

How to win at kettling

a guide for non-policemen

Anarch*ish*

2011

During the second half of 2010 an exciting and physically challenging new urban sport broke out of the sub-cultures and into the big time. Kettling, once the preserve of climate activists, anarchists and anti-fascists, took the student world by storm throughout the winter, and is now set to hit the mainstream in 2011 with trade-unionists, benefit claimants, evictees, the disabled and anyone else who gives a flying fuck about their fellow human beings all set to get involved. The first match of the year is scheduled for Saturday, 29th of January, and both TSG and protesters are limbering up ahead of the big game.

But how, exactly, do you play kettling? Well, first you'll need to split into two teams – attackers and defenders. Team A, the defenders, will be formed of disparate groups of individuals with broadly similar but occasionally conflicting aims. So as to best identify themselves, they should wear hoodies, masks and an expression of determined optimism. For Team A the aim of the game is to remain free and at liberty for as long as possible while expressing their opposition to the status quo.

The offensive team, Team B, will be smaller in number, better armed, and dressed like angry glowsticks. The aim of the game for Team B is to trap Team A in as small a space as possible and stop them from leaving, thereby eliminating their right to free expression.

So far, Team A has suffered from a lack of training and equipment, as well as the fact that the rules were written by Team B, and breaches of even these rules are frequently ignored by the Federation International de Kettling Association, or “IPCC” as it is commonly known. For example, whilst Queensbury rules state that a sterile cordon can only be created in response to violence or breaches of public order, it is now routine for Team B to justify kettling in response to the perceived or imagined threats that these things may occur. This unsportsmanlike innovation means that some tactics previously used by Team A – such as not breaking the law – are unlikely to prevent Team B from kettling them anyway.

One thing that does play in Team A's favor is sheer numerical superiority. At its core, kettling is a struggle between a small, well equipped force trying to surround a much larger group. The principle is one which has been used throughout history, most notably by Hannibal at the battle of Cannae. By encircling his enemies within as tight a space as possible, Hannibal was able to create a front line where he actually outnumbered his opponents, despite their greater numbers, whilst simultaneously creating panic within their trapped ranks.

This is precisely the situation Team A wants to avoid. To do so, they should make good use of one simple concept that any GCSE biologists reading will be familiar with – surface area to volume ratio. The larger the space Team A occupies, the harder it will be for them to be kettled. At the beginning of a march this could mean starting at multiple rally points, or splitting up soon after setting off. It also means moving quickly, as a fast moving, albeit chaotic group covers more ground and occupies more space than a slow and orderly one. In fact, it makes sense to move unpredictably as this makes it harder for team B to spring an ambush, and also spreads the message to people who would not normally get to see dissent on their streets. In France, where this tactic has been popular for some time, it is sometimes called a “wild protest”

Team A might ultimately want to make their voice heard in a place of geographical significance – parliament square or Millbank for example. When this happens, Team A will probably get kettled. This may divide Team A into two groups, one inside and one outside of the kettle. Try to set up a secondary or tertiary rally point for groups outside of the kettle to converge at – this will prove useful later.

To best defend against the coming kettle, Team A should spread out as widely as possible within their rally space. This will both thin Team B’s lines and create a more comfortable atmosphere for all involved. Depending on the situation, particularly on the number of people in Team A, Team B will either kettle geographically or physically. The former is the nicer kind of kettle, where there will be probably be lots of free space and individuals may even be allowed to leave freely, though not as a group. The latter tactic – sometimes known as “hyper-kettling” involves Team B crushing Team A into as tight a space as possible, using violence to squeeze people into an abnormally, sometimes dangerously cramped space. This is horrible.

To prevent hyper-kettling occurring, Team A should keep an eye on the body language and positions of Team B. Unlike Team A, who are free to do as they wish, Team B can only act under orders from one of their team captains, so if you see them moving in a group, putting on helmets, changing their stance or otherwise altering their behaviour, that means an order’s been given. Try and ask yourself: what was that order? Was it part of a strategy? What will they do next?

If members of Team A see a kettle forming, the best thing to do is get beyond Team B’s lines as quickly as possible. At the start of a kettle’s formation these lines are usually weak and can be darted through. Shouting about the kettle is a good idea. Waiting for others to react to it isn’t – the best way to convince others to leave is to lead by example. In any case, you will be more use outside than inside, as kettles are easier to break from the back of the line. Once out of the danger zone, use social media like Twitter and the new sukey.org website to inform your teammates of what’s going on.

For those left inside the kettle, it is imperative Team A fills as much space as possible, quickly. Getting those around you to join in is vital. Grab onto people and link arms tightly to form chains and encourage others to do likewise. You could also sit down, though this makes it harder to push back against police lines, and it will be easy for the police to tighten their cordon should you at any point be forced to stand up. Indeed, Team B may be happy to kettle a crowd sat on freezing concrete for as long as that crowd is willing to stay sat still. Still, at least you’ll have some space.

Whether you are in a physical or geographical kettle, Team A pros will only have one thing on their mind: breaking out. Breaking out is one of the most challenging and rewarding parts of kettling, and freeing your teammates from an illegal and inhumane open prison is one of the most empowering things you can do as a player. To break out successfully, Team A must choose

a weak spot in Team B's offense, pick the right moment, and then concentrate as much force as possible in that location. Good spots to target are places where the lines are only one or two glowsticks deep, or where more inexperienced members of Team B are playing. In London an organization called the Territorial Support Group are Team B's "A-Team", to use a deliberately confusing metaphor. As well as the usual giveaways of riot shields and helmets, TSG members have a letter U on their lapels – this stands for "Utter fucking bellends". The TSG is limited in size and for big games large numbers of other players – normal bobbies without riot training – will be brought off the subs bench. Keep an eye on who knows what their doing and who doesn't.

A good play from Team A will see them focusing their energy on a point where opposition players have the least direct access to their teammates – in a geographical kettle this might mean the edge of a line beside a wall or van, in a physical kettle it is simply the point furthest from reinforcements.

Timing is crucial. While it is generally best to wait until you can apply the maximum possible force to a weak point before rushing in, sometimes opportunities appear that are likely to be short lived. Acting swiftly and decisively in these situations can break the kettle.

The aim of focusing energy on one point is to create a gap in the line which can then be opened as wide as possible. One good way of doing this is to form a wedge or triangle shape, with the player at the front opening the space and allowing a fan of other players to spread it as they follow behind them. This is easier in geographic kettles than physical one, but in either case the structure will be more effective if players link arms and build momentum before reaching Team B's lines. Keep a look out for groups with home made shields, helmets and padding – they are likely to be looking for ways to break the kettle. You can help these Team A pros by allowing them to move through the crowd, then sticking close behind them.

If Team A has become split it can be very effective for those outside the kettle to push into Team B's lines from the outside whilst those within the kettle do the same from within. If a small group has escaped just as the kettle was forming they have the opportunity to put pressure on the kettle from the outside just when it is at its weakest. Keep in contact via phones, SMS, Twitter, Sukey etc. Also, use your eyes and ears – they may be old technology, but they're surprisingly effective.

If all has gone according to plan, you will hopefully spend this Saturday breaking in and out of kettles across London. However, it's not impossible that the day will end in a disheartening stalemate, with protesters being slowly dripped out of a kettle over many hours. Remember, in these situations the police do not have the right to take your details – not even your name – unless there has been a "Section 50" introduced. Officers WILL attempt to blag it. This includes straight out lying to you about their powers and threatening you with illegal arrest. Look around for a legal observer – these guys are awesome and will put the police in their place.

Finally, though kettling is a fun and addictive sport, it does have its dangers. Anarchish recommends you always wear the proper equipment while playing – knee and shoulder pads are recommended, and ideally a helmet as well. Carpet or foam can be used to provide extra padding underneath your clothes, which should be warm and comfy. Bring lots of food and water – I recommend "Mr. Tom" bars for food as they are cheap, lightweight, high in energy and fucking buff. Also, you can get them from most newsagents. Bringing extra food, water and hot drinks is a recipe for instant popularity.

Remember: kettling is not ultimately about stopping violence or disorder. It is about discouraging protest, about punishing people for having the audacity to stand up against the state. Do not give in to it. Be brave, be bold, be prepared — and play to win.

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