How To Use Kettlebells With Young Athletes To Improve Strength, Power & Conditioning

Once I began using Kettlebells they became one of my favorite training tools. Yes, they were great fun, but more importantly, they returned great results, especially for the young athletes (when I say “young” I am referring to adolescents 13 – 19). The constant work they give to the posterior chain only made sense for me to use them often, since the posterior is always the weakest area on kids (and many adult athletes as well).

We stick to the basics with Kettlebells for the younger athlete, with special focus on the swings (and all variations). Once they master the swing they begin doing cleans, then military presses, then clean and presses, and then snatches.
Above you see a young wrestler performing two handed and one handed swings.

We also include squats with a Kettlebell, where they hold the bell with both hands just under chin level (which is great for upper back work as well). The fact that Kettlebells attack the body from multiple angles makes them a very economic and efficient training tool. After squats have been mastered we then do lunges and all the variations while holding the one kettlebell under chin level.

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Once they master BW squats below parallel for 25 reps, we begin loading the squat with some light kettlebells. Monitor the form as always, and if necessary, lighten the load using a small medicine ball and slowly progress to Kettlebell squats.

The more advanced these young athletes get the more variety we can use with the Kettlebells. Exercises such as double military presses, double cleans, double squats, and burpee variations all become part of their overall strength & conditioning program. As always though, we stick to basics. Basics means plenty of swings, military presses & squats. You will also find that after some time of incorporating swings the flexibility of their posterior becomes greatly improved. I have seen improvements in running speed and mechanics after incorporating swings for a few weeks with Football players without any formal coaching on their running mechanics.

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The stretch from doing swings is shown above. The athlete must then exert power through the hips to move the weight back up which is great for hip power.

After performing exercises like snatches, clean and press and heavy swings I have watched wrestlers greatly improve their lifting power, especially from positions that seem to be weaker for other wrestlers (finishing takedowns, escaping from bottom, lifting an opponent who tried to escape from them). The speed that must be used to move a Kettlebell during exercises like the snatch, clean and swing teach the young athlete how to use their hips to generate power. Very often these young kids are not aggressive enough at first and they learn quickly that in order to move a Kettlebell they need to exert force / speed / power!

The swings are used with two hands as well as one hand. We use them during the warm up as well as at the end of a workout. Usually we hit two or three sets in the beginning
and another two or three sets at the end of the workout. A more experienced kid will sometimes do some moderately heavy swings right before a set of deadlifts. For example, they might do a set of 5 or 6 reps of two handed swings and then immediately follow up with 4 – 6 reps of deadlifts. The swings hype up the nervous system with their aggressive hip snap on the swing. When they pick up the bar on the deadlift they are able to bring that “force principle” with them on their deadlift and it works great!

In addition to using kettlebells for power development and the strengthening of the posterior chain, we use them as a conditioning tool for the more experienced young athlete. Using a Kettlebell matrix / complex we are able to condition young athletes through loaded movements. For combat athletes such as Football players and Wrestlers this works great. And one of my favorite sayings is, “There is nothing wrong with being in shape” holds very true for these individuals. Young athletes are all too often severely out of shape (an entirely different article right there) and these complexes kick their ass into shape.
Above, one of our clients sweats it out mid way through his Kettlebell complex. This pic captures the pulling phase on his way to finishing the one arm snatch.

We start with doing 3 or 4 exercises in a complex and eventually work up to doing more with out putting the Kettlebell down for rest. Form, as always, is key on everything. If you wanted your athlete to do 7 exercises in a row but on exercises 4 the form starts to go, stop the set asap, rest a minute or tow and start over. Do everything the right way, and keep the form in check!

Let’s take a look at a few sample Kettlebell complexes for a young athlete:

1. 1 hand swings x 5 L / R
2. 1 arm cleans x 5 L / R
3. 1 arm snatch x 5 L / R
4. 2 hand squats x 5
5. 2 hand lunges (any style) x 6
6. 2 hand swings x 10

The above matrix will be six exercises in a row. As they improve, you can add exercises like 1 arm clean and press for 3 – 5 reps, 1 arm rows for 6 – 8 reps and perhaps another lunge variation (walking lunges are awesome during a complex).

The athlete will repeat the complex two – four times. A beginner might only do it once and using your best judgment you can increase the volume as you see fit. Our resident Kettlebell expert, Jason C Brown, will be the best one to grill on the forum regarding using kettlebells for young athletes so take advantage of our experts on the forum!

A note on purchasing kettlebells. Yes, they are expensive, but, no need to go and buy pairs of kettlebells right away. Start with one kettlebell, and once you master that weight, buy the next heaviest kettlebell, and so forth.

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Kettlebells are an excellent addition to any athlete’s overall program if you can afford them. The investment pays itself off with the success of who ever uses them!

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