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Do You Parkour?

Using the World as a Fitness Playground

by Randy Kambic

Athletes' hunger for new ways to exercise, challenge and express themselves continually prompts the evolution of new sports, often rooted in earlier pursuits. Windsurfing, snowboarding and mountain biking are examples.

Now, a growing number of parkour practitioners are springboarding and combining ingredients from multiple sports and activities in an effort to defy gravity using nothing but sturdy shoes and props.

First popularized in France, parkour means "of the course" (specifically, an obstacle course)—a form of acrobatic freerunning, spiked with vaulting, somersaulting, jumping and climbing; even running up and over walls. Based on exacting training, street athletes overcome or use a creative range of obstacles in their immediate environment.

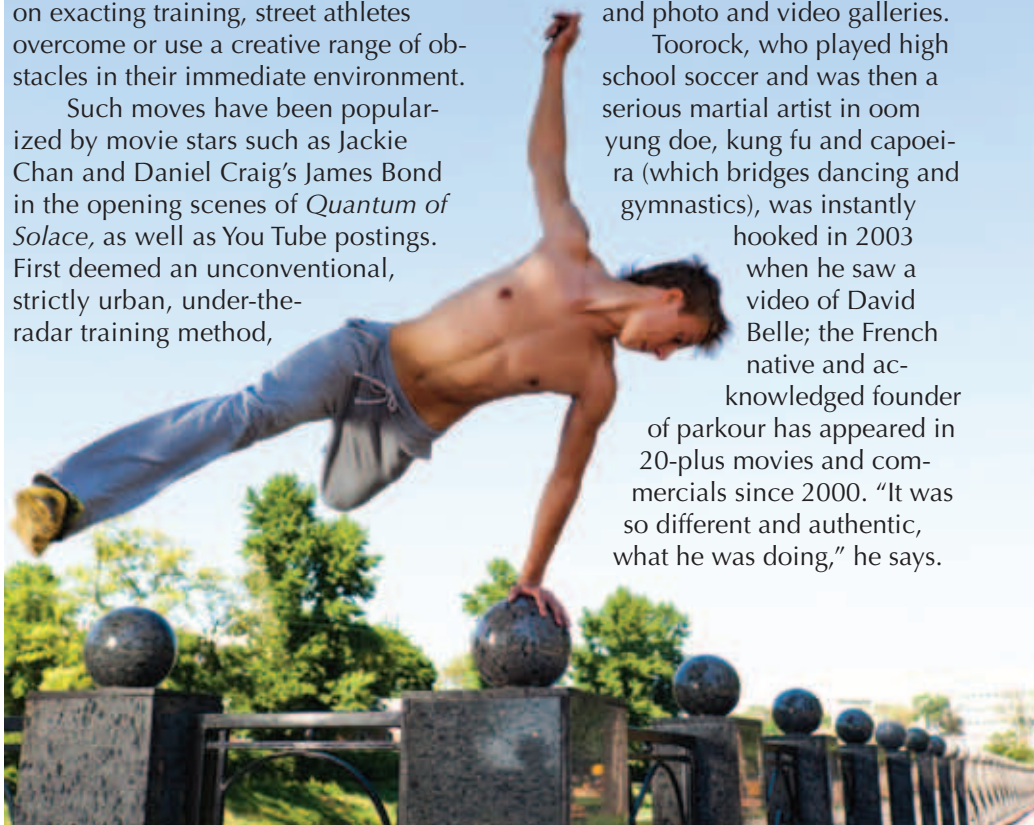
Such moves have been popularized by movie stars such as Jackie Chan and Daniel Craig's James Bond in the opening scenes of *Quantum of Solace*, as well as YouTube postings. First deemed an unconventional, strictly urban, under-the-radar training method,

parkour is increasingly viewed as a way for serious athletes in demanding sports to train and secure an edge. Adult men and women that competed in gymnastics, track and field or diving in their youth particularly enjoy reviving earlier skills.

Check it Out

American Parkour (APK), headquartered in Washington, D.C., considers itself the leading such community in the world. Established in 2005 by Mark Toorock, its website now hosts 90,000-plus registered users and is visited monthly by 100,000 inquirers. It provides news, daily workout emails, training guides, advice for beginners, instructional tutorials, guidelines for local recreation, and photo and video galleries.

Toorock, who played high school soccer and was then a serious martial artist in oom yung doe, kung fu and capoeira (which bridges dancing and gymnastics), was instantly hooked in 2003 when he saw a video of David Belle; the French native and acknowledged founder of parkour has appeared in 20-plus movies and commercials since 2000. "It was so different and authentic, what he was doing," he says.



After opening the first parkour and freerunning gym at Primal Fitness, in D.C., in 2006, APK expanded to locations in Gainesville, Florida, and San Antonio, Texas. All offer an introductory session, full supervised parkour curriculum, boot camps, women-specific classes, summer camps and freerunning classes.

Toorock co-created and co-produced *Jump City: Seattle*, eight, one-hour parkour action shows to introduce more people to the concept (*G4TV.com*). Other fitness centers that now focus on parkour include: Base Fitness, in Noblesville, Indiana; Apex Movement, outside of Denver; Parkour Visions, in Seattle; Miami Freerunning, in Florida; and Fight or Flight Academy, in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. More clubs are getting up to speed nationwide, with the San Antonio parks and recreation department currently adding a parkour park.

Tap Into the Energy

"Parkour allows adults to either continue or learn gymnastics for the first time in a new, creative context," Toorock

says. Natalie Strasser, a competitive gymnast for 13 years, including at Kent State University, is a Los Angeles-based APK-sponsored athlete and conducts workshops.

Travis Graves, head trainer for APK Academies, which trains teachers, says, "One of the first priorities for beginners is instilling a respect for the forces and impact of landings, so we work on rolling, balance and footwork." He also emphasizes the importance of thorough warm-up and cool-down periods, as well as overall safety guidelines.

"Some women might feel intimidated, as most of what they see on YouTube are teenagers or young men doing their thing," comments Graves. "But anyone can experiment and develop his or her own parkour style at their own comfort level."

Lisa Peterson, of McLean, Virginia, was first attracted to parkour's creative movements, which represented a personal next step after years as a teacher and performer in ballet, ballroom and Argentine tango dancing. "As a victim of child abuse, I am always looking for

ways to strengthen my confidence and self-esteem," she says. "Parkour has done that for me."

APK regularly holds community gathering "jams" around the country. We encourage everyone to follow our guidelines, notes Toorock, although we can't say that other methods are wrong.

"Everyone has a sphere of capabilities. We help individuals expand safely and in proper progression," he explains. "Some beginners may wear protective gear like gloves or shin guards but almost always relinquish them because they don't want to rely on them, but take full responsibility for themselves and gain full freedom of movement."

"The world is a playground," he concludes. "Parkour just makes more use of more of it."

Learn more at AmericanParkour.com and DavidBelle.com.

Randy Kambic is a freelance editor and writer in Estero, FL, and a copyeditor for Natural Awakenings.



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