


Teaching PARKOUR SPORTS in School Gymnastics

Sascha Rochhausen



A Practical Handbook of Parkour & Freerunning Instruction 
for Indoor Gymnastics Classes with Children and Teenagers

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Please note

The author shall not be liable in any way whatsoever for any accidents, injuries or damage of any kind occurring in connection with information contained in this book.

Unless otherwise indicated, the use of the grammatical masculine form always additionally implies the feminine.

Additional Materials may be downloaded from www.parkoursport.com (-> Materials).

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Contents

1. Introduction

1. Origins of parkour
2. The names of the moves
3. Parkour is varied
4. A successful trend
5. Parkour sports in school gymnastics

2. Basic Moves

1. Notes on basic moves
2. Descriptions of moves and variations

3. Discussion

1. Philosophy
2. The term 'parkour sports'
3. The transfer problem
4. The case for parkour sports

4. Teaching Methodology

1. Teaching time
2. Location

3. Safety
4. Move exercises
5. Differentiation
6. Promoting independence
7. Parkour exercises in large groups
8. Example of organising equipment

5. Sequence of Activities in a Typical Sample Lesson

1. Warm up
2. Main training
3. Concluding game
4. Agility training and relaxation

6. Illustrations and Symbols

1. List of gymnastics apparatus
2. Symbols and abbreviations

7. Sample Lessons

1. Balancing and Precision Jumps
2. Simple Jumps
3. Reverse Vaults
4. Dash Vault and Underbar
5. Spiral Underbar

6. The Roll
7. Wall Run
8. Cat Leap and Wall Up
9. Combining Movements
10. Wall Spin
11. Wall Flip
12. Wall Up and Turn Vault
13. Climbing, Muscling Up and Jumping
14. Wall Spin Backwards and Obstacle Roll
15. Timed Parkour Exercises
16. Parkour Sports and Performance
17. Theory Unit: Parkour and Freerunning.

8. Parkour Games

9. Relaxation exercises

1. Torso - front
2. Torso - back
3. Torso - hips and buttocks
4. Torso - side
5. Legs
6. Arms
7. Shoulders and neck

10. Bibliography and References

1. Internet addresses
2. Films
3. Bibliography

11. Index

Foreword

“I never thought I would enjoy doing gymnastics”, was how one enthusiastic pupil summed up the parkour sports moves he had just learned in that day’s PE lesson. He is unlikely to have responded the same way if the teacher had announced, “Today we are going to practice the tucked jump!” Indeed, the simple fact that parkour sports are now being taught successfully in schools can be seen as proof that young people are still capable of finding enjoyment in classic gymnastics moves. By combining parkour and gymnastics, sports teachers have at last begun finding an exciting way of re-integrating long-forgotten exercises, such as the dash vault or speed vault, into their teaching programmes. All but ignored in recent years, these moves possess great exercise value, and are ideal as transitions to more well-known exercises.

Parkour sports combines all three of parkour’s common current forms: classic parkour, freerunning, and competitive ‘parcouring’. But more than that, by combining parkour elements with more traditional exercises, a non-standardised, non-competitive aspect can be incorporated into gymnastics. As a trend sport, parkour is gradually gaining adherents all over the world, and it is also attracting the attention of sports teachers, whose pupils quickly come to regard it as a welcome change to more familiar activities. By combining parkour’s varied and natural sequences of moves with more acrobatic elements, a new and as yet uncommon approach to the use of equipment in physical education is evolving. In contrast to the generally standardised moves usually practised in gymnastics, where the emphasis is more on the quality of performance, the stress in parkour is on overcoming obstacles as creatively and effectively as possible, by encouraging pupils to come up with their own solutions. Nevertheless, the example moves presented here are obviously closely related to

traditional gymnastics – particularly in the case of vaulting and floor exercises; accordingly, appropriate teaching methods are employed in the lessons as and when appropriate. However, what makes the discipline so attractive is that the practitioner is free to combine moves in any way he sees fit, to achieve a smooth flow of continuous movement. On the level of school sport, a further important advantage is its ability to integrate schoolchildren of all ability levels.

Yet parkour sports are not practised in the same way as classic parkour, freerunning or parcouring. The situation is akin to translating a book from one language to another, with the exception that in this case, the translation is from a familiar, urban environment into a quite foreign one – the school sports hall. As with any translation, this involves a degree of interpretation, which in our case depends on the facilities available and, indeed, is coloured by the way the author's words are understood and interpreted. In particular, the fact that there are so many ways of interpreting the overriding discipline of parkour makes it all the more challenging to find a translation that is acceptable to all participants. Clearly, the reader is free to adopt any or all of the contents, ideals and concepts presented in this book and to rearrange, embellish and develop them as he sees fit. Indeed, I would be very interested to receive any feedback and suggestions that may serve to enrich the teaching potential of these disciplines and stimulate further discussion.

My experience in teaching parkour sports to sixth-form classes is what motivated me to compile this book. The photographs and moves all evolved through teaching regular school students, none of whom had had any prior gymnastics training. All the moves and systematic exercises contained in this book have been tested in practice to verify their suitability. Their success is a clear indication that parkour sports are an eminently appropriate school sports

activity, not least due to their obvious kinship with classic gymnastics.

Sascha Rochhausen
Oevenum, August 2009

1. Introduction



1. Origins of parkour

The moves introduced in these sample lessons originate from the disciplines of le parkour, parcouing and freerunning. Since, at their core, all three are based on similar moves, it would make sense to introduce a generic term that integrates them all. However, this should be done in a manner which preserves the identity of the individual disciplines.

The term 'parkour sports' is derived from the most commonly used of the three names, which is itself frequently (albeit often erroneously) used to denote any and all of the aforementioned disciplines.

The term is derived from the French expression 'parcours du combattant', (competition arena), although the discipline is also often known as 'l'Art du Deplacement' (the art of displacement or movement).



Fig. 1: A group of young people practising parkour.

The word 'course' will be used to denote moves or obstacles practised here that are not directly associated with the parkour discipline itself (see the warm-up exercises in the sample lessons).

Parkour was developed in France, and is generally attributed to David Belle and his father Raymond. It was

during the Vietnam war that Raymond Belle originally devised a method of movement that could be employed to cross terrain as quickly as possible (this, in turn, was based on the 'Méthode Naturelle' devised by Georges Hébert). Upon his return to France, he taught it to his son, David, and, by the end of the 1980s, the latter had turned the method into a discipline performed in the banlieues, or suburbs, of Paris by a select group of practitioners, who eventually came to refer to themselves as the 'Yamakasi'. As interest grew, David Belle began holding international workshops in the discipline.

As a way of moving through urban terrain, it should not be considered as in any way competitive but as an expression of a way of life, in which any obstacles that may be encountered, such as walls, railings or benches, are overcome as quickly and elegantly as possible; i.e. what may generally be regarded as an obstacle is now no longer seen as such but rather as a minor physical and mental challenge, presented by the need to bridge two points by the shortest possible distance and with a minimum of effort. Ideally, the ensuing movement should evoke a continuous sense of flow (cf. Heinlin 2008).

However, for practitioners of parkour, the discipline is not merely about adopting the most efficient way of moving from one point to another, but also incorporates an element of searching for a new, distinct route, one that is quite unlike any taken by others before. This shows that although often practised in groups, parkour really is a sport for the individual, and also calls into question the frequent claim that the purpose of parkour is not to pitch practitioners against each other in competition. Moreover, the numerous videos in the Internet are themselves evidence of a desire for peer recognition, in that they seek to compare many examples of similar moves in terms of their performance and difficulty.

While parkour concentrates on maximising efficiency in overcoming obstacles, freerunning places the emphasis on

elegance, acrobatics and artistic expression. The name most readily associated with freerunning is Sébastien Foucan. He originally trained with David Belle but went on to develop a new understanding of the art, by adding acrobatic elements to the aspect of overcoming obstacles with maximum efficiency.

The third variant is competitive parkouring, which combines moves from both parkour and freerunning. Here, the practitioner (or 'traceur') is required to complete an obstacle course in competition with others. His performance is evaluated in terms of speed and style.

Comparison of parkour sub-disciplines

Parkour	Fast and efficient moves, healthy self-assessment, sense of flow
Freerunning	Acrobatic moves, risk-taking, self-presentation, high level of difficulty
Parcouring	Time pressure, fast, efficient and spectacular moves, competitive basis

From: Heinlin 2008, p. 27.

Parcouring is a discipline of which the founders of parkour disapprove, since it focuses squarely on the aspect of competition, and thus goes against the practice's original philosophy as a lifestyle expression (cf. Hess 2009).

Nowadays, the term parkour is used to denote each of the sub-disciplines, partly because it is the most widespread term and partly because of the lack of a clear understanding of the differences between them.

2. The names of the moves

Since parkour originated in France, many of its moves have French names. However, as the discipline spreads around the world, the original terms are increasingly being replaced

by English expressions (both are given in the sample lessons, see ch. 7).

The gracefulness of the discipline's movements has not escaped the attention of the film and advertising industries, and these, in turn, have played an important role in popularising the practice (for example, in the James Bond film "Casino Royal"), raising its status to a 'trend', with its own complement of 'in' terms.

For example, a tucked vault over an obstacle is known as a 'saut de chat' or 'kong vault', and other common moves are the 'speed vault', 'dash vault', 'lazy vault' and 'wall spin'.

However, there is some confusion regarding the terminology, not least caused by the rapid and uncontrolled spread of the various terms through the Internet. As a result, terms are not employed consistently, with both the lazy vault and cat leap often being referred to as a 'saut de chat'. In particular, a single jump often has different names, while identical names are often used to denote different moves.

3. Parkour is varied

An integral feature of parkour is that it employs running to connect moves, resulting in a smooth overall flowing motion, which while giving the discipline its appeal and dynamism, is also one of the main difficulties to be mastered. In this aspect, it is also related to light athletics (e.g. hurdles).

The following moves are fundamental to parkour:

- Running (horizontally and vertically, including pushing off from walls, etc.)
- Balancing (running over railings, etc.)
- Turning (vertically or horizontally, with or without jumping)
- Jumping/vaulting (with or without a support phase, looping)

- Landing (incl. rolling, precise landings on two feet)
- Hanging and swinging (after jumping up onto an obstacle)
- Climbing (on walls, trees, etc.)

The demands placed on the athlete are thus highly varied: in order to move both elegantly and quickly across and over common urban objects, the traceur must display strength, stamina, good technique, good self-estimation, precision, decisiveness, anticipation skills, and creativity.

4. A successful trend

Göring & Lutz (2008) have put together a plausible and succinct summary of the characteristic elements of parkour and the reasons for its success. These are set out in the following (with only minor changes):

1. The practitioner is freed from the temporal and spatial constraints to which most other sports activities are subject. Parkour constitutes individualism in perfection and can be performed virtually anywhere and at any time.
2. Unlike other trend sports, it is not bound to any particular equipment or facilities.
3. The performance aspect of the discipline is regarded by its practitioners as a welcome by-product, resulting from the fact that it tends to be performed at central, populated points.
4. The lack of a competitive factor is compensated for by the challenge presented by particular physical conditions or selfimposed restrictions.
5. Despite the high level of individualism, practitioners often identify with groups, frequently organised through the Internet.
6. Moves are largely learned by trial and imitation. In this way, the individual is his own yardstick and can enjoy the progress and success he attains on his own terms.

5. Parkour sports in school gymnastics

It is virtually impossible to perform parkour with school pupils out of doors, because the local physical environment is generally unaccommodating and there are no safety facilities available. A soft landing is only possible in rare instances, and an error on the street almost always has painful consequences.

However, it is perfectly possible to learn the basic moves of the art in a sports hall equipped with the right facilities, with a wide range of safety methods in place, including mats, safety aids, and spotters. Indeed, traceurs themselves have recognised these benefits and often use such facilities for training purposes prior to practising moves on the street.

Neither the moves themselves nor the way they are performed are new to sports teaching. Nonstandardised, non-competitive gymnastics were developed back in the 1980s, using various equipment combinations and apparatus sequences, and both the aspects of elegance and creativity (also with a partner, see Bruckmann 2000) were emphasised even then (cf. Schmidt-Sinns 2008). Moreover, the standard of the beginners' moves (see ch. 5.1) is comparable with that of the basic forms of school gymnastics, if not easier. Many moves are based on gymnastic skills, and so it only makes sense that parkour, freerunning, and competitive parcouing are now finally finding their way into schools. Parkour therefore presents a perfect opportunity to expand the repertoire of school gymnastics and attract enthusiastic new adherents to the discipline.

However, the incorporation of parkour into school sports activities would appear to harbour at least one contradiction: if parkour has by principle no scoring system, how is it possible to assess pupils' progress? This is an aspect that deserves some attention, especially during the initial phases.

Even if one of the aims of the lessons presented here is to evaluate moves in terms of time and performance, the

original principle can still be applied by also incorporating non-assessed elements; indeed the very nature of the activity represents an opportunity to fundamentally rethink the structure of the sports lesson in general (cf. Ide 2007). This is an interesting idea for the sports teacher, who can, if he so chooses, completely dispense with the idea of scoring in parkour activities. This appears perfectly possible bearing in mind that pupils will automatically feel motivated to participate by the very nature of the activity. However, in general it will be found beneficial to introduce some kind of scoring system, in particular if parkour-based activities are to be taught for any length of time. Even if they are not necessarily aware of it, pupils will begin to make their own comparisons as regards their own performance and that of others. Ultimately, it is up to the sports teacher to decide how to proceed on this matter, but this should be done in consultation with the class. It will also depend on the nature of the class itself (e.g. whether it is a school lesson, special interest group, project or sports club activity).

2. Basic Moves

1. Notes on basic moves

This section introduces the basic moves encountered in parkour. Learners must be observed constantly during training and any movement-related deficiencies remedied immediately. Once they have learned to correctly apply the information presented here, participants will know how to avoid body stress imbalances during sustained and intensive training.

Vaults and jumps

Whether performing running jumps or precision jumps, wall runs or gap jumps, and whether jumping off from one foot or both, vaults and jumps are the most common moves performed in parkour.

The sequence of movements for the precision jump is similar to that of the standing long jump, for example. A jump intended to cover a maximum distance should follow the following basic sequence of movements:

Lower the body's centre of gravity and stretch the arms back to add strength to the jump (fig. 2.1). Perform an explosive leg jump making sure to stretch the arms out during take-off (fig. 2.2). In the flight phase, the legs are first tucked up and then stretched far forward (in a 'switchblade' posture), coming to rest on the landing surface with the balls of the feet first (fig. 2.3). Bend the knees strongly upon landing, with arms stretched out forward to maintain balance (fig. 2.4).

Landings

The nature of the landing is inextricably linked with the length and depth of the jump. When jumping from small heights, the front of the foot comes into contact with the ground first, continuing up to the heel.

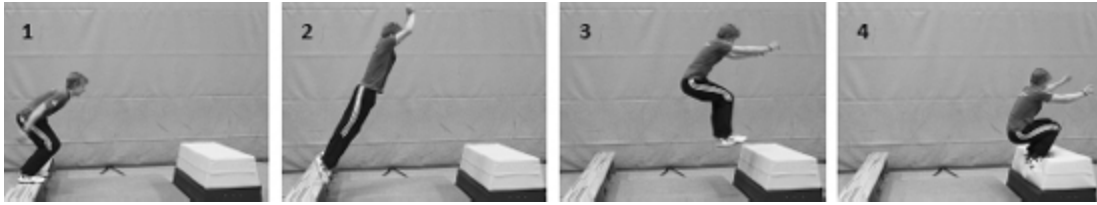


Fig. 2: Jumps: sequence of movements in the precision jump.



Fig. 3: Placing the hands on the floor absorbs the upper body forces when landing from a drop.

This not only applies to landings that follow on from jumps or vaults but is also the natural sequence applied in fast running. This type of landing is recommended when the aim is to absorb all the force incurred in the jump through the feet, e.g. when dropping from small heights or after a running jump (fig. 2.4).

If the forces involved are too great to be absorbed by the feet alone - something which the traceur needs to assess in advance - it will be necessary to lean forward when landing and place the hands on the floor to provide extra support for the upper body (fig. 3). In this case, the feet are not lowered down to the heels, thus maintaining sufficient tension to move the body directly into an upright posture and follow through into a run.

When landing from a great height, a roll will be needed to absorb the majority of the force; a drop or running jump

ends by setting down the front of the foot, moving directly into a forward lean, with the heels not even coming into contact with the ground. When performing a landing, it is not only necessary to concentrate on foot placement but on the posture of the body as a whole. The knee angle must be no less than 90° upon landing; this protects the knees and allows the forces to be absorbed gradually through the roll.

Quadrupedal movement

This is performed on hands and knees (basic posture), keeping the hands vertically below the shoulders and the toes placed on the floor surface in such a way that the hip and knee both form angles of 90° . The back should be kept straight and the knees prevented from touching the floor. It is important not to look at the hands but to watch the floor ahead of them. Walking on all fours is generally performed by alternately moving one leg and one arm on opposing sides at the same time, being careful not to extend them to the maximum. This allows space for correction to maintain balance. The back should be kept at a constant height when moving (i.e. there should be no upward or downward oscillation). This is controlled through the leg movement, by keeping the knees slightly above the ground.

Balancing

Balancing is highly dependent on form and the quality of performance can vary rapidly. It is very important to maintain a positive demeanour. Simply adopting a serious intention to master a particular course can have a decisive impact on the quality of performance.



Fig. 4: Quadrupedal movement: knees move parallel to the floor.

When balancing, the heel and front foot around the second toe should be kept in contact with the beam, to ensure the greatest possible area of contact. If the foot contact concentrates around the big toe, the contact area will be diminished and the ability to maintain control will suffer accordingly.

It is important to concentrate the gaze ahead of the feet and not at the feet themselves. The knees should be slightly bent, to allow any mistakes to be corrected. If the body is fully outstretched, only the arms will be available to perform any compensatory movements.



Fig. 5: Balancing: concentrate on the area ahead of the feet.



Fig. 6: Balancing: keep knees slightly bent.

2. Descriptions of moves and variations

The moves presented here are based on the ones most commonly performed in parkour, freerunning and competitive parkouring, and should therefore be regarded as model movements. Nevertheless, when a movement is presented in one of the lessons, the description should not be taken as binding or standardised. On the contrary, the moves lend themselves to a wide range of variation, a fact borne out by observation. This is due to the aspect of efficiency. Since environmental conditions vary greatly, it makes sense for the traceur to modify his movements to fit in with the immediate physical scenario. This means that under certain circumstances, rather than sticking to a strict sequence of steps, it may make sense to perform a particular move in a way that differs from the model movement described here.

It is important that the practitioner gradually learns to vary his moves out of doors, where conditions can vary constantly. Parkour adherents have come to realise that the best way of overcoming an obstacle involves employing a minimum of bodily resources, so as to conserve strength and energy. However, movement variations also have their place in a sports hall environment. Not only do physical constitutions vary from person to person but so does an

individual's personal form, sometimes even on a daily basis, as does his ability to assess an obstacle. There are therefore many reasons why it can make sense to amend a given movement. A different run-up to an obstacle or an unsuccessful take-off may also necessitate a deviation from the model movements, to restore a move's efficiency and safety.

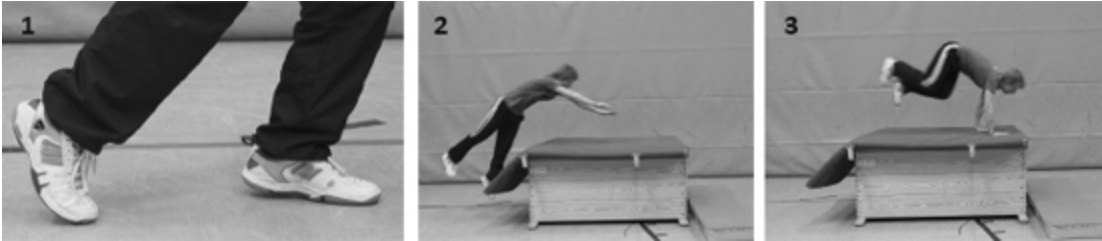


Fig. 7: Movement variation: split-foot kong vault.

This is illustrated by the following example variations.

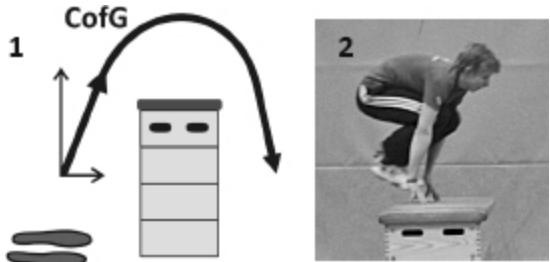
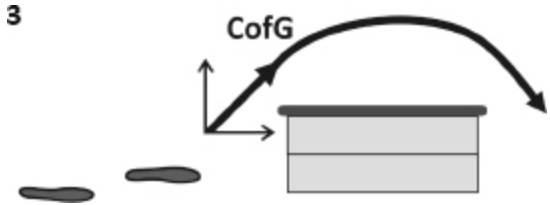


Fig. 8: From an almost centric (top) to an extremely eccentric force action (bottom); the kong vault can be varied by amending the take-off movement.



Example 1: Kong vault

The kong vault (see 7.2) and split-foot kong vault (see 7.1-3) are both related to the tucked jump, but they differ considerably from each other in terms of their take-off. The simple kong vault is performed at high force with both legs together, making it suitable for higher, shorter obstacles, since the body's centre of gravity (CofG) at the moment of take-off is above the feet and acceleration is almost vertical (virtually centric) (ills. 8.1-2). In the split-foot kong vault, (fig. 8.3: split-foot), the body's centre of gravity is above the front foot, and an eccentric burst of force is exerted on it. The rotational movement about the centre of gravity pulls the legs strongly upward and causes the upper body to lean far forward with the hands reaching right out. The split-foot kong vault is therefore primarily suited to low, wide obstacles.



Fig. 9: Reverse vault: vertical take-off from both feet.

Example 2: Reverse vault

There are a number of ways of varying the reverse vault (see ch. 7.3). First of all, the traceur can place either one or both hands on the obstacle for support (beginners, in particular, often feel that using both hands is simpler and safer). The choice of whether to use one or two arms for

support has little impact on the efficiency of the move. It is merely a question of difficulty and both variations can form part of a methodical teaching programme.

The second variation concerns the movement of the legs over the obstacle: either the vault commences from both feet, tucking up and closing the legs in the flight phase (fig. 9), or from one foot (scissor position, fig. 10), with legs open, resulting in a flatter trajectory followed by a landing in a step position. Although the second variation appears the more efficient, the angular velocity is lower since the mass is further away from the pivot (support arm). In practice, though, the differences in speed are negligible, and both variations can be regarded as valuable moves in parkour sports. Deciding which move is more appropriate has more to do with the nature of the obstacle itself – if it is low and wide, the onelegged take-off is the more efficient – if not the only – choice, as it involves a low and wide trajectory over the obstacle. However, if the obstacle is narrow and high, a double-footed, almost vertical take-off is required, and the subsequent tucking in of the legs can be accompanied by a fast turn.



Fig. 10: Reverse vault: single-footed take-off (scissor position) with horizontal trajectory.

Example 3: Speed vault