

# 45 Seconds, 1 Kettlebell Exercise and a 37% Boost in Power—Senior RKC Secrets from the Frozen Tundra

By Adrienne Harvey, RKC II

Dragon Door Interviews Senior RKC, Jon Engum

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**Jon Engum:** I discovered [kettlebells](#) through flexibility training. I've been a martial artist since age 8, and opened my own gym in 1991. I got my first black belt at the age of 12. It's all I do, it's all I've been doing, it's all I know.

**Dragon Door:** What style of martial arts?

**Jon Engum:** Tae Kwon Do, Korean style martial arts... I study three different ones. Early in my career I was a competitor and I liken it to being a rodeo cowboy. You train really hard all week long, then travel and fight at a tournament on the weekend. Sunday you try to heal up so you can train again on Monday. You're getting beat up and beat up and beat up. Hopefully you're winning more than you're losing but it still takes a big toll on the body.



*Dragon Door:* That's a lot of activity.

*Jon Engum:* We were fighters, we weren't athletes. Over the years, after many repetitive injuries, I was getting tighter and tighter. People would come to my gym, and even though I'm the master, they would exhibit more natural flexibility than I could. That had to be changed.

Since all I did was martial arts, I had time to study, and went to every stretching and flexibility guru I could find. After traveling all over, I found the flexibility world is full of charlatans. I'd go to a seminar and the guy would take us through some moves that everybody already knows and he'd say "do this for six or seven months and you'll gain an inch or two here and there." I went to workshop after workshop hoping for just one good idea that was worth the time and travel.

One day a magazine showed up in the mail with this Russian guy and all these outlandish claims about how he could instantly improve your flexibility. Long story short, I went to one of his seminars. I could never do the splits, not even when I was ten-years-old. Pavel told me to jump, do this and do that right now and you'll get it. I did a split that day. Pavel then said, "If you like that you have to try kettlebells." The rest is history. **I believe that's how John Du Cane originally met Pavel as well—through a flexibility workshop.**



**Dragon Door:** I remember reading about that! It's interesting, kettlebell training seems to increase flexibility as a side effect—I'm more flexible now than ever before.

After meeting Pavel Tsatsouline at his flexibility seminar what was the next step for you?

**Jon Engum:** [The RKC](#) in 2004. The course was good back then, but the RKC is a think-tank. It's constantly improving. A carpenter, no matter how good he is, has to sharpen his tools. The tools here are constantly sharpened and examined. The principles don't change but how you teach them gets more and more streamlined.

**Dragon Door:** Are you still teaching martial arts along with kettlebells?

**Jon Engum:** I teach martial arts classes and kettlebell classes Monday through Wednesday. In my hometown, 90 miles from the gym, I teach a kettlebell course on Thursdays. Thursday afternoon I'm usually flying out somewhere to teach a kettlebell seminar somewhere else on Saturday. Sunday is home and Monday it starts over again.

**Dragon Door:** Sounds like a schedule similar to your tournament days!

**Jon Engum:** Healthier though. We had no concept of peaking for a fight back then, no concept of a wavy approach to training. Monday was hard training, Tuesday was really hard training, Wednesday was extremely hard training. Thursday and Friday you'd usually travel, then

Saturday you'd fight. Sunday you'd lick your wounds and hit Monday again. There was no science involved in it. Had we known then what we know now, I could have been a contender.

**Dragon Door:** Which brings me to the next point. How has your RKC training affected your approach with clients and also your own practice?

**Jon Engum:** RKC training has affected it tremendously. The kettlebell is the ultimate conditioning tool for a martial artist. You don't need a lot of equipment, it's fast, it's effective and the principles involved can be transferred to any sport, any movement. Movement is movement—a savvy coach can take the movement principles from the RKC, plug them into the martial arts system, and dramatically improve it. It's a great marriage.



**Dragon Door:** I was reading [The Iron Warrior](#) for lacrosse. I don't know anything about lacrosse other than it's very popular locally and wanted to know what movements from the sport would be improved by kettlebell training. The same thing was true—the basic kettlebell exercises were recommended because as you said, good movement is good movement. Better movement patterns affect sports and really all of life.

**Jon Engum:** Better equals more powerful, faster and you're able to recover because you're not doing stupid stuff.

**Dragon Door:** True. You're a Senior RKC, what advice would you have for someone who aspires to improve as an RKC instructor?

**Jon Engum:** Anybody who wants to become a better instructor needs to find a mentor. A lot of people come to an RKC and get three incredible days of instruction—but that's the tip of the iceberg. The major part of the ice is underneath the water and is gained from experience.

**A couple words of advice for new RKCs:** one, go to the [Marketing Mastermind Intensive](#). Two, find somebody who is successful doing what they want to do, donate your time to them and become an apprentice. You're going to gain a lot from the experience and will hopefully avoid some of the mistakes they made in the past.

**Dragon Door:** Who was your mentor?

**Jon Engum:** My martial arts instructor has been since I was eight. Also, of course, John Du Cane and Pavel Tsatsouline.

**Dragon Door:** What do you think is the most beneficial kettlebell exercise for Tae Kwon Do?

**Jon Engum:** I'm going to throw a curve ball, normally people would say the swing or the get up. I'd say the RKC arm bar. It gets people out of their own way, takes the brakes off, it opens them up. Andrea Du Cane was recently talking about how people are sitting with poor posture all the time. The arm bar does incredible things to correct posture, movement and has the side effect of boosting your power in a roundhouse kick or punch. It's just incredible.

We took a professional boxer and had him throw 10 right crosses on his bag which had an impact meter. Then we taught him how to do the arm bar. He worked the arm bar for maybe 45 seconds then went back and hit the bag again. Take a guess at what the power increase was... a pro fighter who makes his living punching. Normally we'd be excited to improve a pro athlete's major movement by maybe two or three percent. **He had a 37 percent increase in his power from 45 seconds of arm bar work.** That's almost doubling his power, that's real numbers.

**Dragon Door:** To what do you attribute this drastic improvement? Something neurological? Or related to flexibility?

**Jon Engum:** Yes—both of those and more, it's not the kettlebell that's magic, it's the RKC principles, it's all in how you teach it, how you use the kettlebell.

**Dragon Door:** I was really glad to see [your article on the arm bar on DragonDoor](#). That exercise doesn't seem to get a lot of attention.

**Jon Engum:** It's often overlooked, but it is going to be taught here today at the Chicago RKC. Sometimes I use it with the general population—I have them stand up, close their eyes and ask how they feel in terms of posture, their position in space. It's a really open ended question. Then we do the arm bar. I have them stand and close their eyes again and ask the same question. It's just so powerful that they're blown away. Talking about it really doesn't do it justice. It has to be

experienced. People say they feel taller, lighter, that they've just been opened up, that they've escaped.

**Dragon Door:** What's next for you in the long term?

**Jon Engum:** I think I'll be doing kettlebells my whole life. I'm hooked. It's a lifestyle. It's the most powerful system there is—the RKC is really a martial art. When you think of a martial arts system, there's a mental, physical, and even a spiritual aspect. You're pushing yourself past limits, and there's beauty in the movement. The RKC also has a moral code. It's an art.

**Dragon Door:** I've seen some trainers advertise that in two hours you can know everything you need to know about kettlebell training. I usually attribute that to a marketing tactic on their part, but you're not gonna master anything in one day. I'm still working on the Swing, I'm going to be working on the Swing my whole life.

I sometimes describe the Get Up as being like a martial arts form, because of all the nuances.

**Jon Engum:** Saying you can learn everything you need to know about a kettlebell in two hours is like saying you can learn everything about a violin in two hours. Yeah, you hold it like this, it has strings and you make the bow go like this. The trick is making it sound good.

**Dragon Door:** What's the biggest challenge you see with new clients?

**Jon Engum:** Getting them out of the mindset that they're coming to work out and need to be smoked, instead of coming in and practicing. I'm having to reach for that because there's not a problem at all. The hard part is getting clients in the door. Once you have them it's up to you, the instructor, to show them the look, the feel, and the difference. Though sometimes you need to hold the clients back.

**Dragon Door:** I've got a client who is super enthusiastic, but sometimes we have to slow down because form is primary, the workout is secondary.

**Jon Engum:** Back to the musical instrument analogy— would you play your violin badly as fast as you can for three hours or would you shoot for perfection? Stop while it's still sounding good—that's the hardest thing to get across to people. Look at kettlebell training as an art instead of just a workout. Be actively involved in analyzing the technique and training smart.

**Dragon Door:** Totally agreed. Can you think of someone who has had a big positive change because of kettlebell training?

**Jon Engum:** It's endless. **I have a client who is 89-years-old** and wanted to improve his golf game. He asked if he was too old for kettlebell training, I said you're too old not to try! At first he couldn't pick up a kettlebell, didn't have the mobility or stability. We started deadlifting from a box, and I taught him how to grab a kettlebell, roll it over and pick it up. Everyday he said he felt stronger. He came to me trying to improve his golf game and ended up improving his quality of life—a huge transformation.

There's some students saying that [the HKC](#) was a life changing experience. It gives me chills, a lot of them talk to me with tears in their eyes. It's just that powerful of a change. That's why I do this, it's empowering. There are cases that are consistent with the idea that RKC style training is the fountain of youth. It's found, it's been discovered.

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**Grandmaster [Jon Engum](#), Senior RKC** currently holds a 7th Degree Blackbelt in Taekwondo (kukkiwon) a 4th Dan in Hapkido and a 4th Dan in Kumdo. He owns and operates Engum's Taekwondo Association. He teaches ongoing Kettlebell Classes in Brainerd, MN and Detroit Lakes, MN as well as Kettlebell and Flexibility Seminars worldwide.

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