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Title: Jump Right In (Published in *New York Resident Magazine*, July 30-August 5, 2007 Edition)

At first glance they are no different from any teenager hanging out in the park. In t-shirts and sneakers, they stand around chatting like any group of friends. Suddenly one of the boys jumps toward a gray stone wall about 10 feet away, plants his hands firmly on top of the wall and swings his legs up and over the barrier. He jogs a few steps, turns around, and launches himself off the five-foot wall, landing gracefully on top of a railing a few feet away. He balances on the railing for a few seconds, then hops off, as his friends laugh and applaud.

The nine boys scatter, each finding his own obstacle in the middle of Sara D. Roosevelt Park in Chinatown on a dreary April afternoon. Wary of the threatening clouds, they fly between walls and railings, soar over staircases and hustle to conquer the next obstacle in their path before the rain comes.

Their daredevil stunts are pieces of a type of freestyle running, called Parkour, from the French “parcours du combattant”, meaning “military obstacle course.” Featured in the opening scene of the latest James Bond film *Casino Royale*, Parkour has developed a following of an estimated 60,000 enthusiasts around the world, according to the moderator of the website [AmericanParkour.com](http://AmericanParkour.com). Combining aspects of gymnastics and acrobatics with traditional running and jumping, Parkour uses urban landscapes like giant obstacle courses in cities like New York with limited open space.

In 1997, at age 24, Frenchman David Belle created Parkour in Paris. The sport is officially defined as “running on foot, crawling, jumping, rolling, grabbing hold of things, hanging from things and balancing, all toward a single goal: never to be stopped by any obstacle but to continually adapt,” according to [Parkour.Net](http://Parkour.Net), the sport’s official website. The BBC introduced Parkour to the world in 2002 when it aired a commercial called “Rush Hour” featuring Belle and his new tricks. Since then, Parkour has appeared in many videos, including commercials for Nike and K-Swiss, and even the music video for one of Madonna’s recent singles, “Jump.”

To the untrained eye, the stunts seen in these videos seem spontaneous and dangerous. However, serious practitioners, called traceurs, have a repertoire of specific movements. Learning these movements is crucial for improving in Parkour, but it is also important that the traceur learns how to make Parkour his or her own. “It’s like music, the first thing you learn to do is hold the instrument, then you learn to do single notes, and then scales,” said Mark Toorock, 36, of Washington D.C., who created [AmericanParkour.com](http://AmericanParkour.com). “When you get really good, you start to just play, and a whole new thing is born. We learn to play our body like an instrument and then improvise like jazz.”

While these movements are attempted by traceurs of all skill levels, many of the videos on YouTube portray “idiots jumping off their roofs,” said Toorock. “You can’t just throw on a t-shirt and a pair of sneakers and say ‘I do Parkour.’ There’s a big misconception that it’s just jumping off of something.”

This perceived simplicity, combined with the recent media attention given to Parkour, has led to many an Average Joe trying his hand at this extreme exercise. Parkour is a dangerous activity though, and the wrong kind of practice can lead to injury.

AmericanParkour.com takes these risks seriously, providing viewers of the website with a disclaimer explaining that Parkour, like any other physical activity, has inherent dangers. However, if beginners learn carefully and practice safely, they should walk away with only minor scratches and bruises, said one of the boys practicing at Roosevelt Park, Arfel Villanueva, an 18-year-old high school student from Queens.

While the boys seem to be making do, Toorock said New York is one of his least favorite cities to practice in. “The problem with New York is you’ve got 15 feet of sidewalk and 200 feet of skyscrapers,” he said. “There’s just not a lot to interact with.” During the two years that he lived in Jersey City, he commuted to Manhattan twice or three times a week to practice, often at Roosevelt Park, just as the younger generation of traceurs is now doing.

New York’s emphasis on security restricts traceurs from fully experiencing the city, according to Asa Liebmann, one of the creators of the website NYParkour.com. Barbed wire and anti-climb paint are necessary to keep criminal intruders out, but they keep traceurs out as well, said Liebmann, 17, of Highlands, New Jersey.

But New York traceurs are not letting that stop them. Members of NYParkour.com, an online forum for Parkour enthusiasts in the Tri-State area, plan training sessions all over the city, from Central Park to Roosevelt Island. Administrators have posted a list of city “Hotspots” such as Penn Plaza, Battery Park City and Riverside Park, complete with subway directions for getting there. From time to time, park officials ask traceurs to leave, especially from Battery Park, but “there’s always something to train on somewhere,” said Oasis (he prefers to be called by his internet nickname) in between jumps at Roosevelt Park. The 22-year-old college student from Queens is one of the co-administrators of NYParkour.com, which was created in 2003 and grew to 500 members within its first year, according to Liebmann.

Grueling training regimens include running, paired with strengthening and balance exercises, but not only the bodies of traceurs change with practice. Many traceurs begin to see their cities through new eyes. “Where before I saw only varied cityscapes, now I see different ways to interact with my environment,” said Jackson Nash, 28, a videographer, who recently moved to New York from Los Angeles after deciding to experiment with Parkour in February. “The other day, it was raining so hard, and everyone was lined up to cross the street at this one tiny juncture,” said Nash. “I, seeing the line, merely jumped over a nearby barricade and went on my way.”

While New York may not be ideal structurally, New York traceurs make the best of their interactions with the city. Many of the online forums express the importance of taking human interactions just as seriously. “[New York’s] main redeeming quality is the people,” said Liebmann. “New York traceurs form an amazingly diverse, skilled and welcoming community that feels like a family to me.”

For now, the boys at Roosevelt Park are content to sprint from obstacle to obstacle, working on their fluidity and control. They acknowledge, however, that they may not be able to continue such an extreme physical regime forever. Still, they will be forever changed. “You get older, you have a career, a family,” said Oasis. “If you get

hurt, you could lose your job. But even if you stop doing the physical stuff, you never stop being a traceur.”

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