



If you're bored with your regular jog round the neighbourhood, try running free. Or should that be free running?  
By Lisa de Spadeville

Instead of the predictable motorised pursuit, James Bond's most recent adventure began with a chase sequence. Bond is on foot, chasing a guy through, up and over a construction site, in Madagascar. While Bond stumbles, his adversary, Mollaka, flows through the scene from crane boom to stairwell with agility, athleticism and efficiency. Such was the mainstream initiation of many to the art of free running.

Free running is a similar, but divergent, pursuit to parkour – a made-up word evolved from the French *parcours du combattant* (a military obstacle course). Parkour is the physical activity of moving over obstacles, such as walls, stairwells, fences and railings, in your immediate environment with sufficient efficiency to gain ground on something or someone chasing you. Where martial arts are about fighting and defence, parkour is about escape.

Parkour was born in a Parisian suburb, created by an active teenager, David Belle, and his childhood friend Sébastien Foucan. David, son of French fire-fighting hero Raymond Belle, was introduced by his father and older fire-fighter brother Jeff to obstacle courses and George Herbert's *méthode naturelle* training system.

In the early 1900s Herbert, then a French naval officer, developed activity sessions that incorporated the natural movement elements of walking, running, jumping, quadrupedal movement, climbing, balancing, throwing, lifting, defending and swimming to encourage the physical development of military

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officers. Performed on an unspecified route or within a designed environment (man-made obstacle course), his natural method sessions are still the global standard for military training. With this base, it is little wonder Belle excelled in athletics, climbing, gymnastics and martial arts.

Through their teens and into the mid-90s Belle and Foucan developed techniques from their post-school games for an art of movement they would call parkour. Their philosophies would later diverge and so free running, under Foucan's guidance, came into its own.

## Seemingly effortless

Free running incorporates aesthetic moves; elements of visual flair which are in contrast to parkour's primary focus on efficiency of movement, forward progression and escape. It was Foucan's flashy moves that had *Casino Royale* movie goers on the edge of their seats. He played Mollaka, though the death-defying moves were performed by a professional stuntman.

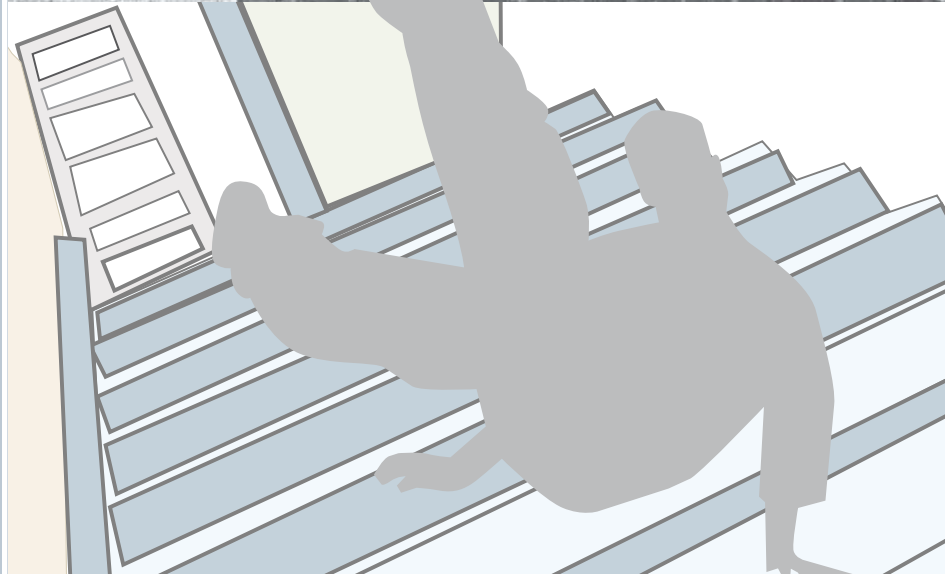
But parkour is not about those roof-to-roof leaps and storey-high drops we see in movies and YouTube videos. "Quite often people are attracted to parkour through seeing big daring jumps in the media," said Dane "DC" Grant, the man who introduced parkour to South Africa. "What many are not aware of is that these jumps are mastered by professionals using professional safety equipment in case something does go wrong."

DC first encountered parkour in the UK in 2003. Returning home for the festive season, DC introduced parkour to his friends and family. "With the help of a friend, Neil Craig, we set up the website [www.parkour.co.za](http://www.parkour.co.za) and also started regular training sessions in Pretoria and Johannesburg." From here parkour spread.

I met up with a local group of *traceurs*, practitioners of parkour, on East Campus at Wits University in Joburg. With its close buildings, open staircases, railings and low walls Wits is an ideal training venue. The jam, a loosely structured training session, was guided by Jacky Ho, an experienced *traceur*. He has been practising parkour for a few years now and it shows in his skill. He is lean and athletic: he moves fluidly over walls with movements that appear effortless and easy. But they are not.

Basic movements such as the precision jump – a jump from one point to another – require muscular power. The jump could be from one side of a paved path to the other or between walls. I was reminded of plyometric sessions (to increase power) from my high school athletics days.

More important than the jump is the landing, which should be controlled to cushion the impact and to maintain balance. "You should not hear a sound when you land," instructed Ho.





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## Movement becomes memory

Parkour training is about repetition; movements are etched into your muscles so that their coordination and execution become instinctive. "The fitter and stronger you are, the more progress you will make initially. It also comes down to repetition and muscle memory. If you train regularly, your skills will improve as your body adapts and learns to move in an energy efficient and correct way," says *traceur* Willem van Niekerk.

We began jumping from the ground onto a low wall, no more than 50 centimetres high. Ho demonstrated the technique of using your arms for propulsion. "Remember to breathe," he added. "Use your breath to help you by exhaling at the point of maximum effort; when you're at the top of the jump."

We then tried cat walks, a crawling movement along a low wall. This can also be used to traverse railings. Finally, I learned to lazy vault a chest-high wall. My first attempt landed me on top of the wall, not over it. As I battled to get enough clearance height Van Niekerk encouragingly prompted: "When I first did this one I had to think of it like the scissors move-

ment in high jump." His advice worked. My next attempt, with better propulsion, body weight redistribution and momentum, saw me over. At first glance I would never have thought I would be able to glide over a chest-high wall. Parkour encourages you to change your perception and gain confidence in your abilities. When someone is trying a move for the first time, two elements affect success: environment and fear.

"The environment has to be safe and the person trying something for that first time must not have to worry too much about falling and hurting themselves but rather about getting the movement right," explained DC. "The next step is to identify what is making you hesitant. Why won't you do it?" He advises understanding the risks, knowing what measures have been put in place to minimise the impact and trusting in what you have achieved thus far.

"Psychological barriers play a cardinal role when you start doing parkour," says Van Niekerk. "If you can jump from one line to another two metres away, on a flat surface, what's keeping you from making the exact same jump from one ledge to another where there's a three-metre drop in between?"

Most of this *traceur* group were students, including Ho. They dress like skateboarders, talk like homeboys and have nicknames. They are also friendly and welcoming, willing to share their skills and passion for parkour with eager newbies.

Aside from improving their physical well-being, parkour has altered their perspectives. "I don't see a wall I don't want to climb, a bench I don't want to vault, a rail I don't want to cat or a drop I don't want to roll. How far you take it is up to you," says Wesley Ostler, aka Kyubi.

Van Niekerk agrees. "Parkour has provided me with a new way of looking at the world that surrounds us. A physical urban landscape becomes a 'living being'. You move through the space and the space also moves through you."

Parkour is not a simple daredevil activity of jumping around obstacles. It is a calculated discipline. It is a physical challenge. It is a journey where *traceurs* constantly face internal fears. It is a philosophy.

"How I overcome obstacles in my physical surroundings is how I like to see my personal obstacles being overcome," explains DC. "Calculating the risks, being focused and committing 100 per cent is the best method and can be used for anything in life." ✕

## Get involved

- **Parkour South Africa** [www.parkour.co.za](http://www.parkour.co.za)

A community-centred website with advice and notices of jams and training sessions around South Africa.

- **YouTube** [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

Search for inspirational footage of parkour and free running. Also tutorials.

- **Urban Free Flow** [www.urbanfreeflow.com](http://www.urbanfreeflow.com)

A comprehensive parkour and free-running website, with video instruction on moves.

- **Worldwide Jam** [www.worldwidejam.tv](http://www.worldwidejam.tv)

A global parkour and free-running resource with articles, training information and basic guides.



THE OLD SHANGHAI FIRECRACKER FACTORY, 2012

Why choose free running as a theme for the new Lancer advertising campaign? *Xplore* spoke with Glenn James, director of the Old Shanghai Firecracker Factory to find the answer. "We needed something edgy and different as the inspiration for the new Lancer advertising campaign. By the time most buyers reach the age where they are buying a sedan they're feeling a little jaded with life. And it doesn't have to be like that. Free running is not only a contemporary and hip way of keeping fit in the city, it's also a metaphor for Lancer, which adds a little fun to your urban existence. We shot the ad to reflect that it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman you can enjoy the city not because you have to but because you want to. That is exactly why people drive Lancers ... because they're looking for a sense of enjoyment." To view the advert online go to [www.mitsubishi-motors.co.za](http://www.mitsubishi-motors.co.za).