

# Kettlebells 'best bang' for fitness buck

KATHLEEN RENNE  
FOR NEIGHBOURS

Personal trainer and kettlebell instructor Damir Mulalic puts a lot of weight (pardon the pun) behind the kettlebell.

Standing in the midst of the gym at ALIVE Personal Training, he holds one of the bowling-ball shaped devices by its curved handle.

"It's an entire gym in the palm of your hand. You can do every single muscle using this. In a half-an-hour you can hit up your entire body," he says.

While it almost sounds like some magical invention, that's far from the case. In fact, kettlebells have been used in Russia for centuries.

Pavel Tsatsouline, an instructor with the former Soviet Union's special forces, is credited with bringing the kettlebell to North America when he authored a book in 2001 called *The Russian Kettlebell Challenge*.

As with many things, kettlebells gained ground in Eastern Canada first before heading West, something Mulalic attributes to the fact Canada's foremost kettlebell authority, Shawn Mozen, is based in Montreal.

Mozen's company, Agatsu, manufactures kettlebells and certifies instructors in Canada and internationally.

Mulalic participated in one of the first instructor certification courses Mozen held in Calgary a couple of years ago.

When I look at the collection of colourful cast iron balls of varying sizes sitting on the gym floor, my first instinct is to pick one up and do a bicep curl.

Mulalic laughs, saying that's what most newcomers to the discipline imagine they are for.

Mulalic emphasizes that, unlike with a bicep curl, there is a proper technique one must learn to maxi-

mize the benefits of kettlebells.

"You're actually trying to perfect an art. You're not just coming in to do a workout," he says.

Trainer Marty Hansen of Calgary's M-2 Sport, which has been offering kettlebell workouts since 2007, concurs.

"The whole body has to be involved, as well as your mental attention. You can't just go and sit on a machine and daydream. Skill is an essential element of using the kettlebell," Hansen says.

"It's not just brute-force strength," he says, explaining that he likes to use training techniques that employ the body as the machine, using devices that allow a person to move from exercise to exercise without having to stop and adjust some sort of stationary, external machine.

Mulalic describes the two basic moves around which a kettlebell routine is based: the swing and the press.

The swing involves, as the name suggests, swinging the kettlebell between your legs and engaging your lower body to raise it again.

The press involves lifting a kettlebell into the air above your shoulder.

"When you work with the kettlebell, you start working from the inside out," Mulalic says, explaining that kettlebells work a bunch of small muscles conventional workouts don't often engage.

All Mulalic's clients incorporate kettlebells in their workouts, including one gentleman who used to weigh more than 500 pounds.

As they become proficient with the basic moves, Mulalic adds some variation to make them more challenging, even using two kettlebells or having the person transfer the kettlebell from hand to hand.

Mulalic says one of the advantages of kettlebells is that you don't need to spend a lot of time with them to



Yuri Choufour, Calgary Herald

**Instructor Damir Mulalic spots Neighbours writer Kathleen Renne as she practices a kettlebell exercise at Alive Personal Training Studio.**

reap the benefits.

"The hardest thing to do is find the time and the commitment to get into a gym. The beautiful thing about the kettlebell is all you need is a half

an hour at a stretch. You're training your endurance, your strength and your flexibility all at the same time," he says.

Or as Hansen describes it, "It (the

kettlebell) gives you the best bang for your buck."

As with many things workout-related, using kettlebells is more difficult than it appears.

Mulalic has me do both swings and presses. While I catch on to the swings fairly quickly, it takes a lot of mental concentration to continually engage my lower body in the action.

The presses are more difficult. While Mulalic makes it look easy, casually holding a kettlebell above his shoulder, when I try it, my hand shakes trying to keep the kettlebell balanced in the air.

Unlike a standard hand weight, where the weight is evenly distributed, the kettlebell is shaped such that balancing, as well as strength, become part of the equation.

He also puts me through a mini-routine, incorporating kettlebell swings alongside other things like pushups and lunges, which leaves me breathless after only two minutes.

To my surprise, kettlebells have a huge and dedicated following. There are national kettlebell clubs, there is a world kettlebell lifting championship, and kettlebell enthusiasts are pushing for it to become an Olympic sport. (According to Mozen, Penelope Cruz uses kettlebells.)

If you want to get in on the kettlebell action locally, you have a few options.

According to the Agatsu website ([agatsu.com](http://agatsu.com)), there are 11 kettlebell instructors in Calgary whom Agatsu has certified, one of whom is Mulalic.

M-2 Sport ([m-2sport.ca](http://m-2sport.ca)) offers kettlebell practices at the Triwood Community Centre on Mondays and Thursdays, and kettlebells are also incorporated into CrossFit workouts, a type of core strength and conditioning program.

You can reach Mulalic through Empowerment Personal Training ([empowermentpt.com](http://empowermentpt.com)).