

Up, and away

Clambering over landmarks and racing through the city, Haligonians are embracing parkour—literally the art of overcoming obstacles

BY ALISON DELORY

Photos: James Ingram/
Jive Photographic



THEY SPIDER CLIMB ON their hands and feet, forward and backward, up and down the steps on the east side of Citadel Hill. They cat jump onto and up the Citadel wall facing the Metro Centre. They leap from rock to rock, tree stump to tree stump through Point Pleasant Park. They balance precariously but fearlessly along posts and handrails in the city's downtown and on university campuses.

They range in age, background, race and fitness level but have one thing in common—they're Halifax's ambassadors for parkour. "Parkour is about being humble, polite and courteous to everything in your environment," says Glenn Knockwood, one of the people at the heart of the city's parkour movement. "People limit themselves. When you break down these limits you want to do more."

Parkour is the art of moving gracefully through any terrain and overcoming, rather than avoiding, obstacles along a given path.



According to parkourists (also known as traceurs), parkour isn't a sport. It's a life lesson in channeling one's mental and physical powers to confront and overcome limitations and fear. "It gives you an internal strength when you scale a wall," says Knockwood. If you can do something that scary, then something in your everyday life that might otherwise seem scary, like someone thinking poorly of you, is no longer intimidating, he explains.

Advanced-level parkour is reminiscent of high-speed foot chases on television or in action movies where people run across rooftops, leap off fire escapes and vault over walls without hesitation. Although pure parkour emphasizes peaceful practice and non-competition, the opening chase scene in the movie *Casino Royale* showcases many moves. Parkour can be innovative, explosive and dynamic, yet is equally importantly a state of mind and a measured progression of small to large movements that challenge the entire body. It's really about seeing challenges as opportunities. And it's become a way of life for a dedicated and growing group in this city.

“It gives you an internal strength when you scale a wall... Parkour proves to me on a regular basis how much it helps people to break down impossibilities.”

—Glenn Knockwood

Knockwood is the unofficial leader of the Halifax group. He is a fit, focused 26-year-old whose life revolves around parkour. Before beginning five years ago he was into skateboarding and martial arts including Taijutsu and Chen-style Tai Chi, which helped him lose more than 150 pounds. Doctors told him he would need surgery to get rid of his excess skin folds after the weight-loss but instead he took up parkour and quickly became taut. “I trusted my body,” he recalls. “Parkour helps me figure things out for myself.”

Knockwood likes parkour because it allows him to continue self-awareness training without being combative. It makes him

think of Spiderman, Batman and ninja-like athleticism. “It is fun,” he says. “I feel like a kid again.”

But there’s more to it than that. “The more and more I practise parkour and see people do parkour the more convinced I am that it is a

motivating force,” says Knockwood. He would like to see parkour taught in schools and says it has greatly influenced his work at the Halifax agency Leave Out Violence. It’s a long-term violence-prevention program for youth ages 13 to 18 who have been victims, witnesses or perpetrators of violence. Knockwood says the positive life-skills, sense of community and critical thinking that parkour embodies helps these youth understand and choose alternatives to violence. Two of his co-workers and his boss also do parkour and when he is counseling youth on health and wellness or even finding employment, the philosophies really resonate. “Determining focus is a


great tool in self-advancement,” he says.

On a cool and foggy Sunday afternoon in June, about 15 parkourists gather at the Old Town Clock to train. The group is friendly and warm, smiling and congratulating each other on their parkour achievements. Among them are three generations of the Davies family: Gwen, 62, her son Travers, 34 and grandson son Alex, 15. Travers was the first to take up parkour, about a year ago. “I am a computer programmer and was a pack-a-day smoker. I was drawn to parkour because I could approach it at my own pace,” he says, adding that he’s quit smoking and loves the discipline and noncompetitive aspects of parkour. “I now have ridiculously high amounts of energy.”

The fire in her son’s eyes inspired Gwen Davies to try parkour. She was recently diagnosed with osteoporosis and believes parkour helps keep her bones strong. “Every Sunday I think ‘I can’t possibly do this’ and then I come and I do,” she says grinning. Alex Davies says he enjoys how social parkour is and he tags along with his dad and grandma mostly to talk to people. This day Gwen has also brought her niece, Ingrid Heard. “I love using my body as completely as possible,” Heard says. “I feel really unified and that’s rare.”

Parkour is a personal journey—in its pure practice it’s not about racing or showing off. Parkourists encourage newcomers to pace themselves and practise quietly. Parkourists make an effort to smile and make eye contact with strangers. “We’re not timid,” says Knockwood. “We have self-assuredness in our own movements. But we also have respect for other peoples’ paths. The Halifax police department reports there have been no complaints against the city’s parkourists, and Parks Canada hasn’t objected to the group training and meeting three times a week on Citadel Hill.

Like most parkourists, Knockwood is self-taught. He watches parkour and martial arts videos and also studies nutrition and anatomy. He offers some personal parkour training and advocates “training small.” Parkourists don’t wear helmets or padding and are expected to work repetitively on jumps, strength and balance exercises to build co-ordination and conditioning before attempting more difficult maneuvers.




TOM FORRESTALL

PAINTINGS | DRAWINGS | WRITINGS

on view from
June 14 to September 1, 2008


Tom Forrestall, *House at River Bend*, (detail), 2007, Egg tempera on masonite, 78.5 x 78.5 cm, Private Collection, Ottawa, ON



Contemporaries

on view from
June 21 to September 1, 2008

Jacklyn Shoub, *Double View #3*, (detail), 2007, Electrostatic print on mylar with oil paint, mounted, 26" x 67", Collection of artist




Show of Hands

FOLK ART OF NOVA SCOTIA

on view from
June 28 to November 16, 2008

Elmer Killen, *Band and Dancers* (detail), 1989, Polychrome Wood, 20.0 x 55.5 x 34.3cm



Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

www.artgalleryofnovascotia.ca

PARKOUR'S ROOTS

David Belle, an actor, martial artist and stuntman, is credited with inventing parkour about 15 years ago in France. His father, Raymond, was a fire services rescuer in the French army and inspired many modern parkour moves. Although there is no official training program or parkour designation, its popularity has spread around the world largely thanks to word-of-mouth and the Internet. Search for parkour on YouTube and you'll find several examples. Today, parkourists are bounding into the mainstream. In 2007, *The New Yorker* featured an article on David Belle and the growth of parkour in America after Belle visited New York City, giving classes and wowing crowds with his flying leaps across the three-storey high pillars outside the Jacob Javitz Center. There are pockets of parkourists in every major Canadian city; the Halifax contingent of about 30 core parkourists is the biggest east of Quebec.

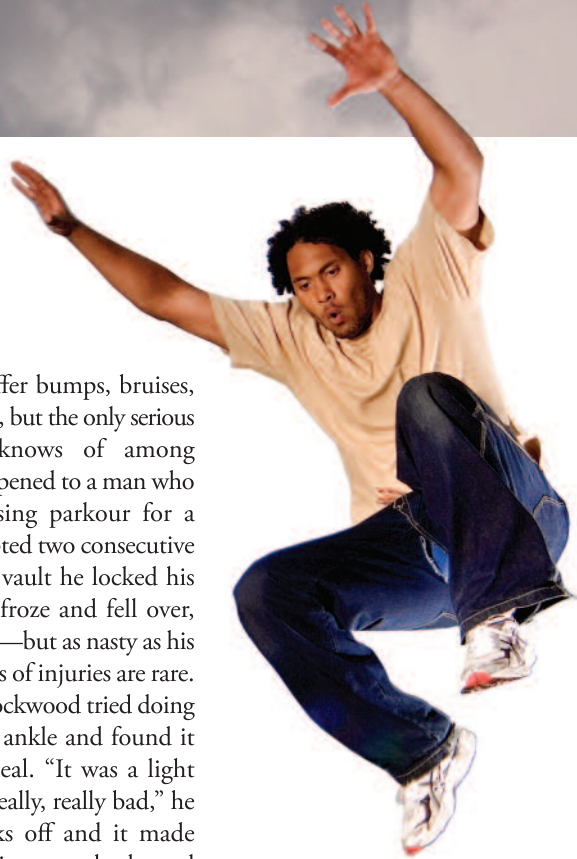
Parkourists often suffer bumps, bruises, scrapes and stubbed toes, but the only serious injury Knockwood knows of among Halifax parkourists happened to a man who had only been practising parkour for a month when he attempted two consecutive vaults. On the second vault he locked his feet around his arms, froze and fell over, breaking his collarbone—but as nasty as his wipeout was, those sorts of injuries are rare.

In his early days, Knockwood tried doing parkour on a sprained ankle and found it took a long time to heal. "It was a light sprain but swelled up really, really bad," he says. "I took six weeks off and it made me sad. Now I look into my body and don't take it for granted." He's come to understand the importance of healing and progressing gradually, soft landings, how far to safely push himself and how controlled breathing accelerates his abilities. "I slowly work up to doing more," he adds. "I haven't reached my limit yet and never will. There's always more you can do in parkour."

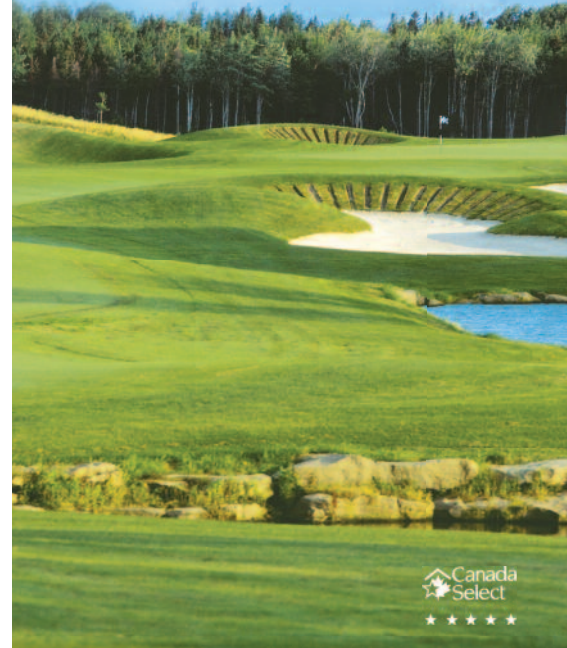
Halifax parkourists have loosely formed their own group, developing a logo for their t-shirts and maintaining a website (www.halifaxparkour.com) where they post regular practise times and the ethics of training. "We are in the forming stages of our organization right now," says Knockwood. They are registering for not-for-profit status and expect that to be formalized in this summer, hoping this will bring a foundation to parkour in Halifax.

"We want to move forward in helping people understand what parkour is." The community is careful to respect onlookers and critics, as well as the planet. Swearing, arguing and littering are absolutely forbidden, as is practising on private property. Anyone can join a session for free and parkourists are willing to demonstrate and assist newcomers.

"We come together to help each other understand ourselves," says Knockwood. "Parkour proves to me on a regular basis how much it helps people to breathe more often and to break down impossibilities." He used to preach parkour philosophies to newcomers but came to understand that people who try parkour quickly figure it out for themselves: "To be and to last, to overcome obstacles—that is parkour." ■



Where business
and stars *collide*



For your next corporate event or meeting – make it 5-star. Our facilities provide a variety of options to mix business with pleasure. Enjoy award-winning golf, skeet shooting and sporting clay, fly-fishing, rejuvenating in the spa, gourmet dining, or a sunset cruise on a yacht. Let us make it the best long day at the office you've ever had.



Fox Harb'r
GOLF RESORT & SPA
HOSPITABLE BY NATURE

1-866-257-1801 | www.foxharbr.com