

TOTAL FITNESS

Our classes are lighthearted, but we push people within their limits. Some people need to be pushed or they are not going to do it.

— Simon Finn, kettlebell enthusiast

Back in 2006, the sculpted abdominal muscles sported by Gerard Butler for his part as King Leonidas in the film *300* generated a great deal of buzz about how such results could be achieved within a limited time frame. That was the first time the word “kettlebell” popped up on my radar. It was one of the many “primitive tools,” according to the Warner Bros press release for the film, used in the relentlessly hyped-up, four-month-long physical fitness program designed to give the principal cast the physique of Spartan warriors.

Kettlebells have now made their way to Taiwan with the formation of the Taipei Kettlebell Club, which gathers at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall plaza twice a week to work out. “It’s about achieving a level of functional fitness,” said Matt Guy, the club’s founder, at a gathering earlier this month. With a group of students, Guy demonstrated how the use of the kettlebell, a rather primitive object resembling a cannonball with a handle on top, can help develop the muscles of the torso, while conveying many other benefits, including balance, strength, coordination and cardiovascular fitness. Fantasies about washboard abs, wearing leather underpants and baby oil, and being a Spartan warrior, however appealing, were not an integral part of the program when I joined the workout session. What I did find was a good deal of sweat and a general sense of exhilaration as students pushed themselves through workout routines.

Kettlebells have a long and somewhat murky history, with claims that they were developed by the Russians, the Turks and even the Highland Scots as a means of developing physical strength. There is considerable anecdotal evidence of their use by old-fashioned strongmen and Turkish wrestlers, and plenty of suggestions that they were the favored training tools of the Spetsnaz, or Soviet special forces, and other elite combat troops. Kettlebell lifting was recognized as a competition sport in what is now the former Soviet Union in 1985, and kettlebells became standard equipment at many American gyms around 2002.

All of this gives kettlebells a certain cachet, but there are also many detractors: plenty of online literature criticizes the use of kettlebells as dangerous and more liable than regular machine-based weight training and calisthenics to cause injury.

Simon Finn, a British teacher who helps Guy in leading the instruction, said that he and Guy take great care to “dial in” the correct movements before beginners even start handling the weights.

Classes are divided into two sections, with novice students practicing basic movements under the supervision of Guy or Finn, while others move through workout routines with kettlebells of various weights. The

The Taipei Kettlebell Club introduces an engaging workout for conditioning, fun and, maybe, the physique of a Spartan warrior

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

two major routines are the swing and the Turkish get-up, using kettlebells that weigh between 8kg and 24kg. The swing uses the hips to swing the kettlebell up from between the legs, while the Turkish get-up is a series of movements in which a kettlebell is held aloft while the person moves from a prone to standing position. Both demand physical coordination, balance and focus to complete correctly.

“It works the whole person, the whole body, so the mind really has to be connected while you are doing it,” said Marcus Opalenik, a participant in the class. “It’s like you work out the whole being. It’s not like you are just exercising. You’re working everything out.” It is perhaps this complete engagement that contributes to the sense of exhilaration that follows the class.

BETTER THAN DUMBBELL TRAINING

Guy said he got into kettlebells more by accident than design. “My father was a bodybuilder and I knew about all those kinds of lifts, but I never really agreed ... never really liked weightlifting that much. I have bad knees so I couldn’t run, and yoga was not my style. I found kettlebells had all of it ... If you want to do any sport, it crosses over really well, and it was also fun,” Guy said.

After discovering the benefits of kettlebell training in the US, Guy brought his experience back to Taiwan, sharing it with Finn. “I hate that sort of stuff,” said Finn of dumbbell training. “When Matt [Guy] showed me [kettlebells], it just clicked. It’s like a real

exercise ... You’re using a weight, but you are also getting a cardio workout. You are also building the body in a way that isolation [exercises] does not do, and I felt effects immediately,” Finn said.

Guy, Finn and other close friends have been working on a training program at their apartment over the last year and with the formation of the Taipei Kettlebell Club almost two months ago are taking what they have learned to the public.

“We are trying to build a base of people who can do it,” said Finn, emphasizing that the program he and Guy have developed is relatively simple and based on a small number of fundamental movements.

“Everything is about swings and get-ups,” Finn said. “The core of everything we do is that one pull and that one press ... We know that’s solid, and those are the basis of everything else, so if you can do them right, it carries over to ... other stuff you can add later on.”

Held two nights a week, the class manages to be both fun and intense, with Guy and Finn giving encouragement and pointers throughout the routines. “Our classes are lighthearted, but we push people within their limits. Some people need to be pushed or they are not going to do it. If you can push them and keep it lighthearted and make people achieve goals, they walk away and they feel they’ve achieved something. We want to keep it happy, but also moving forward,” Finn said.

The Taipei Kettlebell Club currently meets Wednesday at 8:30pm and Sunday at 7pm. To find out more about the club, visit its Web site at taipeikettlebellclub.blogspot.com, or contact Matt Guy at 0983-398-546.



Simon Finn demonstrates a wideball movement with a 10kg kettlebell.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES



Matt Guy demonstrates the Turkish get-up with a 24kg kettlebell.

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The Taipei Kettlebell Club’s class practices using kettlebells of various weights.

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