

STRENGTH IS A CHOICE: FROM GYMNASTICS TO POWERLIFTING TO KETTLEBELLS

BY MARK REIFKIND, RKC

I've trained, competed and coached in some pretty diverse sports. Gymnastics, my first endeavor, required a light bodyweight, very high relative strength, maximum joint flexibility, tons of coordination and agility, as well as the ability to see movement in your head and translate it into real time action.

You also developed quite a work ethic as well as willingness to do something wrong a thousand times before ever doing it right once. Practices were 4-5 hours per day five days to six days per week and most of the time you were *trying* to learn a skill. Progressions hadn't really been ironed out yet and most of what we did was: *go for it.*

Pain is forever. Glory is very temporary...

This approach developed a strong will but also numerous (and lifelong) injuries. Don't let them kid you: Pain is forever. Glory is very temporary.

In gymnastics focus, concentration and the ability to observe and analyze very complex motor patterns are basic skills. It develops a highly tuned sense of body mechanics, spatial awareness, and the ability to see multiple actions simultaneously. Much like dance, martial arts and acrobatics, yet with a very high strength requirement.

Of course just being able to see it perfectly in your head was no easy task. For years my legs came apart on a swing half turn to handstand on parallel bars (called a Stutz) and I could not see it perfectly in my head. My legs came apart in my visualizations. When I could see it I could do it. We were using autosuggestion and intense visualization training very early on. My best friend and teammate Randy Lee was into hypnosis and we applied it to our training, realizing that if we could see it we could do it.

We also realized that you had to pay a price to gain the movement skills we were after and that meant grueling training and total devotion to the goal. Anything less was a sacrilege and would not stand. We were pretty hardcore teenagers.

But being able to totally control your body and fly at will is pretty intoxicating stuff and when you hit the sweet spot you could soar!

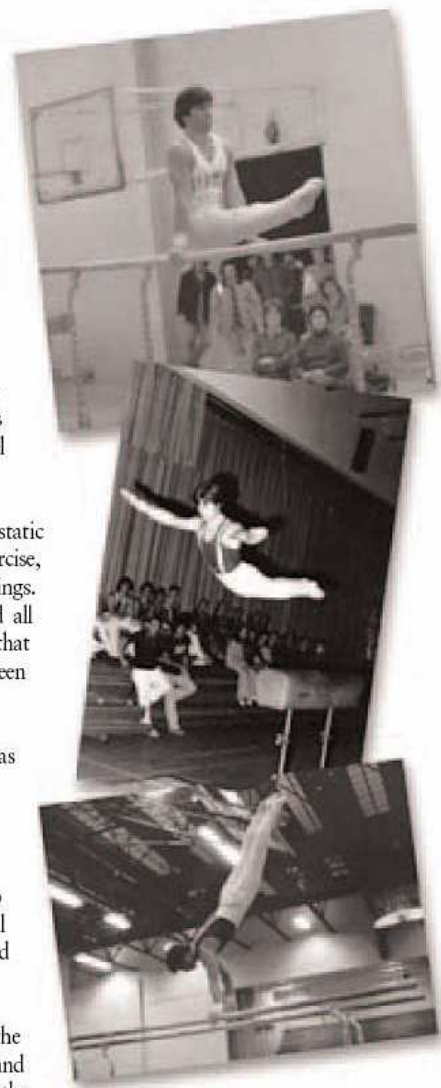
The tighter you are, the stronger you get and the tighter you can get...

Gymnastics requires high levels of total body tension, which is to say, strength. If you can stay tight enough, you can move your body as one piece and direct it in just about any way you want, physics permitting. The tighter you are, the stronger you get and the tighter you can get. A non-vicious circle of strength! Your body acts like a kettlebell swinging around a grounded apparatus. It's no wonder gymnasts take to the bells so quickly. They know how they feel when they swing!

As with kettlebells, in gymnastics you have static movements such as the "L and V" holds on floor exercise, parallel bars, and planches and crosses on rings. Windmills, bent and side presses, squats pistols and all overhead presses require the same full body tension that gymnastics strength moves do. Back and forth between dynamics and statics.

These strength exercises build great concentration as well because they are so intimately tied to balance. Just as in gymnastics, kettlebell grind exercises can require a large amount of balance to perform them properly. Single leg deadlifts, pistols, bottom up cleans, windmills etc. demand that tension and balance go hand and hand. This develops an unusually useful, real world strength as well as increasing body awareness and control.

KB swinging is the mechanical opposite of the gymnastics swing. With a KB your feet are grounded and the arms and torso move. In gymnastics it's just the opposite. The arms are the tether and the legs and hips move freely. A great feeling and it builds a great upper body but if overdone can lead to a very serious upper body/lower body imbalance. There is just not enough hip, leg, or extension work in gymnastics. If not carefully dealt with, the body can get "stuck" in the flexed "hollow" position so prized in gymnastics. This can lead to chronic and debilitating injuries. Also not the best posture for real world strength and activities.



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The kettlebell is the perfect solution to that, in my opinion. One of the most important things I have learned in these 34 years of training and studying training is that working what's weak, and counterbalancing how you train is critical to the long term health as well as progress.

My next forays were into endurance sports and then bodybuilding.

Endurance sports, especially ultra endurance sports were also about strength but of a different kind. Mental strength. I realized very early on I wasn't the fastest guy in town but I could run, bike, and swim for as long as I wanted to because the limiting factor was not my body but my mind. Being able to endure, to suffer for long periods and learn how to relax into it were important skills to me as well. The inner strength that it builds is applicable to everything.

The body likes to be strong. It feels good. Being weak feels miserable...

I've always taught that you can get to the body through the mind or the mind through the body. I've always preferred the body because it's easier. The body likes to be strong. It feels good. Being weak feels miserable. Long, slow endurance training strengthens the mind but really deteriorates the body. All but the necessary slow twitch fibers needed to move the frame are eaten away. Not a great balance.



Powerlifting was a great contrast to endurance training. In contrast with gymnastics and kettlebell lifting, no momentum is used. All effort is concentrated into one maximum effort of the will. Static and absolute strength is the rule of the day. Yet mechanics and conditioning are still vital. One must be in a high condition to be able to do nine plus maximum efforts in a meet, not counting the warm-ups!

I trained under the tutelage of Louie Simmons and followed the *Westside Barbell* template. Louie broke down powerlifting strength into maximum force and maximum velocity and trained each separately. Weak points were analyzed and trained first and hardest. He broke down powerlifting into mechanics and angles and forces. And, of course, will.

Nothing focuses the mind better than fear...

One thing about doing true maximum efforts lifts: it will make you stronger just from being brave enough to face your fears. Fear of being crushed, fear of failure, and mainly fear of weakness. Nothing focuses the mind better than fear, and truly heavy barbells invoke respect (and fear) amongst even the strongest of men. Remember, the bar always wins. You can always put another plate on. So powerlifting is really about mental strength. About intention and focus.

Yet it can play havoc with the joints and over time imbalances and inflexibilities can cause serious injuries as well. Joint mobility and the fluidity and rehabilitative effect of the kettlebells could have played a much bigger role in my knee, hip, back and shoulder conditioning.

Strength isn't just about muscle size, it's about muscle activation. Taking the brakes off and using all of our available muscle to develop tension. Learning to not hold back. True maximum effort. Nothing I've done quite gets to this as heavy powerlifting does. Nothing also lets you know exactly how strong you are at the moment than a 1 Rep Max. 501 is NOT 525. It is 501. Period.

Of course the KB is the same way. 25 snatches is not 28. Knowing exactly where you are is a good thing. Of course, in gymnastics they have fairly serious subjective system and this drove me nuts. But you either made the trick or you didn't. Scores were just opinions in many ways.

These days all of my training is done with kettlebells....

And a kettlebell or a heavy barbell or a double back flip are very compelling when you about to do them. Home treadmills are used mainly as clothes racks because there is nothing compelling about their use. They are boring. But a real live kettlebell or a heavy deadlift sitting on your garage gym calling you a sissy if you don't pick it up now is compelling.

These days all of my training is done with kettlebells. The asymmetrical nature of the one KB seems to be healing my muscular and structural imbalances better than I could have ever hoped. Most of the training is ballistic as that also seems to have a tonic effect on my body. Bilateral static strength moves such as barbell deadlifts, squats, or benches are history. In their place are the grind moves such as windmills, bent press, single kettlebell front squats that really address my weaknesses in the hips and shoulders. I can train five days a week now instead of the three I was limited to when powerlifting.

Each workout starts with swings: one handed, two handed, and with two KB's. I'm using the Hard Style approach with lower reps and multiple sets. Next is a technical pull such as the snatch, the bottom-up clean, or H2H drills. Grinds are also done with windmills predominating. Low reps, under five, and multiple sets. Bent presses, bottom-up press or arm bars are used as well. I change the exercises each workout. A leg exercise or a farmer's walk with different rack positions finish the training. The volume and intensity vary daily.

I know that strength training, as in any focused, devoted and passionate training endeavor, is as much art as science. Science quantifies and measures, art feels and intuit. The training person needs both for if either is lacking, progress will be less, if at all.

Arthur "Superman" Jones, a great raw bench presser once wrote: "There is a big difference between lifting more and getting stronger". His reference was to tight powerlifting gear versus raw lifting but the point is bigger than that. What is real strength and where does it come from? To me the answer is simple. It comes from the mind. From deep inside where you make that choice to act or retreat.

And you get to make that choice every time you pick up a kettlebell or a barbell or get out of bed Monday morning to go to work. Strength is a choice and the more often you choose it the stronger you are and will be.

Rif's Training Schedule

Monday/Wednesday/Friday/Saturday

Choose one exercise from each group each day. Vary the sets from 3-10 per exercise, the reps from 3-5 for grinds and 10-30 for swings. Rest until the heart rate drops to 80% of work set pulse.

1) Swings

- One-handed swing
- Two-handed swing
- Two-handed 2 KB's swing
- One-handed 2 KB's swing
- H2H swing

2) Technical Swings

- Snatch
- H2H flips
- Swing and flip squat
- Bottom-up clean
- Clean

3) Grinds

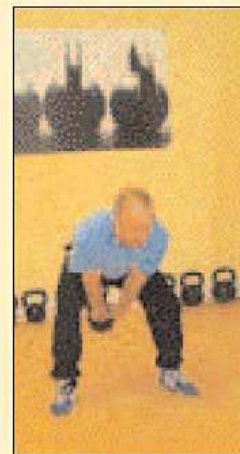
- Windmill
- Bent press
- Military press
- Bottom-up press
- Arm bar

4) Legs

- One KB front squat
- One KB lunge (3 rack positions: farmer's, chest, overhead)
- Tactical lunge
- Turkish getup
- KB squat on a Bosu ball

5) Walks

- Farmers walk (single KB)
- Rack walk (single KB)
- Waiter's walk (single KB)
- Combo walk (two KBs)
- Walking swings



This workout is designed to increase my general conditioning, stabilize my shoulders, build base strength and strength endurance in my legs, hips, and feet, as well as increase technical mastery in the basic KB skills.

Mark Reifkind, RKC has been a competitive athlete, coach and student of physical culture for the last 34 years. A former national level gymnast, he has trained Olympian gymnasts, was the head coach for Team USA in Powerlifting and has written for *Ironman*, *Milo* and *Muscle Mag International*. A masters level rated powerlifter, he now focuses his training on the kettlebell and the depth of its applications.

Rif is the owner operator of Giriya Kettlebell Training in Palo Alto California, the first training center in California to use the kettlebell as its primary method of conditioning. Giriya offers semi private KB classes, KB boot camps, and personal training in the art of the kettlebell. All Giriya instructors are RKC certified.

Mark is available for seminars, speaking engagements and online consultations. Contact him at (650) 273-2637 or www.GiriyaStrength.com.