

No fear, no limits, no safety net

The extreme sport of parkour, or freerunning, was invented by two French teens and popularised in ads for Nike and the BBC. Now there are enthusiasts leaping and somersaulting all over Edinburgh. Claire Sawers meets some of them

Stuart Andrews keeps having the same dream. He is being chased and must jump over fences, high walls and from the roof of one building to another to escape his enemies. "In the dream, I'm jumping off the tops of the tallest buildings along Princes Street. I throw myself off the roof of the Balmoral hotel but I always manage to land on the ground safely," he says.

It sounds like an action-packed fantasy, maybe the sort of dream somebody would have after watching a superhero movie or playing too many video games.

But for Andrews, a 24-year-old from Edinburgh's Old Town, the far-fetched adventures are inspired by his favourite pastime: parkour.

For those not in the know, parkour, or freerunning, is an extreme sport that originated in France and that turns an everyday cityscape into an urban playground. The idea is simply to move freely, and get past obstacles such as walls, railings, trees and steps in as fluid and graceful a manner as possible. It doesn't require any special equipment beyond a decent pair of trainers — just a need for speed and a total lack of fear.

Andrews, or Speedy as he is nicknamed, first saw parkour in Jump London, a documentary shown on Channel 4 two years ago. Watching parkour's creator, Sébastien Foucan, leapfrog and somersault over London landmarks in a series of death-defying stunts, Andrews was hooked.

"I'd always been very interested in sport and fitness," says Andrews, who had tried karate, kickboxing and in-line skating before finding his true passion. "But I loved the fact that parkour was so different — I'd never seen anything like it. Maybe it was because Sébastien was a serious athlete and this was how he made a living."

More than just a childish game, parkour is based around an entire philosophy and way of life, following the motto, "No violence, no competition, no groups, no chiefs". The sport was invented by Foucan and his childhood friend David Belle, who grew up together in Lisses, a suburban estate in Paris.

Incorporating elements of athletics and gymnastics, and drawing inspiration from martial arts masters such as Bruce Lee as well as Japanese manga and eastern philosophies, the teenagers turned their adrenaline-charged hobby of running around the neighbourhood into a strict discipline.

They wanted to reclaim the concrete jungle they were living in and overcome the obstacles it presented to them. The underground sport quickly gathered a cult following, inspiring Luc Besson to write the film Yamakazi in 1991.

More recently, Belle starred in the BBC ident where a man races home over the rooftops of London. Foucan can be spotted showing off his parkour talents in Madonna's latest music video. Although the pair have gained global stardom — appearing in lucrative advertising campaigns for Nike and Toyota — Foucan stresses that parkour is an art form.

When Andrews started practising the basic parkour moves two years ago on the stone steps around the statue of Wellington in Edinburgh's east end, he didn't know of any other freerunners in the city. But the craze is growing across the central belt. Informal meetings, or "jams", are arranged on the internet, where traceurs — French slang for fast movers — swap tips on techniques and good spots.

Last year Meghan Pike appeared in Jump Britain, a sequel to Channel 4's first documentary, where Foucan and a team of freerunners sprinted and hurdled their way around landmarks, including Cardiff's Millennium Stadium and the Edinburgh Castle.

As Scotland's only female freerunner, and one of only a handful in Britain, the 23-year-old from Murrayfield is already well known in parkour circles, although she only began two years ago. As well as freerunning around the city, Pike does parkour training in a specially designed gymnastics centre at Lasswade High school. She is also a keen gymnast.

"It's important to learn the techniques in a safe environment and build up your strength before you go and try out the moves on concrete," says Pike, who admits she still gets scared when freerunning, but says overcoming the fear factor is an integral part of parkour.

"Once you've mastered your first roof jump," says the computer science graduate, "you become so much more confident. It's improved my self-esteem in general and I find everyday things so much less of a challenge now."

When asked to explain why parkour is still a largely male activity, Pike has a simple answer: "It's called testosterone. Boys tend to get less scared, and they love to show off. Plus they tend to be physically stronger, which gives them an advantage for certain moves."

Improvisation and creative expression are encouraged in parkour, although show-off moves such as back flips and wall spins are frowned upon by the more purist traceurs. "There are no strict rules," says Pike, "but for me, it's about getting from A to B as efficiently and smoothly as possible. If you were being chased, you wouldn't waste your energy doing anything fancy."

Whereas Andrews enjoys the adrenaline rush he gets through jumping from heights, Pike specialises in vaulting over obstacles, varying her technique between one-handed, two-handed, legs through arms or whatever else she decides to try out on that day.

John Hall, or Hedgehog, as he is known in Edinburgh parkour circles, admits he loves trying out new tricks when he does parkour. "At school I'm basically a nerd," laughs the 16-year-old from Orchard Brae, Edinburgh. He is a sixth-year pupil at Stewart's Melville College who is waiting to hear whether he has been accepted into Oxford University.

"It's like I have this double life because of parkour. I guess I probably am a bit of an exhibitionist when I'm doing freerunning."

Although he has been practising parkour for less than a year, Hall is generally considered to be one of Edinburgh's most technically competent and daring traceurs. Darting around Bristo Square, one of his favourite spots, Hall scales 3m walls within seconds and fearlessly flings himself headfirst off ledges.

"I do like to impress people if they are watching, but obviously I make sure it's safe before I try something out."

Hall has made a name for himself in the international parkour community, thanks to the runaway success of a short film that shows Hedgehog and fellow traceur Tic Tac running over the city in a daredevil game of tag.

Not surprisingly, Andrews finds he attracts an audience when he is performing his cat leaps or wall runs at Waverley Mall or the Wellington statue on a Saturday afternoon. "People stop to see what I'm doing and I always get loads of young guys wanting to join in and have a shot."

Realising the demand for parkour lessons, Andrews began running classes for children at the Craggs sports centre earlier this year, but stopped after he heard about a 14-year-old in England who was killed after allegedly jumping from a roof while practising parkour.

Crucial to staying safe, says Andrews, is looking out for potential hazards, such as slippery surfaces, loose stonework and passers-by who might get in the way of a jump.

Andrews realises a lot of parents might worry about their children practising such potentially dangerous moves, but insists that with the proper training and a sensible attitude, it can be a great way to improve co-ordination and fitness.

“When people first come along, they often muck about and show off, or laugh when someone gets a move wrong. I tell them that’s not what parkour is about at all. They need to concentrate and really work hard if they want to get good.”

There are plans to set up a parkour events company based in Edinburgh, with the intention of raising the sport’s profile through workshops and public displays. In the mean time, Andrews is crossing his fingers for a sponsorship deal, so that he can follow in the fast-paced footsteps of his idol, Foucan, and become a parkour professional.

“My dream is to do parkour full-time,” says Andrews. “I am at my happiest when I’m running around. It’s pure escapism. I forget about my problems and just flow.”

For more information about parkour, visit www.ed-pk.com. Stuart Andrews can be contacted at edinburghgravity@hotmail.com