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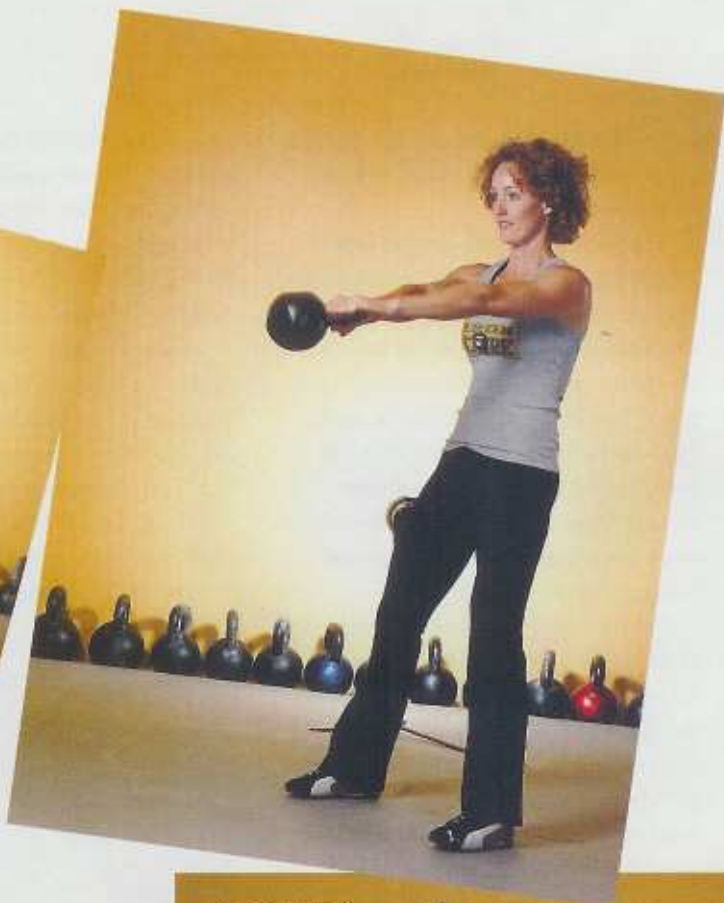
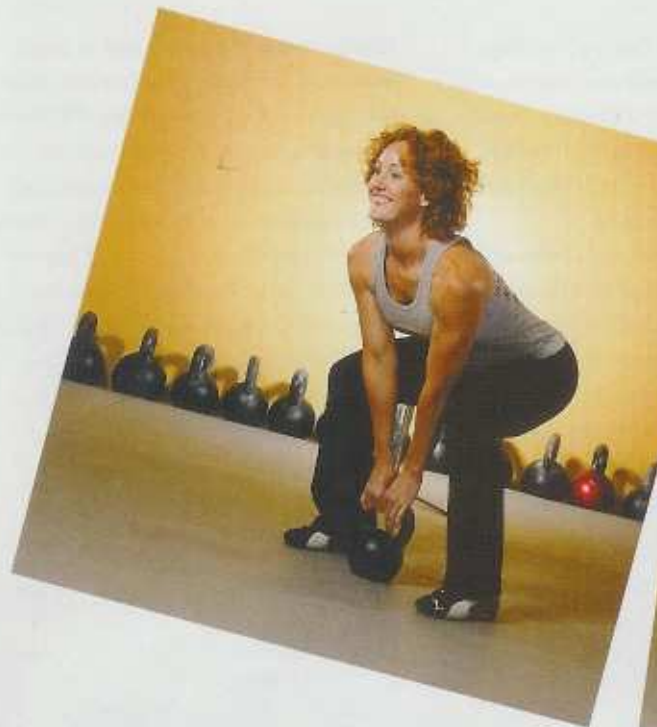
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# bell curves

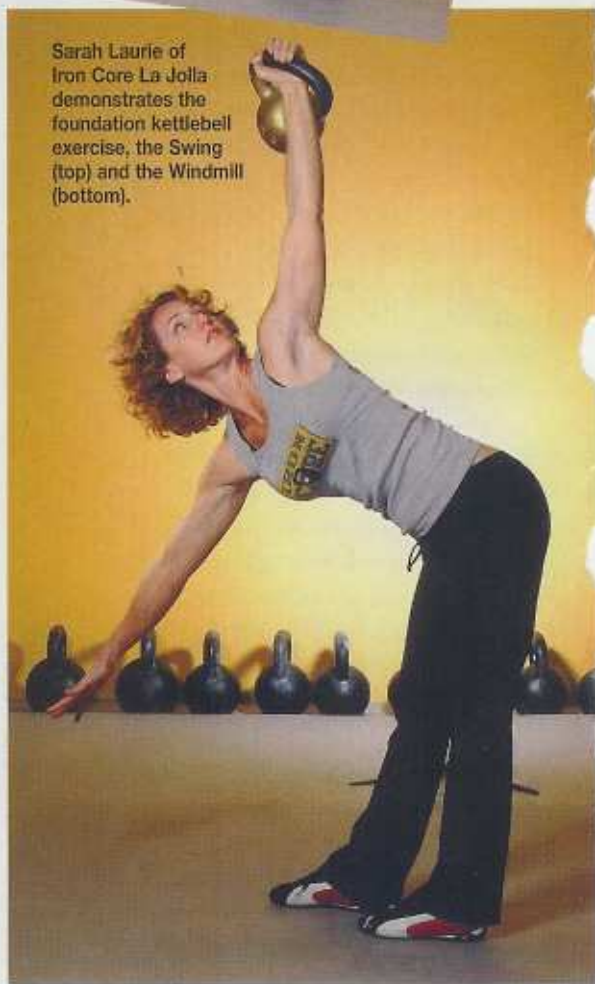
a 300-year-old russian exercise is the hottest thing in 21st-century america

BY KATHY SUMMERS

**W**ho doesn't want better body tone, greater flexibility and more control? That's why we love Pilates. Throw in even more power, all-day endurance and quicker fat loss—all from an item we can hold in our hand like a Prada purse—and we might have the ultimate fashion accessory. The downside is that unlike couture, a kettlebell looks like a cast-iron cannonball with a handle, masculine and a bit medieval. It also requires special training to get started. And yet, the colorful kettlebell could become the new black.

“Formerly a man’s tool, it has become increasingly popular with

Sarah Laurie of Iron Core La Jolla demonstrates the foundation kettlebell exercise, the Swing (top) and the Windmill (bottom).





women," says Pavel Tsatsouline, a St. Paul, MN-based coach and former Russian Special Forces instructor credited with introducing kettlebells to the United States in 1998. The kettlebell, or *girya* in Russian, is at least 300 years old. But in 21st-century America, movie stars like Penelope Cruz, Kim Basinger and Jennifer Lopez train with kettlebells, and in 2006, American athlete Catherine Irwin won the bronze medal in the Kettlebell Sport World Championship.

Like Pilates, kettlebell exercises require coordination, body awareness and proper breathing techniques. Kettlebells also provide a good cardio workout, so you can forget that hour on the Stairmaster or elliptical machine after your Pilates workout, says Andrea Du Cane, a certified Stott Pilates instructor and certified Russian kettlebell (RKC) instructor in St. Paul. In fact, kettlebells complement Pilates in many ways. For starters, both focus on core conditioning. "Once you've gotten all your stabilizing muscles to fire properly with Pilates, you might want to get even stronger," says Du Cane. That's where kettlebells come in.

#### kettlebell basics

Most people learn the basic kettlebell exercises in a few days and notice changes in the way they look and feel in a few weeks, says Sarah Lurie, RKC, founder of Iron Core fitness studio in La Jolla, CA. People with a background in Pilates get up to speed even quicker, she says. Many gyms now carry kettlebells, but it only takes one to get started. Kettlebells come in a range of weights from 9 to 88 pounds. People who practice Pilates regularly will typically start with an 8-kilogram (approximately 18-pound) kettlebell. If you're starting from scratch, go for the 6-kilogram (approximately 13-pound) kettlebell.

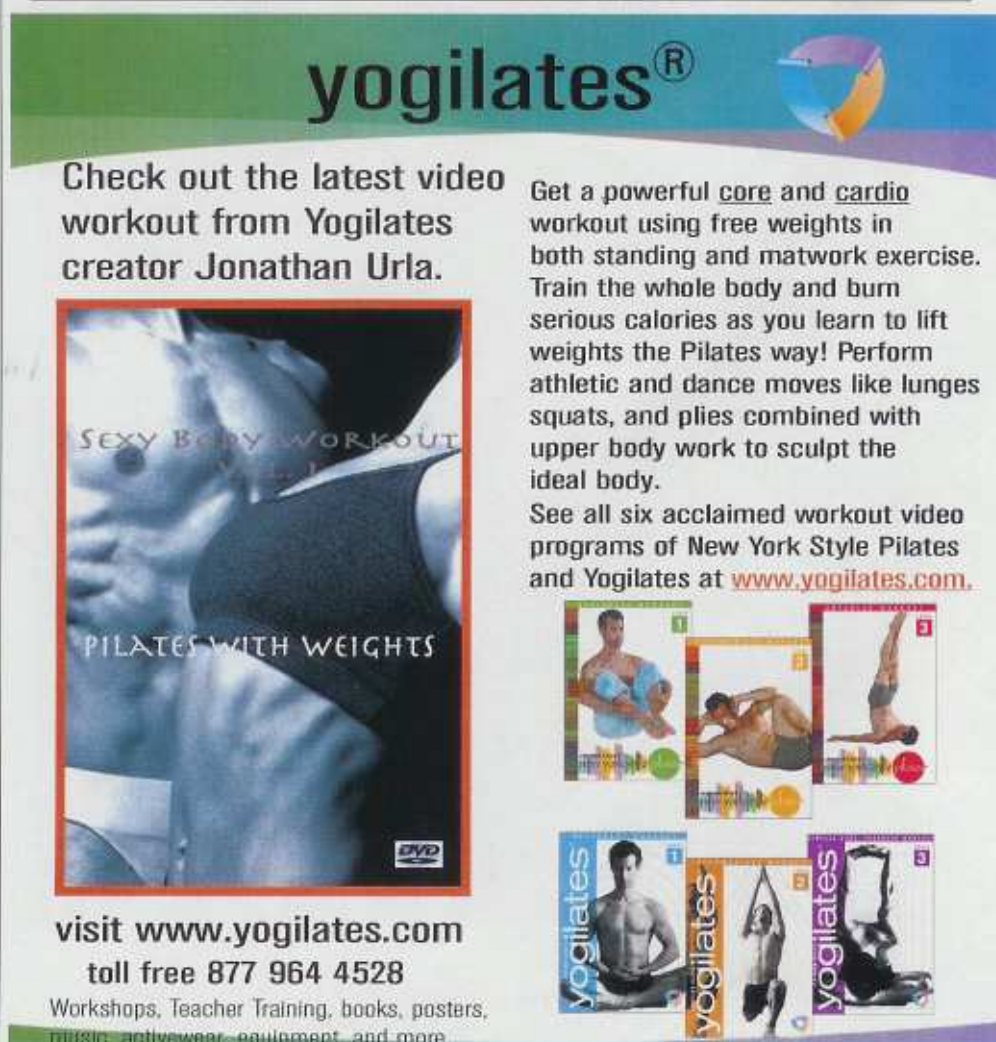


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and if you're used to weight lifting try one that's 12 kilograms (approximately 26 pounds).

Foundation kettlebell drills, with names like the Swing and Clean and Snatch, rely on momentum, gravity and fluid motion. Like Pilates exercises, especially those using the Reformer, these drills promote flexibility in the shoulder and hip and strengthen and stabilize the scapula, shoulder, glutes, hips, thighs, abs and lower back, says Du Cane. The difference is that the weight of the kettlebell provides even more resistance. Pilates teaches you to engage and track your muscles. These skills come into play during more com-

plex kettlebell moves, like the Deck Squat, Windmill and Turkish Get-up.

Combined into a circuit, kettlebell exercises provide a heart-pounding workout that strengthens every muscle in the body. While a few kettlebell drills sound like traditional weight lifting with barbells and dumbbells, kettlebell exercises are not designed to isolate muscle groups. Instead, they work multiple groups together. Nor are they meant to train muscles to failure. "Consistency is more important than intensity," says Tsatsouline, who considers kettlebell training a greater challenge than either traditional weight lifting or aerobics. "Unlike in running or

other popular weight-loss regimens, kettlebell exercises distribute the load evenly throughout the body," he says. "More muscles working at once means greater metabolic overload, which translates to superior fat loss."

The difference shows up in how muscles develop to form a graceful and athletic body. "Yes, you're lifting a weight, but you're moving it dynamically and getting your heart rate up, so bulky muscles just aren't going to happen," says Lurie. You also get really strong, she says. "People who do Pilates a couple days a week and kettlebells a couple days a week notice when they're doing Pilates how much stronger they've gotten." Lurie's students

report improved performance in other activities as well, whether they're training for competitive sports or just moving heavy furniture.

One reason for that is that rather than lifting the kettlebell with arm strength, you swing it up with an explosive hip thrust, a move commonly used to power many athletic activities. Performing well at sports also requires mental focus, a skill honed when doing both Pilates and kettlebells. "You're not sitting at the gym mindlessly watching a TV monitor," says Du Cane. "It's more like meditation with movement."

### in the swing

Learning proper form and breathing techniques is essential for health and safety. "The kettlebell is a highly effective tool for strengthening the connective tissues, especially in the back," explains Tsatsouline. But back pain can occur if you round your lower back. After picking up a kettlebell for the first time, some people find it hurts their back, so they decide to put it down—permanently. The

## pull your own weight

### equipment

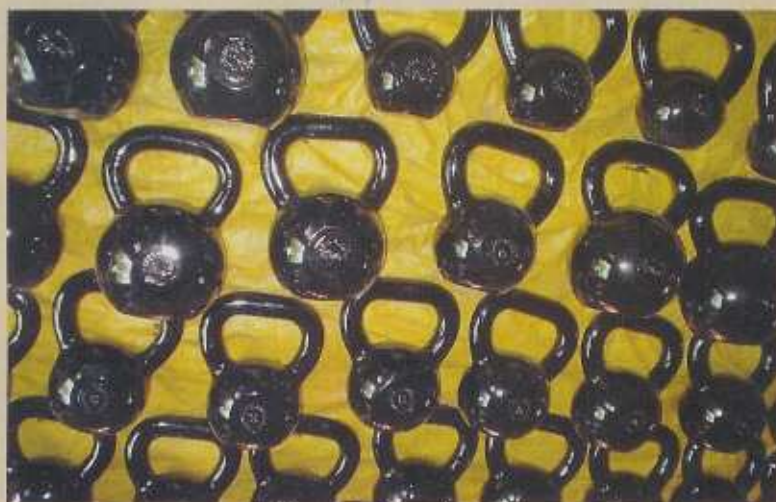
- Good quality kettlebells are available for \$80 to \$100 online at [russiankettlebells.com](http://russiankettlebells.com).

### dvds

- *Kettlebells the Iron Core Way*, Volumes One and Two (Iron Core, 2005)
- *The Kettlebell Goddess Workout*, Andrea Du Cane (Dragon Door, 2006)
- *From Russia with Tough Love: Pavel's Kettlebell Workout for a Femme Fatale*, Pavel Tsatsouline (Advanced Fitness Solutions, 2003)

### books

- *Kettlebells for Dummies*, Sarah Lurie (Wiley, 2007)





problem is usually improper form.

Pilates practitioners protect their backs by holding the body in a neutral spine position. But kettlebell instructors advise students to tilt the pelvis forward. "We stick our butts out like we're proud we've got them," says Du Cane. That may sound wrong to the Pilates-educated ear, but the difference is in the language. "Trainers cue the exercises this way to compensate for what the body wants to do when the back is under load, which is to cave in, especially when the hamstrings and glutes are weak," explains Du Cane. When performed correctly, the glutes and hamstrings will tighten and the back won't overextend.

Kettlebell breathing techniques are also different from those used in Pilates. RKC instructors teach a special abdominal breathing technique that supports the abdominal muscles like a virtual weight belt. "We do this by engaging the inner core muscles, pulling in the pelvic floor or perineum, inhaling into our bellies and then hissing out like we're saying the word 'snake,'" notes Du Cane.

A session or two with a qualified instructor is the best way to get started. (For a list of RKC instructors by state, go to [dragondoor.com/instructors.html](http://dragondoor.com/instructors.html).) In the absence of an instructor, a good DVD will teach the basics and a few advanced drills. Adding more reps, changing the combinations or adding a second kettlebell keeps things interesting. People who graduate to heavier kettlebells often continue to use the smaller ones. In fact, some find they've bonded with their bell. That's not surprising, says Du Cane. "They make us feel good, they make us look good and they last forever." What more could a person ask for?

*Kathy Summers writes about health, fitness and nutrition for several national magazines.*

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