

# EXOTIC exercise

BY J.P. RIBNER ♦ PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL GLEASON

KEN BLACKBURN

What's with all the strange exercise equipment at the gym these days? Whether you're a gym rat or an occasional exercise experimentalist, you've probably seen an odd array of new workout equipment at your local fitness center. While still largely peculiar to the mainstream, equipment such as kettlebells and Bulgarian bags are developing a core group of avid enthusiasts who swear by the equipment's effectiveness at helping them achieve and maintain peak physical conditioning. But something so effective can't stay Genesee County's best kept exercise secret for long, as evidenced by the number of area gyms and fitness centers that are incorporating these workout tools.

Remember the phrase “functional fitness” because it’s becoming more and more popular. This discipline stresses strength, endurance, conditioning and core stability, making it perfect for extreme athletes – military personnel and cage fighters – as well as anyone looking to improve their workouts and/or physical wellbeing. Through his conditioning program at Fenton Fitness Center, Fenton resident and personal trainer Ken Blackburn has been on the forefront of the functional fitness movement. As such, he’s personally introduced kettlebells, Bulgarian bags and other exotic exercise equipment – and the fitness routines that utilize them – to a number of area residents from all walks of life.

“Nearly anyone can benefit from this type of exercise,” Blackburn commented. “The key is the full-body movements that this conditioning offers; by focusing on exercises that present different planes of motion and whole-body movements, functional fitness offers a wide range of benefits including strength, conditioning and core stability.” An ideal way of programming/configuring workouts with these tools is to ensure the loading, volume and intensity are always varied, which Blackburn says ensures progress and helps avoid over-training and injury. This encourages the body to produce more repetitions over time exercised, leading to increased physical results.

The kettlebell is the main tool of Blackburn’s trade, so to speak. It looks like a cannonball with an iron handle attached to its top and it’s quickly becoming one of the hottest exercise trends to appear in area fitness centers. Blackburn’s introduction to the “bells” came ten years ago at the Fenton Fitness Center. He recalled, “They literally had one kettlebell and few people used it because it was tucked away behind a bunch of other equipment.” Intrigued, he began researching this unique exercise tool, leading to co-creation of the International Kettlebell and Fitness Federation, where he’s a Master Trainer teaching certifications and workshops all over the world.

The versatility and challenge of the workouts is what made Blackburn a committed kettlebell convert. “There’s an entire gym in just one of them,” he explained. “They bridge the gap between strength and endurance because the majority of the exercises focus on repetitions over time.” Most of the kettlebell



ELLIE SEVICK

exercises Blackburn’s trainees do are done during a three- to ten-minute set, which he says offer phenomenal strength, endurance and core stability benefits, as evidenced by his many students.

At 59 years old and 113 pounds, Ellie Seveck doesn’t look like the “typical” kettlebell enthusiast – but looks can be deceiving. Some might be surprised to see her hoist a 50-pound kettlebell and complete a ten-minute set without stops or breaks. Ellie explained, “Working with kettlebells has made me strong and confident enough to take on other forms of exercise. I never used to run because I lacked the stamina for it. After years of working with kettlebells, I tried running one day and I did two miles easily.” Now, Seveck regularly takes one of the top three places for her age group in various marathons.

When it comes to exotic exercise equipment, few are more unique-looking than the Bulgarian bag. These crescent-shaped, leather or canvas bags are filled with sand and typically swung around the body for specific lengths of time. Blackburn explained, “It was created by Ivan Ivanov, a former Olympic wrestler from Bulgaria. He was looking for a conditioning tool that offered rotational benefits to the wrestlers he was coaching and this led to its development.” Blackburn adds that routines using the bag offer fitness benefits to anyone, making it an ideal addition to any workout regimen.

Fifty-year-old Fenton resident Julie Diller was introduced to the Bulgarian bag while training with Blackburn. “What I like most about it is the way it targets my external oblique muscles,” she said. “Working with the bag has definitely helped me get toned because it’s an excellent cardio workout.” Julie first purchased a —



26-pound bag, then soon moved up to the heavier, 37-pound model, and she remains diligent about her bag workouts, using it for 10-20 minutes, three or four times per week.

"A big steel ball atop a long metal pole" best describes a mace, another exercise tool that Blackburn has recently introduced to his class. "It's easy to feel like a warrior from *Game of Thrones* when you're swinging one of these things around," he laughed. "Besides its unique look, the exercises done with the mace tend to be circular, making them perfect for both rotational mechanics as well as opening the shoulders and ribcage for posture and mobility." Some of Blackburn's students use the mace to build grip strength and improve their competitive kettlebell performance.

Believe it or not, ropes, chains and tractor tires are considered workout equipment at area gyms and fitness centers.



Users often flip tractor tires end over end to build strength and endurance while ropes – known as "battle ropes" – are waved, snapped and flipped, usually for a specific amount of time. Chains can be worn around the body during a workout or even a jog to add resistance. "All of these things can be incorporated into a traditional workout," Blackburn said. "The benefit is that the intensity of exercising with these items makes it effective at burning fat and creating lean muscle mass."



**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

Story suggestions and feedback  
are always welcome!

Contact us at [mycitymag.com](http://mycitymag.com)

*MyCity*  
magazine

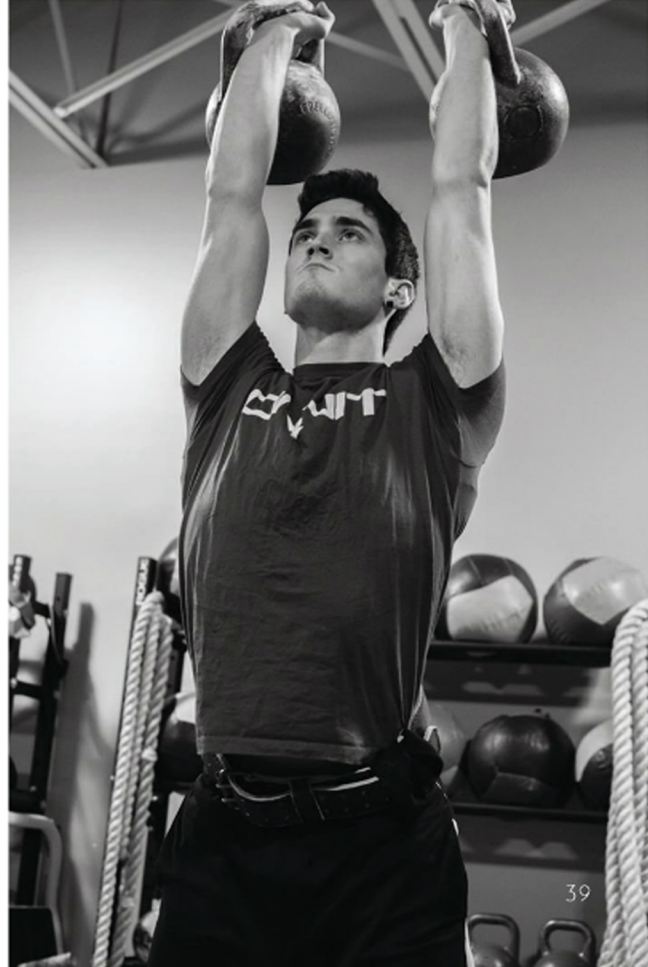


/mycitymag



Thinking about adding some functional fitness to your workout routine? If so, Blackburn has some advice for newbies. He explained, "Using this equipment does present a real risk of various injuries, especially to someone who doesn't know the proper techniques and routines." He recommends seeking the advice of a personal trainer to help make the process as safe and beneficial as possible. He also recommends starting small, especially men. "As guys," he said, "it's typical for us to start out with heavy weights right away. To minimize injury, start with lighter weights until you master the proper form and breathing techniques."

It seems that kettlebells, Bulgarian bags and other exotic exercise equipment are here to stay. While they present a departure from more traditional workout methods, this uniqueness isn't the sole reason for their growing popularity. The results they help produce have led many people to swear by them ... and are why so many more people are willing to give them a try. Perhaps it's time to add something new to your exercise routine, Genesee County? Think of it this way: you now have a few more tools to help you keep those New Year's resolutions! ♦



# THINK DIFFERENTLY. LEARN DIFFERENTLY.

As a national leader in experiential STEM education,  
we're all about science, technology, engineering,  
math and business.

Apply today!

[kettering.edu/apply](https://kettering.edu/apply)

**Kettering**  
UNIVERSITY