

The Russian Kettlebell Challenges Med School

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Pomona, California – Western University’s College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific recently hosted world-renowned strength training expert and pioneer Pavel Tsatsouline for a presentation and special seminar on Russian kettlebells.

Tsatsouline, long respected for bringing Russian kettlebell training to the forefront of strength and fitness training here in the United States, was invited to speak as a guest of the Western University Sports Medicine Club and osteopathic teaching fellow Courtney Mizuhara-Cheng. His well-attended noon-time presentation covered the fundamentals of kettlebell training, as well as an explanation of the physiological benefits of kettlebell exercises.

Explaining that the majority of traditional weight lifting exercises are derived from bodybuilders, the former Spetznaz (Soviet special operations) instructor showed how many exercises do not serve the body’s best interests in terms of functional strength and daily life. Compare that to kettlebell training, where every exercise develops a very linked, coordinated strength. Part of the concept of linkage is a cardinal no-no in traditional weight training – locking the joints.

Tsatsouline said, “That’s one thing that makes kettlebell training stand out: our constant emphasis on ‘linkage’ over ‘leakage’. If you try to do the mechanical work that you do with a heavier kettlebell but with improper biomechanics, it’ll never happen. The muscles will simply give out. If you use a lighter weight and still train with sub-maximal range of motion, you’ll end up training your body to shorten its tissues and impair your healthy range of motion. Kettlebell training is all about using the maximum safe weight to increase the body’s strength through a maximum range of motion. To do that, we use synergistic muscle recruitment, compressive breathing techniques, and highly efficient structural alignment while performing the exercises.”

With his student, Dr. Mark Cheng, demonstrating the swing, Turkish get-up, clean, press, and snatch with a 53-pound kettlebell, Tsatsouline showed the medical students that proper biomechanical alignment and synergistic muscular recruitment created strength gains that got the attention of the academics. He also cited the works of different spinal biomechanists during his explanation about the role of the gluteus muscles in lower back pain. In the condition known as “gluteal amnesia”, many patients suffer with lumbar pain due to the overuse of their lower back and leg muscles. This situation arises because they are unable to properly recruit the gluteal muscles when lifting. Cheng also commented on the injury rehabilitation that he personally experienced in his lumbar spine and rotator cuffs thanks to kettlebell training. “I’ve tried plenty of different means of treating my

lower back pain and rotator cuffs, but nothing has come close to giving me the kind of relief and fast strength gains that kettlebell training has,” Cheng told the audience. “Now I use kettlebell training as a means of rehabilitating certain patients in my clinical practice, and the results have been quite impressive for both me and my patients.”

Following his presentation to the osteopathic medical students, Tsatsouline gave a special hands-on workshop for the osteopathic teaching fellows and faculty member, Professor David Redding, DO. For the teaching fellows, this was a chance to get expert guidance on the proper form and execution of the exercises that Tsatsouline had spoken on just moments earlier.

While the majority of the teaching fellows had been introduced to basic kettlebell swings by their classmate, Courtney Mizuhara-Cheng, each still made improvements in form, technique, and strength with Tsatsouline’s in-depth explanations and troubleshooting exercises. Mizuhara-Cheng led the pack, starting off by confidently swinging a 53-pound kettlebell. At 5’1” and 106 pounds and having given birth barely 8 months prior, Mizuhara-Cheng’s command of the heavy kettlebell was an impressive sight for those who were doubtful that they could move lighter weights without strain or injury. The participants were heard joking afterwards, talking about how their gluteus muscles no longer suffered any sort of amnesia.

Tsatsouline moved on to teach the Turkish get-up, a multi-step exercise that requires both tremendous concentration and coordination to create the muscular linkage required for its proper execution. With Cheng demonstrating each step and Tsatsouline teaching and troubleshooting the get-up in stages, the workshop participants found themselves controlling heavier weights than they had previously imagined possible. Professor Redding turned in a particularly noteworthy performance, handling a 35-pound kettlebell on his first attempt.

At the end of the kettlebell workshop, the Western University COMP teaching fellows found themselves feeling worked, but strangely invigorated. Each of the students and Professor Redding thanked Tsatsouline profusely for taking the time to give such a valuable workshop and expressed hope that he’d be back again for a sequel.