

In 1902, a volcano in the Caribbean island of Martinique blew up. A French naval officer on the scene, Lt. George Hébert managed to coordinate the rescue of over 700 people, both indigenous and European. He noticed, as he did so, how people moved, some well, some badly, around the obstacles in their path, and how this affected their chances of survival. Hébert had travelled widely and knew about the abilities many indigenous people exhibited in being able to survive the natural environment. From these experiences, Hébert developed a training discipline which he called 'the natural method' in which climbing, jumping and running techniques were used to negotiate obstacles. His method was adopted by the French military and became the basis for all their training. In time, it became known as *parcours du combattant* – the path of the warrior.

Raymond Belle was a practitioner of *parcours* in Vietnam in the 1950s. He had great athletic ability, and the skills and agility he had learnt through *parcours* earned him a reputation as an agile and elite soldier. In later life, he returned to France and passed on his skills to his son, David, who combined what he had learnt from his father with his own knowledge of martial arts and gymnastics, and in time, the sport of *parkour* was born.

Parkour involves a range of 'moves', although none are official. They involve vaulting, jumping and landing accurately on small and narrow features, catching ledges, traversing high wall and landing with a rolling impact to absorb impacts.

Belle formed a group of *traceurs* called the Yamikasi, meaning 'strong man, strong spirit', that included his friend, Sebastian Foucan. In time, the two of them started to follow different paths. Belle concentrated on the art of getting from place to place in the most efficient way possible, while Foucan developed his own style which involved more self expression. This he termed *freerunning*.

From the late 1990s, the art and sport of parkour spread worldwide. Both Belle and Foucan gave interviews and appeared on television. In 2003, filmmaker Mike Christie made the film *Jump London*, and urban freerunning, or freeflow, began to dominate the London scene. But it was the arrival of YouTube in 2005 that really brought freerunning to a global audience. People around the world began to post their videos online, making freerunning a mainstream sport, and in 2007, the first major freerunning and parkour competition was held in Vienna.

Since parkour values freedom, there are few facilities dedicated to the practice. Traceurs use both rural and urban areas, typically parks, offices and abandoned buildings. Traceurs generally respect the environment they practice in, and since part of their philosophy is 'leave no trace', there have been few concerns over damage to property. However, law enforcement and fire and rescue teams argue that freerunners are risking their lives needlessly, especially when they practice at height. However, practitioners argue that injuries are rare, because they rely on their own hands and feet rather than things out of their immediate control, such as ice and wheels, as is the case with skiing and race-driving.

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1 George Hebert developed *parcours du combattant* because...

he saw how it could save lives.

he saw how the French were poor at negotiating obstacles.

he saw native people doing it in Martinique.

2 The natural method...

was replaced by Hebert's new discipline.

was taught to Hebert by indigenous people.

was widely practiced by the French military.

3 Raymond Belle...

was trained by George Hebert.

gave the discipline its new name.

was a notable practitioner of the natural method.

4 David Belle...

brought in moves from other disciplines.

also learnt *parcours* while in the French military.

learnt *parcours* from his father in Vietnam.

5 A *traceur* is...

a parkour move.

someone who practices parkour.

an obstacle in a parkour course.

6 Freerunning differs from parkour in that...

it is faster.

it is more creative.

it is more efficient.

7 What brought parkour and freerunning to an international audience?

TV appearances and interviews

a British documentary

a video sharing website

8 According to practitioners, where is the best place to do parkour or free-running?

in cities

in safe facilities

wherever you like

9 Which of the following is NOT true about freerunning?

There are a large number of reported injuries.

There are now international competitions.

Practitioners often cause damage to public property.

10 Parkour and freerunning practitioners...

require a lot of equipment.

rely on their own bodies.

avoid taking risks.