



NEVER GO BACKWARDS

As Toronto's favourite season of moral panic gets ready to catch fire in the downtown core, a group of free runners give a whole new meaning to Stop, Drop and Roll.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG BOYKO; STORY BY MARIKA SCHIMANSKY

On a sunny day in downtown Toronto people are strolling through Nathan Phillip's Square. Most are locals en route back to the office after a road-side dog or tourists leaning back to get a quick digi of the architectural marvel. Then, out of nowhere, a twenty-something, slim, athletic guy jumps - almost slides - through the air to the top of a metal fence. Keeping perfect balance, he comes to the end of the fence, gracefully jumps down into a roll and continues on leaping, rolling,

and vaulting over and around anything that challenges his forward progress. Filled with fences, walls, blockades, cars, and other obstacles, the city provides the perfect setting for a quirky dance of urban athleticism called le Parkour.

A growing phenomenon in Europe for the past twenty years, le Parkour founders David Belle and Sebastian Foucan embraced their spazzy, child-like behavior and brought it to another level of choreography and mental

focus. But French men inspired to take Jerry Lewis to the next level doesn't exactly do justice to explaining le Parkour.

According to the group we followed, le Parkour is a philosophy, one in which each person, or free runner, develops personal meaning.

"It's the art of movement," says Dan, a free runner who has been practising for a few years. "It's moving fluidly through your environment and overcoming obstacles in your path."





According to Mal, a member of a local men's university volleyball team, it's "a spiritual understanding of your environment and a fluid motion through that." A long-time free runner, he says le Parkour is less about what you do on the street than it is about a lifestyle where mental focus takes precedence over actual movements.

The parameters of those movements are simple: never stop, never go backwards.

"You don't want to think of everything

individually," says Dan, who describes le Parkour moves like the roll, the turn, the vault and the palm-spin as a single motion. "It's a great feeling to create a flow of movement from point A to point B."

In le Parkour, there are no performance boundaries, no judgements. And while it's very much a male-driven activity with few female members, there are also no restrictions on who can participate.

"The people most drawn to le Parkour

are the people who don't fit into any other sport," explains Dan, "people who don't really fit into skateboarding but want to do something similar."

Like skating, le Parkour comes with its fair share of punishment.

"Sprained wrists or ankles, stress fractures and shin splints," says Dan, who performed with torn cartilage in his knee from the previous day's activities. "But the usual extent of the injuries is cuts and scrapes."





Le Parkour's encroachment on public space also comes with its share of potential trouble. During a session along University Avenue, pedestrians stop and watch as Dan does a grip cat-leap between two uneven walls. It's one of the moves that require the most mental focus: imagine yourself stories above the ground, making a death-defying leap from one building to the next, only to catch the edge with the tips of your fingers and lift yourself up.

Interested? Not everyone is. Although free runners try to promote a positive image of le Parkour there are occasional run-ins. Security guards just want them off their beat. But Metro's finest are getting wise to and more suspicious of le Parkour or, as it became known after a shooting was erroneously linked in the media to the phenomenon, 'urban running'.

With local numbers jumping from 50 to 150 after TLC aired the *Jump London* doc in

October, Toronto now boasts the most free runners in North America. As sites like www.pkto.ca log hits like never before, the city that culled its raver population and now takes aim at clubs in the Richmond-Adelaide corridor might be well served to skip the moral panic, forget about a new source of ticketing revenue, and just sit back and go with the flow.