

phase as a teenager where I felt like I couldn't climb anything because it wasn't cool, and I thought I was too old to be doing things like that," says Branum. "Parkour makes me view my surroundings as I did when I was a kid. I look around and want to play on everything."

From war games to child's play

Parkour is now practiced for fun, but its origins are based on military structure. The inspiration for parkour stems from the "Natural Method of Physical Culture" developed by George Hébert in the early 20th century. Hébert travelled extensively throughout the world and was impressed by the physical development and movement skills of indigenous peoples in Africa and elsewhere. He described their movements as splendid, flexible, nimble, skillful and enduring, yet he noticed they had no tutor in gymnastics other than their lives in nature. Upon his return to France, Hébert created a method of physical training patterned on the abilities of the indigenous people he had encountered. He created obstacle courses that became the standard system of French military physical education.

French soldiers in Vietnam, impressed by Hébert's work, started what morphed into modern day parkour. David Belle, co-founder of the sport along with his friend Sebastian Foucan, learned Hébert's methods from his father Raymond, a French soldier who practiced the discipline. The word parkour derives from *parcours du combattant*, the obstacle courses of Hébert's method and a classic form of military training. The younger Belle first participated in martial arts and gymnastics, and he sought to apply his athletic prowess in a manner that would have practical uses in life. Belle says the spirit of parkour is guided in part by the notions of "escape" and "reach" — that is, using physical agility and quick thinking to get out of dif-

ficult situations and to go anywhere at all.

Hébert's natural system rejected the regimented physical systems of that time. He believed that competitive sports diverted physical sports both from its physiological ends and its ability to foster sound moral values. Parkour doesn't involve any competition. Traceurs do parkour because of their desire to play, free of rules and boundaries. Watching traceurs perform this relatively new activity — at least new to the U.S. — is like watching a child play on the monkey bars or jungle gym at a playground.

French traceur Foucan hopes that the sense of play remains. "I don't want competition for parkour because in my heart I want to be free," says Foucan in an interview with *Urban Flow*.

With recent media recognition increasing interest in parkour, there is pressure for parkour to become competitive, and

enthusiasts fear that the spirit of parkour might change. Branum feels that too much media exposure will turn the sport mainstream with full-blown endorsements and athletes that have competitive, money-driven attitudes. He would rather the sport remain underground.

Leaping in

Parkour teaches adults how to play. A computer, the Internet and an instructional parkour video decked out with training tips and parkour moves are all you need to begin. Branum started practicing parkour about a year and a half ago, after a friend emailed him some online clips. As Branum watched people fluidly climb buildings and leap from rooftops, he thought, "These guys look like superheroes straight from the comics." Most

importantly, as he watched them, he thought, "I could do that."

Branum had no trouble finding places to practice parkour because Eugene has a plethora of parks, bike trails, parking structures, buildings and playgrounds. He started practicing at Amazon Park because it provides a large area to run around on, soft grass to practice landing and rolling and lots of structures to stretch on. Now, Branum prefers to practice at the university and the old City Hall building. "Universities are the best place to go," Branum says. "They have unique architecture to climb on, a cluster of buildings grouped together and multiple levels to maneuver through." He recommends doing any major stunts at night to avoid crowds and angry onlookers.

Branum also recommends that anyone interested in parkour read a lot about the practice and take it slow in the beginning. He says that the following exercises can help you thwart problems: Skip or run everywhere you go. Practice jumping rope. Stop walking on designated paths, and start making your own — in order to practice park-

our, you will need to tackle obstacles, not go around them. Watch *Spiderman*, Jackie Chan movies, *Casino Royale* and parkour videos on YouTube for inspiration and a visualization of extreme play. Practice visualization techniques. If you can visualize yourself jumping over the obstacle before it happens, then your body is more likely to respond accordingly. Most importantly, find a tree and climb it.

Foucan, in the film *Jump London*, describes "the vision of parkour" as looking and thinking like a child. Branum doesn't feel that he has adopted the parkour lifestyle as strictly as many parkour enthusiasts, but he has what Foucan considers "parkour vision."

"It has definitely made me see my surroundings differently," Branum says. "I can't look at a building for the first time without thinking about how I would conquer it." **EW**



Traceurs play on urban structures: They climb, jump over, swing on and dangle off of everything.

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