

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## **Virtuosity and the Basics of Parkour**

### Environmental Awareness and the Roll

Jesse Woody

In my first installment on parkour, in last month's journal, I recounted a bit of the sport's background, from some of the original concepts of functional fitness that underlie it to the sport/art that was developed by teens in the suburbs outside of Paris and has recently exploded onto the world scene. That being said, any activity is only as good as its actual practice. Talking about parkour is in no way correlative to actually doing it. The same applies to CrossFit in general; rarely will someone garner an accurate view of the program purely through conversation or contemplation rather than action. So let's get right to the nitty-gritty.

Parkour, first and foremost, is dependent on two things: the environment, which dictates the possibilities for effective movement, and your current level of ability or comfort within that environment. In much the same way that CrossFit scales and modifies techniques from gymnastics and Olympic lifting for new trainees, parkour can be scaled and modified to benefit most any willing population. And the result of an untrained individual getting in over their head in parkour is similar to that of putting a newbie upside-down

on a set of rings or in a full overhead squat under a bodyweight load on a bar. (Let's just say that natural selection can be a beautiful thing.) Fortunately, as with

many other aspects of parkour, the way to scale movements to your skill level is mostly common sense. I will eventually give some specific tips and drills for scaling movements to your ability, but for now, if something is too high for comfort, find something at a safer height, if it involves a level of speed or commitment that you have yet to possess, find another, more appropriate, move or obstacle.

Parkour takes CrossFit's concept of everyman's gymnastics and moves it into an environment infused with an additional dose of variation and randomness. This same varied and random nature that enhances its overall benefit can also create unknown hazards, but you can manage them by carefully inspecting the various elements of any new environment. Take note of any loose bricks, broken concrete, or slick surfaces (algae or moss-covered bricks are notoriously dangerous even days after a good rain). Besides the obstacles themselves, the surrounding area is also important to inspect. Visualize your approach angle



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to each object and memorize the loose gravel, protruding roots, or other questionable objects that may occupy this path. Also keep in mind the area beyond each obstacle that you will invariably occupy post-technique. That old lady walking around the bend in the park might make her way directly beneath a wall you plan to incorporate in your training, and despite what some may tell you, vaulting onto old ladies is not parkour.

Once you have given the area a thorough examination, start to navigate your environment slowly, and keep a watchful eye for any hazards you may have overlooked. Through this process you will gain an intimate knowledge of the nature of certain obstacles and surfaces that can be extremely useful in an emergency situation. Perhaps that root you thought would trip you up ends up being the perfect final step before a vault, propelling you slightly faster and higher than you would otherwise be capable. Maybe a quick sprint toward that algae-covered, wet brick surface ending in a controlled slide to underbar is just the move that will evade that band of marauding ninjas on your trail.

So now that we've covered this essential safety aspect we're ready to start jumping, climbing, and vaulting our way through the city, right? Well, not exactly...but soon, grasshopper, I promise. First, we will drill the basic roll to the point of virtuosity. It is a simple shoulder roll, similar to the technique performed in many martial arts, which helps alleviate unnecessary impact from drops, sustain momentum when jumping gaps, and provide a safety net if a technique doesn't go according to plan. For those unfamiliar with the rolling technique, the simplest progression that I have found proceeds as follows:

1. Choose a shoulder to roll over. It is best to become proficient in both directions. If you are rolling over your right shoulder, your right knee will be forward (this description will be assuming a right shoulder roll).

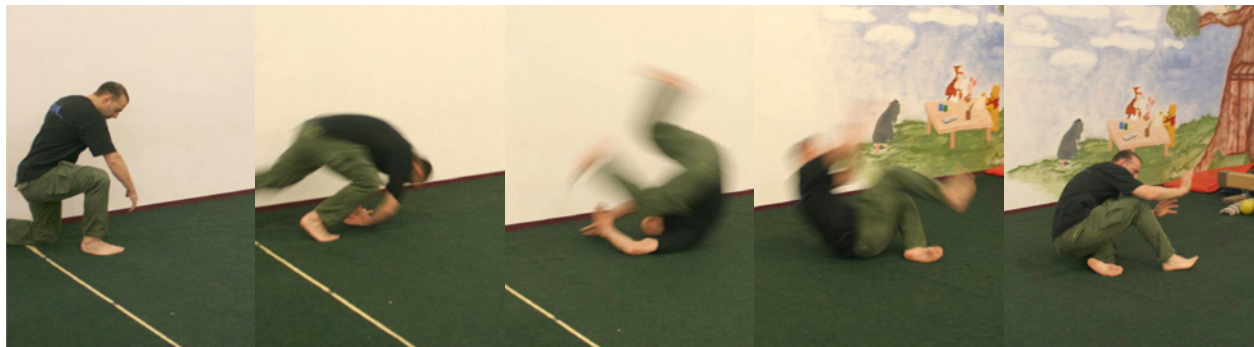
2. In the beginning, kneel down on your left knee, with your right knee bent in front of you. As you bend at the hips to roll, your hands will contact the ground slightly behind the line made by your right foot. You can also start from a standing "table-top" position, bending at the knees and hips to place your hand in the appropriate spot.

3. Bend at the hips, placing your hands to the left and slightly behind your lead toes. Look back toward your left foot by tucking your chin into your chest at an angle.

4. You will push off your left foot, meeting the ground with your hands, then right forearm, then right scapula (shoulder blade). From your right scapula, you will roll across your back at an angle toward your left hip. It helps to imagine that your arms are wrapped around a barrel. This will create the proper position for a smooth transition from your hands to your arm/upper back. Keep your chin tucked, looking toward your left foot throughout the movement.

5. As you roll over your back, your left foot will tuck back toward your butt, and after your hip, your left heel will be the next thing to contact the ground. Your right leg will still be bent at the knee, and as your momentum carries you over your left heel, your right foot will land in front of you, carrying you up into a running position.

Once this technique is mastered from the crouch or table-top position, you can move to a standing roll. Here you will give a slight hop or skip, bend at the knees and then propel yourself forward. Your hands will contact the ground for a split second before you transfer once again to your forearm, scapula, then diagonally across the back. All other aspects of the roll remain the same; your chin will be tucked toward your trailing leg, your trailing foot tucked into your butt, and your lead leg



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bent throughout the move. Try to keep relaxed enough to avoid any “dead” spots during the roll. You will want consistent contact to avoid unnecessary impacts (imagine a wheel with a flat spot in it) so keep your tucked, rounded-back position until your momentum carries you onto your feet. You will invariably learn this the hard way, though, on your quest to transition faster to the run. I easily spent a week hobbling around with a bruise down the side of my hip from thinking that I could preemptively exit from the tuck, only to take the momentum of a good-sized jump and transfer it to my pelvis. That is precisely the opposite of the whole “transference of momentum” idea.

Once you get the hang of the basic technique, both the standing roll and the roll from a drop will seem relatively easy, as the added momentum will do most of the work for you. After committed practice, you will likely find your own personal method for efficient rolling and will know that you’ve mastered the move when you can roll consistently from both sides, directly onto your feet. Don’t despair if you don’t pick up the technique immediately; the learning curve can be somewhat steep. As long as you keep the basic concept in mind and approach it with constant, mindful practice, a perfect roll will eventually be yours.

This most basic of movements is of supreme benefit to anyone who ventures to learn it. If you are an athlete, it is essential to know how to right yourself in a fall and dissipate the momentum to avoid injury. The same goes for seniors, kids, and everybody between: knowing how to roll can make the difference between a dislocated shoulder or broken collar bone and a smooth and safe transition that brings you directly onto your feet. In terms of parkour, it is both a vehicle for preserving momentum and reducing impact as well as an essential aspect of safety.

With a grasp of these basic concepts—allowing your environment to dictate your movement, approaching obstacles with humility and readily scaling down your

approach to the proper level, and continually practicing the basic roll—you will have a strong foundation on which to build the rest of your parkour training.



But why haven’t we discussed any of the basic moves? As odd as it may seem, these are secondary to the three simple concepts I’ve outlined. Once you master those, you are free to go out into the world and choose the movements that best suit your chosen path. If you can keep these ideas in mind, you will be more perceptive of the possibilities that lie outside some standard move that you’ve seen repeated a thousand times in videos. From this basis, you can train parkour to become an extension of your own most effective locomotion, no matter what path you may choose. In this way, you can run toward a table, and instead of instantly thinking “monkey vault!” you can be free to approach from the angle of

“now what might be the most efficient movement for me in this situation?” Trust me, with two and a half years of constant training (on top of twenty years of similar activities), I still consider myself a beginner in this respect. Mastering both body and mind to allow for unfettered movement is a lifelong process (a case in point is parkour pioneer David Belle, who still persistently trains to improve after fifteen years of experience and is a role model for us all in that regard.)

So what was I saying about words as opposed to actions? Oh yeah, enough of my blathering—get out there and train!

Jesse Woody works in various capacities for the Woodberry Forest School in Virginia, including working with the outdoor education department and strength and conditioning. He’s been practicing parkour for three years, though he’s acted like a monkey his entire life. He is an administrator and frequent content contributor for the [American Parkour website](http://www.americanparkour.com).