

Kettlebell Training for Triathletes; A Half Marathon Experiment

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As every triathlon enthusiast will appreciate, success in competition demands a considerable time commitment. Indeed, many participants find themselves short-changing other important aspects of their lives, such as work, and time for family and friends, in order to put in those all important training hours. I myself have slaved away for up to 14 hours a week just to be competitive at sprint and Olympic distance tris, and have had to sacrifice other enjoyable aspects of my life in order to do so. Additionally, injuries synonymous with hefty triathlon training schedules, such as chondromalacia Patella (runner's knee, also prevalent in cyclists), Achilles tendonitis and swimmer's shoulder, pose a constant threat to keen triathletes following a traditional training routine.

It is no surprise, therefore, that an increasing number of endurance athletes are beginning to look for an alternative method of achieving optimal fitness without the time-consuming, laborious and life-ruling characteristics of traditional endurance training; A method that can not only enable them to reduce the time they spend training, but can also strengthen, condition and injury-proof them in a way that swimming, cycling and running cannot; Perhaps even a training method that is anything but monotonous, and therefore keeps motivation and adherence to a premium.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to, the kettlebell!

There is no other training method that develops strength, endurance and cardiovascular capacity quite like the kettlebell. Its ability to provide unparalleled conditioning and turbo-charged fitness has seen an upsurge in popularity in recent years, with world class athletes and celebrities such as Lance Armstrong, Matthew McConaughey and Penelope Cruz swinging, snatching and pressing their way into incredible shape.

The kettlebell resembles a cannonball with a handle, and training is based around five foundation exercises, all of which have the ability to simultaneously enhance performance in the three phases of triathlon. The drills are all multiple lever movements that rely on major muscle groups, thus providing an intense and challenging strength and cardiovascular workout in one. The swing, a dynamic, total body movement, teaches the hips, glutes and hamstrings to fire powerfully and effectively, which translates directly to running and cycling efficiency. Cleans also encourage power generation from hip drive, whilst simultaneously relaxing the shoulders; critical during a gruelling multi-sport race. Snatches help to rewire the central nervous system, thus strengthening the mind-body connection and adding overall efficiency in each phase. Military presses, meanwhile, stabilises the inherently unstable shoulder joint, strengthening the surrounding muscles and negating the continual internal rotation of the freestyle stroke that so often causes the collection of troublesome symptoms that fall beneath the 'swimmer's shoulder' umbrella. Each and every kettlebell drill has the benefit of encouraging the body to work

as one synergistic unit, thereby resulting in optimal efficiency and providing a hugely advantageous carry over into triathlon, and every other sport.

To give you an idea of the incredible cardiovascular conditioning you can get simply by using a single kettlebell, allow me to briefly tell you about my preparation for my first half marathon at Windsor in 2008, as an example. Due to my heavy schedule as a personal trainer, the time I had available for training myself was restricted, and certainly not sufficient to follow a traditional half marathon training regime. So, rather than admit defeat and give up on one of my personal goals for the year, I decided to perform a little experiment and prepare for my run primarily using kettlebells. Whilst I would not advocate building up to a significant race distance without at least some running preparation, I was interested to see how well fitness developed primarily from kettlebell training might transfer to running endurance. My lead up to the half marathon incorporated five workouts of 60 minutes or less per week, for eight weeks. Instead of a traditional running build up, I devised a varied, kettlebell-based regime which consisted of high-rep snatches (approximately 500 in 45 minutes), total body strength training using heavier kettlebells to increase my power and injury-resilience, and multiple sets of 5 or 6 exercises, such as deadlifts, russian twists, squats and presses, in order to develop muscular endurance and conditioning. I ran on the treadmill once or twice a week for the duration of my build up, gradually increasing to a maximum distance of 8 miles in the penultimate week, before tapering.

Lining up on the start line I was admittedly somewhat anxious at the prospect of running 13 miles with very little actual running mileage, but as I settled into the run I felt surprisingly comfortable. I finished the race in two hours dead, which, considering the heat and demanding hills on route, was respectable for a 'natural sprinter's' first attempt. More importantly, I pushed myself to the maximum, and although I had considerable lactic acid build up as expected by the end of the race, my recovery was exceptionally quick, and two days later I felt completely recovered, bar a few blisters.

Bearing in mind that I had also severely prolapsed a disk in my back and could barely move only five months earlier, my half marathon attempt bore testament to the kettlebell's incredible core conditioning capacity. Every lift or dynamic movement you can perform with this versatile and diminutive piece of kit requires extraordinary core muscle strength, which is imperative to maximal performance. The core provides a solid foundation through which power can be transferred from one region of the body to another, so for any athlete looking to improve their race day results, as well as help prevent injury, developing a strong core is essential and is an aspect of training that simply cannot be overlooked.

So there you have it. If you are looking to reduce the amount of time you spend preparing for race days, whilst also increasing your resilience to common endurance training related injuries AND improving your overall efficiency, and therefore speed, then find yourself a well qualified kettlebell trainer and discover the challenge, fun, and results associated with this remarkable training tool. Kettlebell training can be performed pretty much anywhere and takes up very little space, so even when you're tight for time you can still give yourself an immense cardiovascular workout without even leaving the house.

For more information on kettlebell and functional training visit
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