn More:** www.ronjones.org/Coach&Train/BodyXerciseLibrary/Kettlebells/index.htm

* Ron Jones (7.18.09)