

SPORTS

WORLD GAMES

Leaps of faith

Many parkour athletes in Chengdu made the jump after quitting more conventional sports

By XING WEN in Chengdu
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Against the serene backdrop of Xinglonghu Lake, the parkour competition at the Chengdu World Games erupted with energy — pulsating music and an MC's fiery commentary fueling athletes as they transformed the course into a stage for gravity-defying artistry.

Many competitors arrived with backgrounds in disciplines like gymnastics and climbing — now channeling their skills into parkour's philosophy of fluid movement, personal creativity and tight-knit community.

Representing China in women's freestyle in Chengdu, Shang Chunsong made history in November 2024 by claiming gold at the FIG Parkour World Championships in Kitakyushu, Japan — China's first-ever world title in the sport.

However, the 29-year-old was previously the captain of China's bronze-winning gymnastics team at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

After retiring from competitive gymnastics, she dived into parkour in 2022. "Both sports judge routines based on difficulty and execution," Shang explained. "But gymnastics requires perfecting fixed sequences on standardized equipment, while parkour freestyle demands improvisation — each course becoming a unique creative challenge."

For Shang, parkour gives her freedom and a sense of joy.

"The coaching feels more like friendship, and training adapts to my personal rhythm. At its core, parkour has become my lifestyle," she added. Shang credited her gymnastics background for mastering parkour techniques, but said conquering fear and developing her unique movement signature remain the sport's challenges for her.

Fear was clearly not an issue for Shang late on Wednesday afternoon, as she cruised to gold in the women's freestyle final with a superb score of 24.2, beating Japan's Nene Nagai by more than two points. After looking like a sure-fire winner with 22.7 points, Nagai ended the day with silver, after Shang's stellar final run deposited her from top spot. Argentina's Sara Ranchoff Tzancoff clinched bronze with a score of 20.6.

Audrey Johnson of the United States missed the podium by the most slender of margins, coming fourth with a score of 20.5.

Johnson, 24, is the only female parkour athlete representing the US at the World Games.

She previously trained in gymnastics and sport climbing, but once she discovered parkour, she was completely hooked.

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Shang Chunsong, former Team China gymnast on her transition to parkour

"I love being a female parkour athlete. I think it's a really cool sport where women can perform at levels very close to the men if you train hard," she said.

"Parkour is all about just finding the type of movement that makes you happy and excited to move your body."

She emphasized how the shared joy and mutual support among parkour practitioners creates an environment where training feels like play. Similarly, before discovering parkour, Austria's Tobias Kahofner was a ski jumper — a sport with deep roots in his home country. But, by age 12, the thrill had faded.

"I didn't have too much fun doing it anymore, so I stopped," he recalled.

His passion for movement found a new outlet when a friend introduced him to parkour.

"I got to know it through her. I thought, 'okay, I'll look up some videos,' and I fell in love with the sport immediately."

Driven by curiosity, he visited a local gym to try it out. That decision marked the beginning of an enduring obsession. "I stuck with the sport," he said. "And I've been loving it ever since."

For him, unlike ski jumping, which requires athletes to repeat the same movement, parkour offered boundless variety — both physically and mentally.

"You can do way more things in parkour. If a move doesn't click, you can just do something else," he explained. "I find a lot of fun and joy in my parkour flow and runs. I think people see that, and it definitely defines me in a way."

This is Kahofner's first time competing at the World Games.

"I'm just blown away by how big this whole thing is, how much fun it is. To get to compete with the best in the world and be amongst them is incredible," he said. Kahofner, who participated in both the freestyle and speed events, has been savoring the full athlete experience this time.

"I've just been enjoying time in the athletes' village and training here. It's just a great experience." Similarly, Swiss parkour athlete Caryl Cordt-Moller, 25, tried many sports including field hockey, archery and curling before he got fixated by parkour.

"I think what I like the most about parkour is that you can do it anywhere, at any time. All you need is a good pair of shoes — you could even do it barefoot if you want to," he said.

For both Cordt-Moller and Kahofner, it's the first time they've visited Chengdu, and, in the coming days, they plan to visit a few of the city's iconic landmarks, including the twin towers and — naturally — the city's famous pandas.

eventually becoming best friends.

Am dominated the women's final of the FIG Parkour World Cup held in



From top: Caryl Cordt-Moller of Switzerland, China's Shang Chunsong, Stefanny Navarro of Spain, Bulgaria's Kseniya Mornchilova and Argentina's Sara Ranchoff Tzancoff show off their strength and agility as they traverse the parkour course at the Chengdu World Games.

WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY AND AGENCIES

Tough competitors are best of frenemies

By XING WEN in Chengdu

In parkour speed events, athletes face two opponents: the clock and the competitor in the adjacent lane. While the final time determines the result, runners remain acutely aware of their rival's movements — adding an extra layer of intensity.

The Chengdu World Games women's speed final delivered a thrilling rematch between Sweden's Miranda Tibbling and the Netherlands' Noa Man. They started side-by-side, but Tibbling crossed the finish line 1.05 seconds faster, claiming the gold and leaving Man with silver — a carbon copy of their 2022 World Games podium positions in Birmingham,

Alabama, where Man had topped Tibbling in freestyle, just a day before losing to her in speed.

"It's nice, because if we're in the finals together, we can go faster. We're pushing each other to become better," said Man.

"Our goal was to both reach the podium — and we succeeded."

Both born in 2004, the pair became the first women to win a parkour at a World Games event in the debut evening at the sporting gala in 2022.

When they first met at an international meet, they were too shy to speak. But, over time, as the pair have repeatedly shared competition podiums, they have grown closer —



Sweden's Miranda Tibbling (left) and Noa Man of the Netherlands contest the women's parkour speed final. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY



During competition season, they train, compete and hang out together. This time in Chengdu, they're

looking forward to exploring the city together after the competition.

"I'd love to see the pandas and temples," said Man.

Tibbling especially loves the camaraderie within the parkour community, pointing out that at parkour competitions, everyone cheers for, and supports, one another — a level of harmony rarely seen in other sports.

"It's more than just a good sport. It's a whole lifestyle," she said.

The pair also encourage other women to give the sport a go.

"In parkour, you can do the same flip as a boy," said Tibbling. "It's just about your mindset. You may think you can't..."

"... but you can if you train," they said in unison.

Parkour is gaining momentum in countries like China, Italy and Japan, and the World Games have become a prime stage for the sport's top athletes to showcase their skills — and

their camaraderie.

For Chinese freerunner Fu Sida, 24, the games were less about getting podium finishes and more about reconnecting.

"I'm just happy to see old friends," said Fu, who started parkour when he was 18 after watching online videos. "I really admire Shie Rudolph's style. He's cool! We've met three times, and we always have great conversations."

Twenty-five-year-old Rudolph, bronze medalist for the United States in the men's freestyle on Tuesday, echoed the sentiment.

"Everybody here is part of the parkour community. We're so close. That's one of the best things about this sport," he said.

Fu invited Rudolph to train together at his parkour club in Shanghai. "Unfortunately, I'll be leaving Thursday," Rudolph said.

"But I think we're going to see some pandas — maybe tomorrow"