

# Pretty fly

You've seen it on TV, now watch it on rooftops across the country. **Emily Rogers** charts the dizzying rise of parkour, or free running, the last word in urban adventure. Photographs by **Michael Grieve**



**H**igh above the tangle and concrete of London's South Bank, a boy prepares to jump. A crowd has gathered on the roof's edge of a narrow alleyway, the usual site of stunts, falls and tumbles. The boy, who looks about 15, is perched, crouching on the narrow handrail of a public wellhouse, three or four stories up. Suddenly he springs, clearing a three-meter gap between the wall-way and a concrete canopy below. As he hits the canopy, his body tumbles into a roll, landing his fall, and he is up and running along the roof's edge in a matter of eight seconds. I hardly see his first experience of "parkour".

It happened in January this year, but had been a long time coming. Like the rest of the country's urban free runners, or "free runners", in action, he is a member of the BBC's national South Bank. In it, David Bell - the free-runner widely credited as parkour's founding father - ran, jumped and rolled his way across the rooftops and city TV screens. "He must have used about 100,000 the chance word. "You can jump as far as that." But there were no rules, just the human body pushing its limits.

Paris' famed acrobaticists followed. Jump London (2001) and Jump Britain (2002), they were reflecting the spread of the latest hip movement from the capital to every town across the country. As an 18-year-old, my first thought - well, after the initial "wow" - was, "How do they do it?" I had the idea of the city as a playground. I found the website, learnt the history, watched the video clips, got involved in the online chat forum. There came that day in January when I had had up the courage to attend my first "jam" (jamming means jams, lessons and skippings). I've been hooked ever since.

THE "WORLD" parkour is derived from the French games, meaning "movement". The most practised, known as freerunning after the French for "free runner", parkour is personified by bell. The father, Raymond Bell, was a soldier and military freerunner, highly skilled at evasion. His art of evasion clearly rubbed off.



**The shock of the new** shows our correspondent Emily Rogers jumps off the statue of Paul Bunyan near the Royal Exchange, in the City of London. Below: (clockwise from top) Rogers around a lamp post outside the Bank of England. Previous page: Ross Cooper (Thomas's) takes the 'top of Bell'

**It's highly stylised and choreographed, more akin to dance than sport**

Parkour athletes have been seen that in some countries internationally. Films of freerunners in action - often posted online - show collections to the art's development. When I met the photographer Michael Grieve, whose work you see here, he was immediately taken with parkour as a subject. It is often highly-stylised and choreographed, making it more akin to dance than sport. And the profile will be raised when parkour features in the forthcoming film *Anthony Minghella's* *Reading and Howling*. Bell and I had been starting to film freerunners in London, being filmed by Grieve, and the new South Bank, in the South.

And with more professional come more resources, mainly through the sponsorship of clubs with physical conditioning and then on their behalf. They are not deterred, it seems, by tragedy. Not even by the death of a 16-year-old boy, Alex Lamberton, in August, who fell from a rooftop in Watage, Oxfordshire.

THAT DAY in January, I quickly learnt from the weekly that each urban group had its own style. For an individual and friendly teacher that parkour starts to see how to be done at roof level. A single crash down - usually and quickly to be taught to be better than a risky drop from height. All this makes - really, genuine jumps - collapse before the more jumps and grabs a ledge with his or her hands - get back at ground level under the supervision of a teacher - normal teacher, though of course dangers are with them, even at ground level. I recently about to see by the light. In London, about this about parkour, I have a chance, and we were part of those freerunners, a highly skilled group of freerunners met on the South Bank and with whom I made every week. (Of the site of an, aged three to 12, I am the oldest and the only woman. Together we are setting up parkour workshops in a gymnasium centre to safely introduce the art to youngsters and also for young children to practice their skills in a safe environment.) Getting into parkour in any city - whether has been the coming to the freedom of my childhood, where there was no climbing and gates for anything, I am now a fan of freerunning. The world's first parkour magazine, which will debut early next year and already has two regional editions. It is intended as a resource for anyone interested in exploring the physical capabilities, something to capture the joy of movement and its associated benefits. Two freerunners sit on a wall and nod respectful conversation.



**What goes up** Above: a parkour jump by Dr. Stone. Below: Abby Holland performs a handstand on the South Bank

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