

THE HISTORY OF ACROBATIC ARTS



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The word *acro-batics* comes from the Greek words for *Akros* meaning "high" and *bat* meaning, "walking". Thus a direct translation can be interpreted as "high walking." In modern times, acrobatics refers to the demonstration of a practitioner's physical ability for controlled movement through space. This demonstration includes feats of balance, agility and motor coordination. One of Acrobatics most popular subdivisions is gymnastics, which often relates to the methods at which acrobatic prowess is achieved. From the dawn of history to present times we can see how this "high walking" transcends the mundane and shines light on the glory of human potential.

Acrobatics in the Ancient World



It is difficult to say who the first acrobats were. The origin of acrobatics most likely pre-dates any historical accounts. It is undoubtedly an art form that spawns from the functional movements of everyday life. When individuals within a group demonstrated physical movements with an unusual degree of efficiency or skill, it would have been noticed and admired by his or her peers. Later, these feats of virtuosity would have been given an aesthetic flavor to display an acrobat's superior agility.

Chinese culture is steeped in a long gymnastic and acrobatic tradition. Acrobatics are the oldest performing art in China. Early records show that the ancient Chinese used gymnastic-type exercises for healing the body and keeping it strong. Chinese acrobatics reached a high level of sophistication as early as the Warring States Period during the third century B.C. The early cultures of Japan, Persia and India also used this type of training to prepare for war. The ancient Egyptians left records of acrobatic and balancing feats in the form of hieroglyphs and Indian yoga has long taught contortion as a means to health and spiritual enlightenment. Acrobatic arts have long been used to promote cultural exchanges between the people of different countries around the world.

The early Greeks gave glory to physical training and coined the term gymnastics. In ancient Greece, the well-rounded development of the individual was sought through the disciplined practice of gymnastics. Because so much importance was attached to gymnastics, gymnasiums, outdoor gathering spots for athletic contests, were considered the seat of Greek intellectual development.

Early gymnastics were based on the natural movements of running, throwing, wrestling, boxing, climbing, jumping, weightlifting, as well as dancing. The Romans took the idea of gymnastics from the Greeks but adapted it to their purposes. The admiration of the human form was highlighted in Classic Greek culture, as was the importance of playing games. For the Romans, gymnastic exercises emphasized their military practicality.

The appearance of gymnastics and acrobatics transformed again in Europe during the Middle Ages when asceticism became the norm and strenuous physical activity beyond manual labor was discouraged. In a time when even laughter was often frowned upon, the idea of play was taboo.

The first of two exceptions to this were the acrobatic performers who traveled

about the countryside. These groups were made up of gypsies, jesters, magicians and charlatans. Through their performances, they perpetuated the aesthetic roots of the acrobatic tradition. The second exception was the European knights of the warrior class, who practiced a variety of acrobatic-related skills in preparation for war. These knights participated in organized physical activities like climbing, vaulting, riding, swimming, archery, jousting, wrestling, jumping and dancing.

As we move closer to the modern era, we've seen the larger genre of acrobatic culture divide into a wide variety of distinct forms. Some of the best known of these sub-categories are: Breakdancing, Capoeira, Circus Arts, Gymnastics, Parkour/Freerunning, and Tricking. Each of these amazing art forms are similar in that they involve human movement as a vehicle to develop freedom and grace in the physical realm.

Breakdance

Breakdance (also known as breaking or b-boying) is a street dance style that evolved as part of the hip-hop culture of African American and Puerto Rican youths in Manhattan and the South Bronx of New York City during the early 1970s. It is normally danced to electronic or hip-hop music that is remixed to prolong the “breaks” in a song. Breakdancing involves the dance elements of toprock, downrock, freezes, and power moves. A breakdancer, breaker, b-boy or b-girl is the name for a person who practices breakdancing.



It is suggested that the roots of Breakdancing may have begun as a constructive alternative in youth culture to the violence of urban street gangs. Today, aspects

of breakdancing culture have evolved to a high level of athleticism. Since acceptance and involvement within the breakdancing community centers on physical abilities and style, breakdancing culture is often free of the common race and gender boundaries of a subculture. As a consequence breakdancing has been accepted worldwide.

Breaking first became popular in the Bronx in New York City when neighborhood disc jockeys like DJ KOOL HERC, would take the rhythmic breakdown sections (or "breaks") of dance records and string them together with many elements of the melody. This provided a raw rhythmic base for improvising and further mixing, and it allowed dancers to display their skills during the break.

There are four basic elements that form the foundation of breakdancing. These distinct elements are: 1) toprock, 2) downrock (also known as footwork), 3) power moves, and 4) freezes.

Toprock refers to any series of dance steps performed from a standing position, relying upon a mixture of coordination, flexibility, style, and rhythm. It is usually the initial display of a breakdancer's style, and it serves as a warm-up for transitions into more acrobatic moves.

In contrast, downrock includes all footwork performed low to the ground such as the 6-step. Downrock is normally performed with the hands and feet on the floor. In downrock, the breakdancer displays his or her skill in foot speed and control by performing various combinations. These combinations often transition into more athletic moves such as power moves or air freezes.

Power moves are actions that require momentum and physical power to execute. They are often very physically demanding and a great display of upper body strength and balance. Some examples of power moves include windmills, swipes, headspins, 1990's and flares. Many of these moves have been

influenced or adapted from gymnastics and martial arts.

Most breakdance sets end with freezes that halt all motion in a stylish pose. Some of the more difficult freezes require the breakdancer to perform inverted positions that, similar to powermoves, rely on a significant amount of flexibility, balance and upper body strength.

The concept of the "battle" is a key component of b-boy culture. Battles can take the form of informal cyphers or as organized competitions. Both types of battles are head to head confrontations between individuals or groups ("crews") of dancers who try to out-dance each other.

The cypher (or the circle) is the name given to a circle of b-boys and/or b-girls who take turns dancing in the center. There are no judges (other than the participants of the cypher itself), concrete rules or restrictions in the cypher, only unspoken traditions. Although people aren't always battling each other in the cypher, there are many times when battles do take place. B-boying began in the cypher and only later did organized competitions develop. This original type of battle is often more confrontational and more personal. The battle goes on until it ends for one of many possible reasons, such as one dancer admitting defeat. Cypher culture is more present in communities with a stronger emphasis and understanding of original, true hip-hop culture. Battling in the cypher is also a common way for dancers to settle issues between each other.

Organized competitions, however, set a format for the battle, such as a time limit, or specify a limit for the number of dancers that can represent each side. Organized competitions also have judges, who are usually chosen based on their years of experience with breakdance, level of deeper cultural knowledge, contribution to the scene and general ability to judge in an unbiased manner. It should be noted that some breakdancers believe that there has been an over-emphasis on organized competitions in recent years. These individuals suggest

that this trend takes away from a more originality-based aspect of the culture that is often more expressed in the cypher tradition.

Capoeira

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art form that combines elements of martial arts, music, and dance. It was created in Brazil by slaves brought from Africa around the 16th century and was developed in the regions known as Bahia, Pernambuco



and Rio de Janeiro. In Capoeira, participants form a roda (pronounced "hoda"), or circle, and take turns either playing musical instruments (such as the Berimbau), singing, or ritually sparring in pairs in the center of the circle. The sparring is marked by fluid acrobatic play involving kicks and evasions. It also includes the extensive use of sweeps, head-butts and the occasional throw. Its origins and purpose are a matter of debate.

Historians are divided between those who believe Capoeira is a direct descendant of African fighting styles and those who believe it is a uniquely Brazilian dance form distilled from various African and Brazilian influences.

Even the etymology of the word Capoeira is debated. The Portuguese word capão means "capon", or a castrated rooster, and could mean that the style appears similar to two roosters fighting. Some claim that given that Capoeira in Portuguese literally means "chicken coop", it could simply be a derisive term used by slave owners to refer to the displays as chicken fights.

For some time, Capoeira was prohibited in Brazil. In 1890, Brazilian president Deodoro da Fonseca signed an act that prohibited the practice of Capoeira

nationwide, with severe punishment for those caught. It was nevertheless practiced by the poorer population on public holidays, during work-free hours, and on other similar occasions.

In spite of the ban, Mestre Bimba (Manuel dos Reis Machado) created a new style, the "Capoeira Regional" (as opposed to the traditional "Capoeira Angola" of Mestre Pastinha). Mestre Bimba was finally successful in convincing the authorities of the cultural value of Capoeira, thus ending the official ban in the 1930s. Mestre Bimba founded the first Capoeira school in 1932, the Academia-escola de Capoeira Regional at the Engenho de Brotas in Salvador-Bahia. He is considered by most to be "the father of modern Capoeira". In 1937, he earned the state board of education certificate. In 1942, Mestre Bimba opened his second school at the Terreiro de Jesus - rua das Laranjeiras. The school is still open today.

Capoeira is growing in popularity worldwide. In the mid-1970s when masters of the art form -- mestre capoeiristas, began to emigrate and teach Capoeira in the United States, it was still primarily practiced among the poorest and blackest of Brazilians. With its immigration to the U.S., however, much of the stigma with which it was historically associated in Brazil was shed. Today there are many Capoeira schools all over the world and throughout the United States, and with this growing popularity it has attracted a broad spectrum of multicultural, multiracial students. Capoeira has gained popularity among non-Brazilian and non-African practitioners for the fluidity of its movements.

Capoeira does not typically focus on injuring the opponent. Rather, it emphasizes skill in out-performing the adversary. Capoeiristas often prefer to show the movement without completing it, enforcing their superiority in the roda. If an opponent cannot dodge a slow attack, there is no reason to use a faster one. Each attack that comes in, gives players a chance to practice an evasive technique.

The ginga (literally: rocking back and forth; to swing) is the fundamental movement in Capoeira. The style of the ginga varies between the different styles of Capoeira. Generally speaking however, the ginga is accomplished by maintaining both feet approximately shoulder-width apart and then moving one foot backwards and then back to the base, describing a triangular step on the ground. This movement is done to prepare the body for other movements and should match the rhythm being played by the bateria (group of musicians).

There are three main styles of Capoeira: Angola, Regional, and Contemporânea.

Angola is the oldest of the three and is often considered the most dance-like or ritualistic form of Capoeira. It is generally played slower and lower to the ground than other major forms of Capoeira, but the speed varies in accordance to the music played.

Regional is a more martial form of Capoeira, and is practiced widely in Northern Brazil. Capoeira Regional was developed by Mestre Bimba and is characterized as having swift, powerful and efficient movements. The Capoeira Regional style is often considered to be a faster and more athletic form of play than the more traditional Capoeira Angola.

Contemporânea or modern regional is the newest branch of Capoeira. A variant of Bimba's Regional, the Contemporânea game is characterized by high jumps, flashy acrobatics, and spinning kicks. This newer form of Capoeira should not be confused with the original style created by Mestre Bimba. It is common for students of Capoeira Contemporânea to train elements of Regional and Angola as well as newer movements that would not fall under the framework of either of those styles.

Circus Acrobatics

A circus generally refers to a traveling company of performers that may include acrobats, clowns, trained animals, trapeze acts, hoopers, tightrope walkers, jugglers, unicyclists and other stunt-oriented artists. The word can also be used to describe the performance that such a company gives--usually a series of acts that are choreographed to music and displaying either spectacular feats that often stretch the imagination. In the case of travelling circuses, performances are often given in a large tent called the big top.

The popularity of the circus in England may be traced to back to Philip Astley in London. The first performance of his circus, held on January 9, 1768 highlighted trick horse riding as a main part of the show. Along with Astley, Antonio Franconi, the founder of the French circus, is credited by many to be a co-creator of the modern circus.

Early circuses in both the U.S. and Europe were held in buildings built for the show but in 1825, Joshua Purdy Brown was the first circus owner to use a large canvas tent for the circus performance. Then the American circus was revolutionized by P.T. Barnum and William Cameron Coup, who launched P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie & Circus, a traveling combination of animal and human oddities, the exhibition of humans as a freak show or sideshow was thus an American invention. Coup was also the first circus entrepreneur to use circus trains to transport the circus from town to town; a practice that continues today and introduced the first multiple ringed circuses.



After the equestrian Thomas Cooke returned to England from the United States in 1840, bringing with him a circus tent, three important circus innovators entered on to the scene: Italian Giuseppe Chiarini, and Frenchmen Louis Soullier and Jacques Tourniaire. Their traveling companies introduced the circus to Latin America, Australia, South East Asia, China, South Africa and Russia. Soullier was the first circus owner to introduce Chinese acrobatics to the European circus when he returned from his travels in 1866 and Tourniaire was the first to introduce the performing art to Russia where it became extremely popular.

Following Barnum's death, his circus merged with that of James Anthony Bailey, and travelled to Europe as The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show On Earth where it toured from 1897 to 1902, impressing other circus owners with its large scale. This show toured using the big-top tent and a circus train. It included a combination of circus acts, zoological exhibition and the freak show. This format was adopted by European circuses at the turn of the 20th century.

The influence of the American circus brought about a considerable change in the character of the modern circus. In arenas too large for speech to be easily audible, the traditional comic dialog of the clown assumed a less prominent place than earlier circuses and the old-fashioned equestrian feats were replaced by more ambitious acrobatic performances. An increased variety of exhibitions involving skill, strength and daring, required the employment of immense numbers of performers and often complicated and expensive machinery. Also, circuses from China, drawing on Chinese traditions of acrobatics, became popular throughout the world.

In 1919, the USSR nationalized the Soviet circuses as 'the people's art-form' and circuses were given facilities and status on par with theatre, opera and ballet. In 1927 the State University of Circus and Variety Arts, better known as the Moscow Circus School, was established where performers were trained using methods developed from the Soviet gymnastics program. When the Moscow State Circus

Company began international tours in the 1950s, its levels of originality and artistic skill were widely recognized, and the high standard of the Russian State circus continues to this day.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the circus began to lose popularity as people became more interested in alternative forms of entertainment. However, there are still numerous circuses that have kept the tradition alive. These include Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, Circus Krone from Munich, Circus Royale and Lennon Bros Circus from Australia and the Big Apple Circus.

Cirque nouveau (New Circus) is a performing arts movement that developed in the 1970s, simultaneously in France, Australia the West Coast of the U.S. and the U.K. In this style of show there are no animals and artistic influence is drawn as much from contemporary culture as from circus history. In 2007, Cirque du Soleil, an example of a cirque nouveau revenues were estimated at between US \$550–\$600 million.

A traditional circus performance is led by a ringmaster who has a role similar to a Master of Ceremonies. The ringmaster presents performers, speaks to the audience, and generally keeps the show moving. The activity of the circus takes place within a ring; large circuses may have multiple rings, like the six-ringed Moscow State Circus. A circus traditionally has its own band.

Common acts include a variety of acrobatics, gymnastics (including tumbling and trampoline), aerial acts (such as trapeze, aerial silk, corde lisse), contortion, stilts and a variety of other routines. Juggling is one of the most common acts in a circus; the combination of juggling and gymnastics is called equilibristics and include acts like plate spinning or the rolling globe.

Gymnastics

Gymnastics is a sport involving performance of exercises requiring physical strength, flexibility, agility, coordination, balance and grace. Artistic gymnastics, the best known and most popular of the gymnastics sports typically involves the women's events of uneven parallel bars, balance beam, floor exercise, and vault. Men's events include floor exercise, pommel horse, still rings, vault, parallel bars, and high bar. Gymnastics evolved from exercises used by the ancient Greeks, that included skills for mounting and dismounting a horse, and from circus performance skills. Other forms of gymnastics are rhythmic gymnastics, various trampolining sports, and aerobic and acrobatic gymnastics.



In the sixteenth century, Girolamo Mercuriale from Forlì, Italy wrote *De Arte Gymnastica*, where he brought his studies of the attitudes of the ancients toward diet, exercise and hygiene, and the use of natural methods for the cure of disease. With its explanations concerning the principles of physical therapy, *De Arte Gymnastica* is considered the first book on sports medicine.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, two pioneer physical educators – Johann Friedrich GutsMuths (1759–1839) and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778–1852) – created exercises for boys and young men on apparatus they designed that ultimately led to what is considered modern gymnastics. In particular, Jahn crafted early models of the horizontal bar, the parallel bars (from a horizontal ladder with the rungs removed), and an apparatus called a “horse” used for vaulting.

By the end of the nineteenth century, men's gymnastics competition had grown

popular enough to be included in the first "modern" Olympic Games in 1896. From then on until the early 1950s, both national and international competitions involved events that have since disappeared from the Artistic Gymnastics of today. These events included synchronized team floor calisthenics, rope climbing, high jumping, running, horizontal ladder, and flying rings. During the 1920s, women also began participating in artistic gymnastics, and the first women's Olympic competition was held at the 1928 Games in Amsterdam.

In the 1950's, Soviet gymnasts astounded the world with highly disciplined and difficult performances, setting a precedent that continues to inspire. The then new medium of television helped publicize and initiate a modern age of gymnastics. Today, excellent gymnasts of all ages can be found around the world doing children's gymnastics, recreational gymnastics, and competitive gymnastics at varying levels of skill, including world-class athletes.

Parkour/Freerunning

Parkour was pioneered by David Belle and is also known as PK or l'art du déplacement ("the art of movement"). It is a discipline aimed at moving rapidly from one point to another as smoothly and efficiently as possible using the trained prowess of the human body. PK is also built on a philosophical premise



very akin to martial arts in that it's focus is on self-mastery of both the body and the mind. Expertise in PK is tested on how obstacles are dealt within the practitioner's environment and how they relate to both physical and mental challenges of life.

PK is most commonly practiced outdoors and is not considered a performance or competitive sport by its adherents. Practitioners of PK, often referred to as traceurs (males) or traceuses (females), are trained to overcome the obstacles in their path as they would in an emergency. However, PK has a deeper philosophical basis. When faced with a hostile confrontation with another person, we are challenged to do one of three actions: negotiate, fight, or flee. If martial arts are a form of training for the fight, PK can be similarly seen as a form of training for the flight.

Because of the emphasis on body control in PK, skilled traceurs/traceuses normally have an extremely keen spatial awareness. Many practitioners say that PK also influences one's thought process by enhancing self-confidence and critical-thinking skills that allow them to overcome everyday physical and mental obstacles.

PK lacks the rigid rules of other disciplines like gymnastics. Any specific moves that are used in the community have been adopted because of their effectiveness in transcending obstacles more than for any other reason. Each obstacle a traceur faces presents a unique challenge on how they can overcome it effectively. The particular technique that a traceur uses to achieve his or her goal depends on his or her body type, speed, angle of approach, the physical make-up of the obstacle, etc. Thus, ultimately each practitioner must find his or her own way through the challenge.

In many cases effective PK techniques depend on fast redistribution of body weight and the use of momentum to perform seemingly impossible or difficult body maneuvers at speed. Absorption and redistribution of momentum is also an important factor, such as the use of rolling to reduce the landing impact when jumping from a great height.

Unlike many other activities, PK is not currently practiced in dedicated public facilities (e.g., skate parks), although efforts are being made to create places for it. Traceurs practice their skills in urban areas like gyms, parks, playgrounds, construction sites and abandoned structures. While concerns have been raised regarding trespassing, damage of property, and practice in inappropriate places, most traceurs will take care of their training spots and will remove themselves quickly and quietly from a location if asked.

Freerunning is a style of street acrobatics in which practitioners (known as free runners) treat their environment as a playground or obstacle course. It is closely related to Parkour and some practitioners consider the two terms interchangeable. Those who insist on a distinction point out that the emphasis in both arts can vary different. While Parkour emphasizes efficiency of movement, Freerunning incorporates more freestyle, aesthetic acrobatics into the movements. These aesthetic additions can include acrobatics common to many of the other styles discussed in this report.

The founder of Freerunning, Sébastien Foucan, originally intended *Freerunning* to be the English translation of the French *Parkour*. Later many began to view Freerunning as distinct from Parkour due to freerunners' greater inclusion of superfluous acrobatic movements into their practice.

Tricking



Tricking (also known as Martial Arts Tricking) is a dynamic movement form derived from kicking martial arts like Karate and Taekwondo. Unlike traditional martial arts forms, tricking emphasizes flashy and acrobatic moves over combative efficiency. Tricking incorporates a host of techniques similar to those found in Gymnastics, Breakdance, Capoeira, Freerunning and other similar disciplines. Typical Tricking

movements include the 540 Kick, the Butterfly Twist and Slant Gainers. Considered by some as a sport, tricking has no formal rules or regulations. Tricking uses momentum to link movements into an aesthetic blend of flips, kicks, and twists. Practitioners of Tricking are generally referred to as "tricksters" or "trickers".

Emerging in the early 2000's, the evolution of Tricking is largely an Internet phenomenon. The availability of free websites allowing uploads of personal video content has accelerated the boom of the online tricking community. Websites like YouTube have allowed trickers from across the globe to share video demos and tutorials with others. In recent years, tricking has grown in popularity even among non-tricking circles.

Conclusion

Those who wish to contribute to the History of Acrobatic Arts can find free resources on our website. www.PrimordialPlayground.com.

