

Plenty of exercise equipment outside of a gym

By Christopher McDougall, Outdoor

I was waiting at the checkout counter of a drugstore in Lancaster, Pa., when a human cannonball sailed past the window. I glanced around. Did anyone else just...?

A second body flew by, right behind the oblivious cashier's head, looking like it had been flung by one of those medieval catapults that hurled rotten cow carcasses over fortress walls.

I swiped my card, grabbed my bag, and hustled outside to see what was going on.

I could have taken my time, it turned out. The two guys were still there and totally absorbed by the handicap-ramp railings: vaulting, swinging, tightrope walking, basically wringing a crazy amount of movement out of two blue bars. When I'd spotted them through the window, they were practicing "precisions" – broad jumping back and forth between the railings and sticking precise landings on top of the bars.

"You start practicing parkour," one of the guys told me, "and whole nights disappear."

Technically, he's talking about *l'art du déplacement*, more universally known by the funkified French version of its other name, *parcours*, for "obstacle course."

Parkour was born in the late 1980s when a band of mixed-race kids living in the outskirts of Paris got tired of being roughed up by bullies. They created their own "training method for warriors" and called themselves the Yamakasi. Being rebels and outsiders, they detested the idea of organized

competition; even after parkour became a phenomenon, the Yamakasi never bothered cashing in with how-to stuff. They were innovators, not explainers.

If you wanted to come to Paris and follow in their footsteps, fine—but that meant being yanked out of bed at 2 a.m. to train in a midwinter rainstorm. Otherwise the Yamakasi had just about zero interest in sharing their skills with the rest of the world. That left two places you could go if you wanted to learn parkour: France or YouTube.

Not surprisingly, my two new parking lot buddies got their start at YouTube U. “I got into it because I was so fat,” one of my new buddies, Neal Schaeffer, told me. He’d begun partying after high school and by age 20 had bloated up from 175 pounds to 240.

One afternoon, he was in a nearby park watching some strangers “kong vault” picnic tables—they’d charge a table, plant their hands, and shoot both feet through their arms like gorillas and fly off the other side—and they talked Neal into giving it a try. He was shocked to discover that even out of shape, once he got over his fear, he could master skills that at first looked impossible.

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