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## Climbing Walls Because They're There

By PETER GERSTENZANG

The group of young men with a woman in the lead crawling apelike in Riverbank State Park on a recent Sunday in Upper Manhattan had not lost its mind. It was simply doing a typical parkour quadrupedal movement.

This growing sport, which combines the physicality of extreme gymnastics with the spiritual philosophy of martial arts, has gained a foothold in the United States among men and, increasingly, women.

Among them is Nikkie Zanevsky, a businesswoman and a hard-core practitioner of parkour. She and a group mostly composed of men meet regularly around New York City, including on a recent Sunday when she led the traceurs on their monkey walk along the Hudson River.

Started in France about 18 years ago, parkour has appeared in films like “Live Free or Die Hard,” and the company American Parkour has a sponsorship deal with the shoe company K-Swiss. Mark Toorock, who runs American Parkour and is credited with bringing the sport to the United States, said his Web site [americanparkour.com](http://americanparkour.com) had 43,000 members, and 65,000 visitors a month.

Toorock, the owner of a parkour gym, said the sport had been dominated by men. But with practitioners like the 23-year-old Zanevsky, whose background includes stints at [Columbia University](http://Columbia University) and clown school, it seems as if that is changing.

“There are certain disadvantages to doing parkour as a woman,” Zanevsky said. “The most annoying is if you’re training alone, as I do in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, the unwelcome attention from guys. You get catcalls, because you’re doing these weird movements.

“Another, different sort of impediment is that women don’t have the same upper-body strength as men. So pulling yourself up a wall is harder. But it’s not like any of that stuff is going to stop me.”

Certainly, Zanevsky is not the only woman practicing wall jumping. Ann Kaczka, 21, was also at Riverbank State Park working out with the gaggle of young men with superhero names like Irish, Sha and Pyro.

“At my gym, we have everyone from housewives to the agents who guard the president learning parkour,” Toorock said by telephone from Washington. “Women coming to the gym make up 30 percent of the total population. But on the street, it’s something like 3 percent.

“Much of it has to do with women’s fears of how they’ll be perceived. They’re afraid they’re going to look unattractive when they’re doing parkour in public. Here, in the gym, it feels safer for them.”

Toorock said Zanevsky “is nothing short of amazing.”

“She’s not intimidated by the fact that she is often doing parkour with 100 other guys,” he said. “She never slacks off from doing whatever it is that the men do. She’s simply not afraid to be herself.”

As Pyro, Irish and Kaczka jumped up and caught impossibly high tree branches or leapt over benches, Zanevsky said: “I’ve only been doing parkour for about a year and a half. I went to an indoor workshop to start learning the movements. What inspired me was this video I saw of a guy named Oleg from the Dvinsk Clan in Latvia. That, and, of course, stuff by David Belle, who invented this whole thing. I grew up in the Ukraine and lived in sort of a bombed-out neighborhood. I wish I’d known about parkour then. It was the perfect environment to be doing these sorts of moves.”

Asked what weight training goes into preparing for the pulling and pushing of the sport, Sha Mialimm Ak, 18, said: “There really isn’t any. It’s about using your body weight. So you can do push-ups and pull-ups. But it’s not important to have muscular arms to do this. It’s better to have flexibility in the whole body.”

The footwear of choice at Riverbank State Park seemed to be anything that gripped well and was light enough to allow participants to jump, like high-top sneakers or rock-climbing shoes.

When the talk turned serious, Zanevsky spoke about how her parkour career was nearly ended when she contracted pneumonia several months ago on a business trip to Tanzania. She said that she coughed so much and so hard that she damaged several disks in her back, and her doctors told her that she risked paralysis if she continued to practice the sport.

“You know, I don’t want to be paralyzed,” she said. “But the thing I love about parkour is, no matter what kind of shape you’re in, it’s all about tailoring the sport to your strengths and limitations. I try not to do as much jumping now, because that hurts my back, but there are still plenty of moves I can do, even with my injuries.”

“What’s cool about the sport is, it’s all about confronting yourself and seeing what you’re capable of,” she said. “That’s very instructive in life. So, as far as my injuries go, it’s a little like the catcalls I get. I may not like it all that much, but it’s not going to stop me.”

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