

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Parkour

Jesse Woody

Parkour is quite simply the art of navigating any environment quickly, confidently, and effectively with only the capabilities of your body to aid you. It's easy to see that how well it matches the CrossFit tenets of function, intensity, and variance, but it may seem surprising that it can also be universally scalable and beneficial. The concepts of environmental awareness and adaptation are of infinite usefulness to every person. Whether you are a senior trying to recover from a random fall or a soldier escaping an ambush in an urban environment, Parkour

techniques can be applied to a variety of situations. By enhancing an awareness of your surroundings and building your confidence to overcome the obstacles throughout, you are given the key to a freedom that the untrained individual might never realize. To top it off, it's just plain fun! It requires nothing more than a good pair of shoes and an awareness of a safe and steady progression, so you will rarely be limited by lack of equipment. Instead, you will be able to apply the state of elite fitness we all strive for to any path of your choosing.

The term Parkour is a spin on the French phrase "parcours du combattants," which is the military obstacle-course training that has been in place since the turn into the twentieth century. While traveling around the world with the French navy, Georges Hébert (1875–1957) was inspired by the fitness and vitality of the indigenous



peoples he encountered. By the time his tour of duty was complete, he returned to France with the concept of a méthode naturelle, or natural method, of exercise. Within this method, practitioners would run, jump, climb, swim, move quadrupedally (on all fours), fight, defend, and pick up and carry heavy objects. All of these individual aspects would be practiced randomly, either within a parcours course or in the natural environment. By moving the body in many varied and functional ways, he realized, an individual could

become a true specimen of health and vitality. Hébert also realized that the moral and mental faculties would need to be strengthened as well, and that any method that improved the body at the expense of the mind was doomed to failure. His personal motto "Be strong to be useful" (Etre fort pour être utile) illustrates this completely. Between the two world wars Hébert's concepts of the natural method were established as standard physical training for the French military. His concepts became the means for improving both the physical prowess and mental and emotional character of the soldiers in training.

Years later David Belle was taught these ideas of functional movement, useful physical skill, and the improvement of character by his father Raymond Belle, a firefighter and officer in the French military. After being involved with various sports in his young life,

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Parkour (continued...)

David decided he would expand his skills beyond the walls of a gym or the lines of a field. He took the ideas behind the parkours training and applied them to the suburb of Lisses outside of Paris. With a few friends he developed this art to navigate the urban landscape and overcome any obstacle they encountered. After years of training, a few videos of the young practitioners became public and the parkour movement expanded from there. Today there is a growing worldwide scene of both traceurs (parkour practitioners) and those who relate to parkour in some way.

The downside of this expansion is the apparent media bias toward dangerous stunts and acrobatic movements that can make even the most adventuresome individuals cringe. When exposed to Latvian kids performing back flips from 25 feet and insane Frenchmen jumping deadly gaps between roofs, many people regard parkour as an “extreme sport” that is appropriate only for the few individuals sick enough to huck their bodies from dangerous heights. Fortunately for us all, this isn't the case. Parkour is established through a manageable progression from the most basic roll to ground-level basics and then moving into ground-level combinations. Any sort of height is attempted only after mastery of the foundation techniques, and all the benefits of parkour training can be gained without ever traveling above your own body height. The opportunity to expand and perfect movement in relative safety is endless, and an entire lifetime could be dedicated to pursuing virtuosity in the basics.

The basic movements are simply the expression of the human body's most effective methods of locomotion through varied environments. Over time, many standard techniques have stood out as universally effective: the basic landing and roll, the various vaults, the element of balance, the hybrid of both balance and jumping/absorptive power in the precision jump, and the element of climbing and swinging in the underbar and cat leap. For each of these there is an almost infinite amount of variation which depends on what the environment and obstacle may dictate. The same object may present an opportunity for both climbing and vaulting, depending on the angle of approach and speed and/or experience of the practitioner. After dedicating time to repetitive drilling of new techniques, a traceur's options for movement expand. Where once you may have been comfortable with only a two-handed vault at low speeds, you may now realize that you are capable of a more powerful monkey vault. From this point you begin to expand into the realm

of more complex combinations of movement, and you can begin to overcome more complicated environments than you might have previously thought possible.

The discussion of these techniques can become simultaneously an oversimplification and an overcomplication of parkour's purpose. From refining individual movements in varied and random situations, the traceur progresses to combinations of movements that become more and more complex while also becoming smoother and less defined. Ultimately, the traceur pursues a mind state in which the individual movements lose their significance and are replaced instead with constant motion through any chosen environment. It is much like a martial art where you learn forms to master the basic movements only to gradually disregard these individual elements in pursuit of total mastery of the body and mind.

Along the way to this point, both the dedicated traceur and the recreational enthusiast will find innumerable benefits from incorporating parkour techniques into their training. Increased confidence, agility, balance, coordination, endurance, stamina, power, speed, and strength are just a few of the more obvious rewards. As these improve, more subtle changes also take place, and before too long the athlete will be viewing his entire environment from a different perspective. Mastery of both the body and the obstacles that might otherwise hinder its movement is a profound state. By moving purposefully through the basics in a safe environment, you gain the ability to approach every situation with the skills and confidence to find the most effective way over, around, and through anything that might stand in your way.

Jesse Woody, age 26, father of two, has about eight years experience in fitness and nutrition. He works in various capacities for the Woodberry Forest School in Virginia, including working with the outdoor education department and, currently, transitioning to head strength and conditioning coach. He's been practicing parkour for three years, though he's acted like a monkey his entire life. He is an administrator and frequent content contributor for the [American Parkour website](http://www.americanparkour.com).