

For what it's worth

Daniel Gardner on expensive running



'It seems there is only one qualifications easier to get than a free-running instructor: a Bangkok driver's licence.'

There are some sports that you don't have to be very good at to appear good at them. Tenpin bowling is a nice example. With very little practice you can have that whole bent-knee-counterbalanced-leg-follow-through-delivery-arm thing in no time.

Your shots may still end up in the carpark but you'll look good.

Skiing is another case in point. After just a few lessons with a dashing French chalet-boy you can be snow-ploughing like your umbilical cord was cut on the piste, although at the bottom of the slope you are still likely to wind up lodged in a conifer with one leg wrapped around an ear.

But there are sports where quite the opposite is true. Years of practice will undoubtedly return steady improvements but until the day you reach Olympic standard you will look like a total tool.

In-line skating is one such sport. The delta-leg stance with hands nervously extended at either side is a familiar sight. Most rollerbladers look like this.

Then one day, after 20 years of looking like a moose on a frozen lake, suddenly the participant graduates to a super-cool expert, gliding along in complete relaxed confidence.

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in a relatively new pastime know as "free-running".

The first time I heard about free-running (also known as parkour) was on a TV ad in which a super-human Frenchman named Sebastien Foucan managed to circumnavigate a large part of a city travelling only over the rooftops of frighteningly tall buildings.

It was completely unbelievable and captivating but quite real – Foucan amazing, in fact. Unfortunately, quite a lot of people saw this ad and decided that they too would like to be able to defy gravity just like Foucan.

Some years later there are parkour institutes all over the world promising to teach you the physics-defying ways of free-running.

Sadly, though, the sport fits very comfortably into the second category described earlier and, subsequently, there is still only one person in the universe who is any good at it – Foucan.

If you want to see what I mean then take a trip to Southbank on any sunny afternoon and you'll find a number of hopefuls practising this strange art.

Don't expect to be particularly impressed, though, because, no one seems to have progressed beyond jumping from a handrail on to a wall and falling over, followed by some rolling around on the ground.

What's even more amazing is that there are people advertising themselves as "instructors", with very smart looking T-shirts.

I did some research and it seems there is only one qualification easier to get than a free-running instructor: a Bangkok driver's licence.

How ironic that an activity with the word "free" in its title should actually cost you something so valuable – your dignity.

I propose a name change from parkour to "pourquoi?"

■ Dan Gardner is an *mX* reader who prefers to stick to reasonably-priced-running.