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## The Attempted Globalization of Parkour by the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique

Damien Puddle<sup>a</sup>  and Belinda Wheaton<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Hamilton, New Zealand; <sup>b</sup>Te Huataki Waiora School of Health, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

On December 3rd, 2018, the 82nd Congress of the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG), voted to include parkour as the FIG's 8th gymnastic discipline. Unlike, trampoline and acrobatic gymnastics, which became gymnastic disciplines following the agreed dissolution of their respective federations, parkour's inclusion followed two years of unilateral and ultra vires development of competitive showcases. Despite athlete participation in FIG-organized parkour competitions, the global parkour community has been largely opposed to parkour under FIG, especially its attempts to include parkour in the Olympic programme. This situation catalyzed the federating of the international federation Parkour Earth. However, all attempts by the global parkour community to halt the FIG's appropriation of parkour have proved unsuccessful to date. Digital ethnographic work conducted during the controversy and the authors' experiences as key protagonists in the formation and administration of Parkour Earth highlights the politics, influences, and power struggles between the different stakeholders. With help from Ritzer's theory of globalization it is clear that the FIG is attempting to globalize parkour to grow its power and profits, and the IOC is enabling, and to some extent complicit in this process. This has implications for the parkour community and other long-standing gymnastic disciplines.

### KEYWORDS

Parkour; gymnastics; Olympics; action/lifestyle sport; institutionalization; sport governance; globalization

On February 24 2017, the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG) published a press release announcing their intent to develop a new gymnastics discipline based on parkour and obstacle course competitions.<sup>1</sup> A road map, identifying FIG's plans to take control of the largely informal and urban-based activity parkour itself, was leaked several months later.<sup>2</sup> As a statement by then Secretary General, André Gueisbuhler explained:

President Watanabe wants to broaden the base of gymnastics, especially to the youth ... There are many groups around the world who do parkour, so we will invite all of them, we will tell them what we want to do, and we will invite them to cooperate with the FIG in order to develop this discipline into a sport.<sup>3</sup>

**CONTACT** Damien Puddle  [damiempuddle@gmail.com](mailto:damiempuddle@gmail.com)  Hamilton, New Zealand.

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**Figure 1.** Parkour Southland, a regional parkour organization in the south of New Zealand, supporting Parkour Earth. Screenshot by the author. August 17, 2017.

This sparked significant controversy across the global parkour community with participants around the world vocalizing their dissent, that #WeAreNotGymnastics (see [Figure 1](#)). The longer-term processes, politics and power relationships within the global sport landscape are what led to this historical moment. Indeed, a range of actors were involved backstage and frontstage, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the FIG, Parkour Earth (the international federation for parkour established as a response to the FIG in July 2017), various individuals identified as ‘founders’ of parkour, and the parkour ‘community’, the term parkour practitioners themselves use to describe their local and global social groups at large.<sup>4</sup>

This is a significant moment in the global development of gymnastics. Divergent historical accounts of the development of both gymnastics and parkour were proffered by the FIG and parkour protagonists, and the historical narratives that FIG constructed were strategically used to claim ownership of parkour. We use Ritzer’s theory of globalization<sup>5</sup> to explain the processes of sporting commodification (of parkour), cultural appropriation (by the FIG and the IOC), and resistance (by the parkour community). The analysis demonstrates that attempts by the FIG to claim historical lineage between parkour and gymnastics are driven by economic motives, and their desire to support the IOC and its Agenda 2020 priorities to make the Olympic Games more urban and youthful.<sup>6</sup>

The paper is structured as follows: First we introduce parkour and its history. Then give an account of the wider political and economic context within which this controversy emerged; principally the IOC's attempts to modernize the Olympics via Agenda 2020, and the associated shifts in the cultural and economic power of sporting organizations such as the FIG. A short methods section follows to explain the empirical research data. A brief introduction to the relationship between the FIG and the IOC precedes the historical narrative explaining the processes by which the FIG incorporated trampoline and acrobatics. This is important as unlike the FIG's incorporation of these previous gymnastics' disciplines, their incorporation of parkour is both different and unilateral. We explore the ways in which the FIG created particular historical narratives to support its claims, which were disputed by those within the parkour community. Last, our discussion shows how this case supports Ritzer's theory of globalization within the context of the global sports order.

### ***The Emergence, Development and Global Spread of Parkour***

Parkour is one of the activities at the forefront of a changing wave in sport participation, namely, the increase in participation in informal, lifestyle and action sports.<sup>7</sup> It is widely argued that parkour was developed and brought to wider public attention by nine ethnically diverse young men, the 'founders', in the suburbs of Paris in the late 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Although the physical practices used in parkour (i.e. traversing obstacles, climbing, jumping) can be traced back to the 1900s,<sup>9</sup> the modern activity packaged as parkour only gained global awareness in the early 2000s.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the expansion of parkour from its origins in France as 'an underground activity with low participation rates'<sup>11</sup> has been swift and widespread, particularly among young urban populations, with the expansion of digital media playing a key role.<sup>12</sup>

Parkour is intimately intertwined with the lives of the founders, children of first-generation migrant families, who were 'neither integrated into the culture of their parents nor their country'.<sup>13</sup> The practice was closely linked to their own childhood games, familial migrant upbringing, and their desire to find meaning in difficult financial and social circumstances.<sup>14</sup> However, these individuals developed different personal meaning and ideologies of the activity which soon led to the diversification of parkour, as well as fracturing personal relationships. As Thorpe and Wheaton note, many action sports fragment as they grow in popularity, often because of philosophical differences, and the various ways they can be practiced.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, despite parkour's short history, contestation is rife, particularly about the different ideological styles of practice developed – such as 'l'art du déplacement' (ADD), freerunning, and parkour – which while born out of the different personalities of the key protagonists, are also in a state of constant transformation.<sup>16</sup> These ideological differences have impacted wider understandings of what parkour is, which is increasingly a diverse activity with different schools of practice'.<sup>17</sup>

David Belle, one of the most well-known founders, used the word *parkour*, which is an Anglicization of *parcours*, the French word for route or course (following a suggestion by French actor Hubert Koundé).<sup>18</sup> Another early and enduring name for parkour is 'l'art du déplacement' (abbreviated as ADD), the art of displacement

or art of movement.<sup>19</sup> ADD is less common outside of French speaking nations, but is closely tied to the still practicing founders Chau Belle, Williams Belle, Yann Hnautra, and Laurent Piemontesi. Further, freerunning, a term created for the documentary *Jump London*<sup>20</sup> to convey parkour to an English audience,<sup>21</sup> has been described as the embodiment of another founder Sebastian Foucan's training philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent adherents have further perpetuated this 'great divergence in styles, practice and definition of parkour'.<sup>23</sup> At the local level, understandings and experiences of parkour also vary according to practitioners' regular training partners, their mentors or coaches, the geography, weather, architecture, the public and local government responses, purpose built facilities, and parkour employment opportunities.<sup>24</sup>

As a result, parkour is understood differently in local and national communities around the world, with disparities in the categorization of parkour stemming from the still ongoing ideological debates surrounding what parkour is, and is not.<sup>25</sup> For instance, some defined the practice based on the physical requirements of the practice; for example as 'the activity or sport of ascending, descending, or moving through any structured environment, often using specialized techniques'.<sup>26</sup> Others emphasize the importance of the body and the mind whilst underlining specific movements. For example, the Australian Parkour Association defines parkour as 'an attitude and training method for movement through any environment at speed. The concept is to overcome all physical and mental obstacles in your path by using your body and mind to run, climb, jump and vault'.<sup>27</sup> Others adopt a more all-embracing definition, explaining parkour as 'a method or lifestyle to get strong physically and mentally and to be able to adapt to any situation and overcome obstacles in life'.<sup>28</sup> Parkour UK's description of the practice concludes that while some describe Parkour as a sport, this 'does not fully describe the art/discipline/philosophy of Parkour as a whole'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, many parkour enthusiasts reject the term sport in favour of 'art'<sup>30</sup> or 'discipline'.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its relative infancy compared to most traditional sporting pursuits, parkour has achieved rapid growth in participation on a global scale, much like other new (urban) action sports.<sup>32</sup> It has even been touted it as the 'world's fastest growing informal sport'.<sup>33</sup> Alongside this, the activity has experienced commercialization, commodification, and institutionalization, such as featuring in Hollywood cinema, branded clothing, indoor gym franchises; and the development of coaching methods, qualifications, competitions, and national governing bodies. Despite this, parkour is still primarily an informal and non-competitive activity practiced outdoors.

This growth, diversity and evolution of parkour have, until recently, been primarily an internal process driven by the parkour community itself. Practitioners have sought to preserve and protect its philosophical and holistic underpinnings. Both the founders, and the parkour community at large, have demonstrated an interest in establishing an international federation for parkour from as early as 2004, with several attempts to do so in different parts of the world and with various protagonists involved.<sup>34</sup> The diverse goals of these organizations included accurate transmission and development of parkour, growing awareness, promotion of specific parkour ideologies, sharing of ideas, community building, and hosting of competitive and non-competitive events at various levels, including for some developing international/

Olympic competition.<sup>35</sup> One such organization, the Mouvement International du Parkour, Freerunning et de l'Art du Déplacement (MIPFA) was developed by six of the French founders: David Belle, Williams Belle, Chau Belle, Malik Diouf, Sébastien Foucan, and Charles Perrière, on September 3rd, 2014.<sup>36</sup> It was this organization that initially partnered with the FIG, leading to the FIG's appropriation of parkour (discussed later).

Concurrently attempts to make a living within the sport including self-promotion on social media have popularized the activity beyond core participants. It has been argued that this rapid growth, almost exclusively due to social media,<sup>37</sup> has increased the recognition of parkour's commercial potential. This popularity and association with 'cool' urban youth lifestyles, coupled with the waning status and popularity of gymnastics, also lead to attention from sports providers.<sup>38</sup> This included attempted appropriation of parkour by national gymnastics organizations such as British Gymnastics in the late 2000s.<sup>39</sup> As discussed in the next section, the popularity of parkour with youth audiences and associated broadcasting potential piqued the interest of the IOC and the FIG through the opportunity of developing an international competitive pathway.<sup>40</sup>

### **Grobalization and the Global Sport System**

Globalization processes are integral to the development of parkour. Parkour has developed, and become popularized through relationships and flux created by the global and local flows of people, information, ideas, money, and media, etc.<sup>41</sup> Globally this includes international companies, parkour brands and teams, and a myriad of voices and images from all over the world via social and digital media. Locally this includes individual practitioners, parkour communities, local gyms, and cultures, etc. As theorists of globalization have argued, glocalization is the concurrent presence of globalizing and localising forces, or the '*duality of glocality*'.<sup>42</sup> Ritzer, another prominent globalization theorist, argues that focussing on glocalization has resulted in the growing hegemony of glocalization as a concept, and even its elevation as a theory or paradigm in its own right.<sup>43</sup> While Ritzer agrees with Robertson's contention that there is always a mix between the opposing forces of globalization, he argues that 'it is increasingly difficult to find anything in the world untouched by globalization'.<sup>44</sup> Ritzer, therefore, proposed the concept of 'grobalization',<sup>45</sup> to describe the imperialistic ambitions and desires of nation states and organizations involved in furthering the globalization project,<sup>46</sup> with their key agendas as attempting to *grow* (hence gro-balization) their influence, power, and profits.<sup>44</sup> Here we argue that grobalization is a useful concept to examine the attempted takeover of sporting by international/national sporting organizations, and their power brokers.

It is worth noting, however, certain critiques of Ritzer's globalization scholarship. Giulianotti and Robertson assert that 'Ritzer's grobal/glocal binary represents the two extreme poles on an ideal-typical continuum'.<sup>47</sup> They show that Ritzer himself is pessimistic about the ability of local cultures to resist grobalization and that he admits to being 'both elitist and incurably romantic, nostalgic about the past'.<sup>48</sup> In other words, he reverses those commodities that are local and rails against globalizing

forces. Indeed, Ritzer's McDonaldisation thesis and globalization scholarship are part of a 'broader motif in critical approaches to the cultural homogenization thesis that emphasize "coca-colonization," hyper-consumerism and a world of increasingly Westernized cultural uniformity'.<sup>49</sup> This has led to other critics questioning the dominance of globalization within Ritzer's theory, compared to the other potential outcomes<sup>50</sup> (see Hoogenboom, Bannink, and Trommel 2010).

However, as Giulianotti and Robertson suggest, 'in reality, most cultural commodities fall somewhere between the two ends' of the global/glocal continuum.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, globalization is inexorably a dominant (or dominating) force, and therefore helpful in accounting for the power games that are being played by international sports federations. As Kellner argues, Ritzer's models of globalization 'adds a wide range of important insights into globalization, whilst providing useful categories and distinctions to describe globalization itself'.<sup>52</sup> Ritzer's globalization models also provide a theoretical lens that puts greater attention on the global pressures (political, economic and cultural) rather than local cultural resistances (Beal and Smith 2010),<sup>53</sup> though both will be discussed in this paper.

The establishment of international sports organizations has facilitated the standardization of sport around the globe, with major international organizations such as the IOC being at the forefront of this global system of sport.<sup>54</sup> Initially, these organizations were not commercial entities.<sup>55</sup> However, the globalization of organizations and institutionalization itself is now closely linked to capitalist endeavours.<sup>56</sup> The IOC now sits 'somewhere between multinational corporation and global institution' at the 'heart of a vast interlocking structure' of actors.<sup>57</sup> As Allison and Tomlinson identify, the recent phase of growth and expansion, can be characterized as the 'commodification of the Olympic brand and media product through the global reach of capital'.<sup>58</sup> The IOC have acquired the capacity to 'generate and control hundreds of billions of dollars, which has made them [] profit making structures'.<sup>59</sup>

Capitalism is a central force driving globalization, and globalization specifically<sup>60</sup>; capitalist organizations always have global ambitions and are therefore interested in globalization.<sup>61</sup> Sport has been rationalized in accordance with 'corporate values and a logic of profit maximisation'.<sup>62</sup> This appropriation of sport by capitalist interests makes it apparent that the maximization of profit has become the key goal, even a 'pathological' behaviour<sup>63</sup> of international sports organizations. Equally, there is perhaps no force that has contributed more to infusing the Olympic Movement with capitalist ideals than television coverage and the rights and fees to broadcast it.<sup>64</sup> The Olympics, have been described as the 'world's greatest media and marketing event'<sup>65</sup> sitting at the 'apex of a multi-billion dollar global sport political economy'<sup>66</sup>; The IOC's global ambitions have driven the Olympic Games, now over 120 years old, into the enviable spot of most watched sporting event in the world. To better understand the economics behind the contemporary Olympic movement, Boykoff coined 'celebratory capitalism', a specific 'formation of capitalism' which he argues promotes 'economic benefit for the few'.<sup>67</sup>

However, there has been a significant decline in US audience ratings over recent decades,<sup>68</sup> with younger viewers representing the biggest drop off in numbers.<sup>69</sup> However, capitalist organizations 'must continue to expand, or they will die'<sup>70</sup>; hence

it is unsurprising that the IOC is concerned with the ageing profile of its television demographics.<sup>71</sup> Sports that were once 'popular and prestigious a few decades ago have dwindled dramatically.'<sup>72</sup> As the IOC have recognized, particularly as articulated in their Agenda 2020 'roadmap' they must make substantial changes if they are to 'respond to criticisms and stay relevant (and profitable) moving into the future.'<sup>73</sup> Thus, as Wheaton and Thorpe explain, one of the IOC's initiatives to combat this trend was the inclusion of youthful action sports, mostly recently surfing, skateboarding, and climbing at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Games, to make the Olympic Games more youthful.<sup>74</sup> The IOC's attempts to incorporate action sports including snowboarding, windsurfing, BMX (racing then freestyle), skateboarding, sport climbing and surfing, have received considerable academic interest.<sup>75</sup> However, as Wheaton and Thorpe outline, such scholarship on action sports and the Olympic Games has mostly 'focused on the micro-level cultural politics within and between action sport cultures (with do-it-yourself (DIY) and anti-establishment values) and their contestation with, and incorporation into, the IOC at one moment (or period) of time.'<sup>76</sup> Few have 'contextualised Olympic inclusion within broader socio-economic and political processes'<sup>77</sup> or the complex networks of power in the IOC's appropriation of these action sports. Wheaton and Thorpe employed Actor Network Theory as a way to better understand the forms of power operating across sports organizations, sport industries, the IOC, and within these organizational networks. Here we also focus on the broader political/economic factors impacting power relationships within the governance of international sports organizations, the IOC and other key agents. We argue that the IOC can be seen as attempting to globalize action sports in order to make the Olympics more popular and thus more profitable. In so doing, they are not simply demonstrating their imperialistic ambitions, but their *need* to impose themselves.

The globalization of action sports via commercialization/commodification has a longer history, such as ESPN's X Games, launched in 1995. This successful media-event was the IOC's inspiration for identifying action sports (particularly snowboarding) as a vehicle to reach the lucrative young adult market.<sup>78</sup> However, a key difference between the commercialization of action sports by media corporations such as ESPN, and the IOC, is that the former do not claim governance over the sports within their commercialized events. In contrast, the IOC presides over a system of international and national sports organizations,<sup>79</sup> with a 'vast interlocking structure' of actors, who provide each other mutual legitimacy and help reproduce the IOC's hegemonic position.<sup>80</sup> The Olympic Movement is so large that its membership outnumbers that of the United Nations,<sup>81</sup> with 'widespread criticism about its systematic lack of accountability',<sup>82</sup> This creates a complex system of interrelated organizations and 'networks of elites and powerbrokers',<sup>83</sup> who are central to the claiming, usurping control of, or otherwise globalizing action sports via their uptake by IOC recognized ISFs into the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.<sup>84</sup>

This globalization of sports by the IOC and its ISFs has been successful for attaining power over windsurfing (and now kiteboarding) via World Sailing, snowboarding via the International Ski Federation (FIS), and BMX via the International Cycling Union (UCI) – though not without controversy, and cultural

contestation.<sup>85</sup> As Wheaton and Thorpe show, often the impetus for these ISFs to appropriate these action sports comes directly from the IOC themselves.<sup>86</sup> For example, The IOC requested that the UCI, and later the International Roller Sports Federation (FIRS, now World Skate after merging with the International Skate Federation) accommodate skateboarding into their Olympic programme.<sup>87</sup>

While the ISFs of new sports may not be perceived as a threat to the global sport order, the impact of these sports on audiences is clearly palpable.<sup>88</sup> Wheaton and Thorpe encouraged the IOC to work with action sport ISFs 'in contrast to fitting within existing I[S]Fs that may not understand and respect the unique cultural value systems ... within these sports.'<sup>89</sup> However, despite claims to recognize this need, including in allowing the self-governance of sport climbing and surfing,<sup>90</sup> the appropriation of action sports under the vision of the IOC has continued in recent years. For instance, the controversial merging of FIRS (roller-sports) and the International Skate Federation to form World Skate in order to deliver skateboarding at Tokyo 2020.<sup>91</sup> The UCI and IOC bypassing the International BMX Freestyle Federation (IBMXFF) to bring BMX Park Freestyle to Tokyo 2020, abandoning the collaborative efforts achieved with IBMXFF up to that point.<sup>92</sup> Further, the lack of support from the IOC for the International Surfing Association (ISA) who were fighting off the encroachment of the International Canoe Federation (ICF) over stand-up-paddleboarding, despite the ICFs lack of history in the activity,<sup>93</sup> and here, the FIG's appropriation of parkour as a new gymnastic discipline.<sup>94</sup>

## Methods

This case study emerged from a broader project exploring the globalization of parkour from 2016 to 2019, during which this issue emerged. This wider research, which was the basis of the First author's PhD was interpretative and qualitative in approach utilizing multiple methods of data collection that all received institutional ethical scrutiny. They included ethnographic methods involving participant observations in New Zealand over 2 years in local parkour communities and on-line via social media, and in-depth interviews with 32 local parkour community figureheads and practitioners. As the FIG controversy unfolded, public discourse via local, national, and global online news media was collated and analysed. Additionally, a digital ethnography of 166 New Zealand and international parkour practitioners was conducted on Facebook. This involved the analysis of digital social interactions such as posts, replies, shares, and likes of text and media including photography, video, news, and memes. Lastly, publicly available archival collections published by the FIG including press releases, Bulletins, and the World of Gymnastics Magazine from 2016–2020 were examined.

The authors' first-hand experiences of parkour's developments across this period are also significant for this article. From 2013, the first author was CEO of Parkour NZ (a voluntary post). Both authors were invited as inaugural Directors on the Board of Parkour Earth, the international federation established in 2017; in 2019 the first author transitioned from Director into the CEO position with Parkour Earth (also a voluntary role). Through these positions we had proximity to the

historical and political developments described in this article, enabling intimate detail of these processes as they developed.

### **The Developing Relationship between Gymnastics, the FIG and the IOC**

‘Gymnastics is not a uniform concept or practice’, but from the 1800s has drawn from various European movement cultures and activities.<sup>95</sup> Gymnastics’ initial popularity as a physical practice in many European countries included promoting physical education, military training and developing nationalist agendas. However, gymnastics continued to mean different things to different people culturally and linguistically, and these meanings have also changed over time.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, across all the nations where gymnastics experienced growing popularity, different styles of gymnastics have been practiced including ‘gymnastics on apparatus’, as ‘expressive movement cultures’,<sup>97</sup> and ‘physical activity in a broader sense’.<sup>98</sup> These differences are based on the nations different cultural values, and the activities perceived benefits,<sup>99</sup> Thus, gymnastics has always been a polymorphous activity assuming many identities.<sup>100</sup>

Gymnastics popularity in European countries resulted in its inclusion in the first Olympic Games in 1896.<sup>101</sup> This led to the formation of the FIG in 1922 off the back of the Bureau Des Fédérations Européennes De Gymnastique (formed in 1881).<sup>102</sup> The FIG is one of the world’s oldest international sports federations and its omnifarious roots can still be seen in the various contemporary and sportized gymnastic disciplines it sees as under its banner: artistic, rhythmic, trampoline, acrobatic, aerobic, gymnastics for all, and most recently, parkour. However, the process by which the FIG appropriated parkour is different to its prior inclusion of trampoline and acrobatics, it is therefore important to outline the historical development of these two sports and how they became disciplines of the FIG.

### **The Integration of Trampoline and Acrobatics as Disciplines of the FIG (1934–2000)**

According to the IOC, the modern trampoline was invented by George Nissen and Larry Griswold circa 1934 to train astronauts and tumblers and became popular in its own right soon after.<sup>103</sup> Unofficial competitions began in the US in 1947, with the first national championships held in 1954.<sup>104</sup> The first international event was held in 1964 and the Fédération Internationale de Trampoline (FIT) was founded after that competition,<sup>105</sup> but was only recognized by the IOC in 1988.<sup>106</sup> Given trampoline’s association with gymnastics events, it is not surprising that the FIG had an interest in trampoline from as early as 1961.<sup>107</sup> Silacci identifies that André Gueisbuhler, FIT Secretary General in 1992, was central to building relationships between FIT President Ron Froehlich and FIG President Yuri Titov, and ‘greasing the wheels to make sure that the strategy for integration for the discipline would run smoothly’.<sup>108</sup>

In 1994, the FIT Congress approved a working group to consider ‘whether, and under what conditions, Trampoline... could cooperate in the future with FIG’.<sup>109</sup> Then in 1997, the IOC proposed the inclusion of trampoline on the Olympic

Programme for the Sydney 2000,<sup>110</sup> ‘provided that trampoline [was] organized by the FIG.’<sup>111</sup> The dissolution of the FIT was confirmed at the FIT Congress in May 1998 and a mutual publication confirmed their merger with the FIG on October 6th, 1998.<sup>112</sup> The ‘merger was made legal by joint signature on December 28th 1998’ with drafts of statutory documents approved at the FIG General Assembly in October 1999.<sup>113</sup> Trampoline subsequently featured at the Sydney 2000 Olympics as part of gymnastics events, and in every Summer Games since.

The history of acrobatics is significantly older than trampoline and can be traced back to ancient Egypt and Greece,<sup>114</sup> but its modern development follows a similar timeline. The first national championship for acrobatics was held in the Soviet Union in 1939 where the first codified competitions were developed.<sup>114</sup> In 1957 an inaugural international competition was held in Poland for what was then being called Sport Acrobatics.<sup>116</sup> The International Federation of Sports Acrobatics (IFSA) was established in November 1973,<sup>117</sup> and delivered its first world champion in 1974.<sup>118</sup>

In 1994 the FIG decided to establish ‘a Sports Acrobatics Commission and to run the first FIG Sports Acrobatics World Championships in 1995.’<sup>119</sup> A merger agreement was initially signed between the FIG and the IFSA in 1997, and then in 1998 the IFSA Congress voted to dissolve and merge with the FIG.<sup>120</sup> The FIG General Assembly approved the merger following a proposal from the IFSA President.<sup>121</sup> Since 2007 ‘the discipline has been known as Acrobatic Gymnastics’ and although it has never been on the official Olympic Programme, it featured in the Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires in 2018.<sup>122</sup>

In summary, the FIT and the IFSA existed for 34 and 25 years respectively, with decades of growing awareness of their sports and of relationships between their federations, the FIG, and the IOC before becoming gymnastic disciplines. While the level of political influence the FIG and the IOC had on these processes is hard to establish, in both cases the congresses of the sports’ federations made their own independent decisions to dissolve and merge with the FIG. These mergers involved joint agreement and legal documentation, and were approved at both their own, and the FIG congresses, reported to be over 80% majorities in all cases.<sup>123</sup> It appears clear that these decisions were motivated by alignment with the IOCs interest and the opportunity to draw on the FIGs powerful position and resources to create sporting commodities that were more profitable. Both histories demonstrate globalization processes via a top-down approach and show that the expansion of capitalist means was underpinning this decision making with limited resistance from the sporting communities themselves.

### **The Appropriation of Parkour as a Discipline of the FIG (2014–2018)**

In a 2011 letter celebrating 130 years of the FIG, then FIG President Bruno Grandi stated that ‘gymnastics is one of the most important sports of the Olympic programme’ and that thanks to artistic gymnastics, they have a high amount of television coverage.<sup>124</sup> However, he warned that this success was not assured and they must continue to pay attention to the future of gymnastics.<sup>125</sup> Supporting this, Silacci suggested that the FIG was fearful of ‘falling out of favour with television cameras’,

highlighting that the FIG archives show numerous examples stating the need for gymnastics to modernize its formats.<sup>126</sup> FIG's subsequent modernization is shown in the evolutions of gymnastics rules and apparatus<sup>127</sup> as well as the integration of new gymnastic disciplines such as trampoline and acrobatics. Then, in February 2017 the FIG announced their interest in developing a new gymnastic discipline, and identified *Mouvement International du Parkour, Freerunning et de l'Art du Déplacement* (MIPFA) as their key partner.<sup>128</sup> As outlined above, MIPFA was developed by six of the French founders in 2014.<sup>129</sup> While detail of MIPFA's actions between 2014 and 2016 is limited, at some point they came to the attention of the IOC and were engaged to deliver parkour as a showcase and participation activity at the 2016 Youth Olympic Games in Lillehammer.<sup>130</sup> In 2017 a FIG press release states that 'following a presentation and research into *parcours d'obstacles* (obstacle course competitions) and parkour' the Executive Committee had made the decision to develop a 'new discipline based on both historical and contemporary sporting practices in order to broaden even further the appeal of our sport'.<sup>131</sup> As Secretary General, André Gueisbuhler explained:

At the moment they are not organized. Their basic spirit is to be free, not to be organized. Yet they want to have competitions. But if they want to do competitions, obviously they need minimum rules and environment to make attractive competitions. I'm sure the FIG is the international federation most qualified to further develop parkour.<sup>132</sup>

The 'Road Map for Parkour (decision making process)', Item 8 of the FIG Executive Committee Meeting in Baku, 4/5 May 2017, a document leaked to the public that year, identifies the FIG's intent to follow the same pathway as that taken with trampoline and acrobatics. That is, their objective of meeting with MIPFA was hoped to lead to 'the decision to dissolve the *Mouvement*, respectively merge and have the activity [parkour] under FIG'.<sup>133</sup> Further, minutes of a FIG Executive Committee meeting (July 2017) confirms their intent to 'inform and seek approval about the merger with the *Mouvement*' and 'forming a "Steering Group" with a President from FIG and a few members from the *Mouvement* and other interested groups'.<sup>134</sup>

The minutes from the FIG Council on May 6–7th 2017 identify that President Watanabe informed the Council about his intent to integrate MIPFA into the FIG following a presentation from Mark Cooper (a sport executive and MIPFA executive). In this presentation Cooper argued 'parkour was gymnastics'.<sup>135</sup> This assertion built on an earlier article about the 2018 YOG parkour event, where Cooper identified the shared roots between parkour and obstacle course racing, citing the work of Francisco Amoros. Amoros is considered one of the fathers of French gymnastics<sup>136</sup> (although Cooper didn't make this assertion here). FIG Council member Pinda A. Malik suggested that the FIG 'should not rush into a premature decision'.<sup>137</sup> However, the Executive Committee approved the aforementioned roadmap, and 'the Council unanimously approved the principles of the integration of Parkour in the FIG'.<sup>138</sup>

The FIG immediately began organizing competitions in association with an American parkour organization called Apex,<sup>139</sup> and FISE (International Festival

of Extreme Sports), a strategy also used by the International Cycling Union and the IOC to achieve credibility and buy-in from BMX freestyle athletes.<sup>140</sup> FIG also began to develop a Parkour Commission to be chaired by David Belle ('founder' and MIPFA member, although Charles Perrière was always the key protagonist), and plans for proposing parkour for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.<sup>141</sup>

Parkour organizations and communities around the world responded swiftly to this attempted globalization by the FIG. Individuals showed their dissent via social media. For example: 'if they're just going to blunder their way into our community and ignore what we say from the get-go, then there is definitely no way that they are fit to lead us'<sup>142</sup> and 'Stay away from parkour. Fuck you.'<sup>143</sup> Collective responses from the parkour community included; 19 open letters to the FIG from National Parkour Federations and national parkour communities<sup>144</sup>; 43,558 signatures on petitions against FIG's attempted takeover of parkour<sup>145</sup>; and two public online polls with 98%<sup>146</sup> and 75%<sup>147</sup> of responses against parkour under the FIG. These were subsequently submitted to the FIG and the IOC to demonstrate the parkour community's opposition to the FIG's actions.

Furthermore, in July 2017, six National Parkour Federations formed Parkour Earth, the first international parkour organization based on a federated model (i.e. National Sports Organisations or NSOs) to stand in opposition to the FIG at the international level.<sup>148</sup> The Parkour Earth press release stated:

Any International Federation protecting the sovereignty of the sport, art and/or discipline of Parkour/Freerunning/Art Du Déplacement **should and must be** established only by consensus of the international community, via a process of federating National Federations, as per entrenched and recognised international norms, on the established right of self-determination. By virtue of that right **we**, as an international community determine our sporting, social and cultural development, in accordance with the freely expressed will and desire of the international community.<sup>149</sup>

This form of resistance demonstrates an attempt at glocalization in the face of the FIGs global endeavours. Parkour Earth met with the FIG in November 2017 in an attempt to 'formalise the clarification, understanding and recognition of the sovereignty of Parkour/Freerunning/Art Du Déplacement' and hoping to bring an end to the FIG's actions with parkour.<sup>150</sup> In an open letter following this meeting, Parkour Earth stated that the meeting failed to address their 'fundamental, legitimate and substantiated concerns related to the continued encroachment upon the sovereignty of Parkour/Freerunning/Art Du Déplacement by the FIG' and 'gave rise to further significant concerns as a result of the vision that the FIG are unilaterally and illegitimately pursuing for our sport'.<sup>151</sup>

Throughout 2017–2018, the FIG's clandestine actions continued to raise concern in the parkour community. In particular, Apex ceased its collaboration with the FIG on delivering its competitive events.<sup>152</sup> Then, the entire first group of high-profile athletes invited to participate in the inaugural competition refused to attend<sup>153</sup>; which for some was realization that the first FIG parkour competition was actually an all-expenses paid showcase and not a true competition. Alongside this was vocal opposition by other parkour founders.<sup>154</sup> Then in 2018 founder David Belle ceased

his involvement in the FIG Parkour Commission,<sup>155</sup> followed by the en masse resignation of the other commission members except Charles Perrière.<sup>156</sup> These events clearly suggested that the relationship between parkour and the FIG was not mutually beneficial.

Yet, despite these events, ongoing community advocacy and a significant amount of negative news media on these controversies, the decision to appropriate parkour as a gymnastic discipline was given by the FIG Executive Council to their National Member Federations at their 2018 Congress, without any representation from the parkour community, or NSOs. The inclusion of parkour into FIG's statutes was ratified by the requested two thirds majority (75% approval) becoming valid as of January 1, 2019.<sup>157</sup> These National Gymnastics Federations, bar a select few, had no relationship with parkour, or jurisdiction over their national parkour communities. FIG subsequently claimed that because parkour 'did not belong to any [international federation] ... it was a perfect match'.<sup>158</sup>

During this period, the FIG actively asserted a particular historical narrative of both gymnastics and of parkour which were central to their justification of their actions, that parkour did not belong to parkour participants/NSOs. However, these narratives were contradictory, and contested by those in the parkour community, highlighting that the FIG's narratives were actively constructed to support their expansionist, 'globalizing' agendas.

### Contested Historical Narratives

FIG's historical narrative asserted that a) parkour had a much longer history (beyond the 'founders'); and b) that obstacles have always been part of gymnastics. André Gueisbuhler, the FIG Secretary General at the time, stated (in an interview), 'If you study the history of parkour and obstacle races, then you will see that it wasn't invented five or ten years ago. It has a long history in gymnastics'. He continued:

When gymnastics began its history at the very first Olympic Games and until 1932, you will still find apparatus being used as obstacles ... You will find in the history, that gymnastics was used also for the instruction of the soldiers. They learned how to climb walls, how [to] deal with obstacles ... parkour is at the roots of gymnastics.<sup>159</sup>

Gueisbuhler further expounded on this position in a letter from the FIG, responding to Parkour UK's assertion that parkour has 'no connection and/or lineage to the sport of gymnastics'.<sup>160</sup> The history that the FIG asserted was as follows: 1) Fransisco Amoros,<sup>161</sup> considered one of the fathers of French gymnastics, inspired Georges Hébert's *Methode Naturelle*, claimed by some parkour proponents as a key influence.<sup>162</sup> 2) the word *parcours* to refer to obstacles, natural or man-made, comes from Hébert; 3) parkour was originally called 'parcours' by the founders, and 4) that as parkour is considered non-competitive, competitions with obstacles (i.e. parkour competitions) doesn't fit under the definition of parkour.<sup>163</sup> To support this account the FIG cited the work of Julie Angel, whose book on the history of parkour states that 'unknowingly, the activities and innate instincts of the young Parisians from Sarcelles, Lisses and Evry reflected the arguments of some of the most influential thinkers and pioneering physical educators from continental Europe'.<sup>164</sup>

In sum, the FIG claim there is ‘more than a passing association between gymnastics and parkour’,<sup>165</sup> and that gymnastics has strong historical ties to the concepts of usefulness, non-competitive practice, and altruism – concepts often linked to parkour’s ethos, at least by ‘traditionalists.’<sup>166</sup> Additionally, Mark Cooper’s claims about the shared roots between parkour and obstacle course racing via the work of Francisco Amoros become the basis for which the FIG articulated the ‘natural’ relationship between parkour and gymnastics.

However, this narrative of parkour’s lineage is not one that is shared by many parkour practitioners, who argue that the FIG’s accounts of the historic relationship between gymnastics and parkour are highly selective. Julie Angel responded stating that the FIG’s ‘claim that the sport of gymnastics was the sole discipline to support physical endeavour with a sense of altruism is both opportunistic and uninformed.’<sup>167</sup> She points out that the FIG’s account ignores that although parkour draws on similar roots, parkour was never a direct evolution of gymnastics. Moreover, that gymnastics also has clear connections with wide range of physical activity and modern sports; techniques such as moving over obstacles are no more connected to gymnastics than they are to other athletic disciplines.<sup>168</sup> Regarding the link FIG made with physical education pioneers such as Georges Hébert, Angel argued ‘The work of Hébert also included the ability to throw, catch, swim and to fight yet there has been no such encroachment by those sports or activities by FIG.’<sup>169</sup> Commentators have also argued that the FIG’s claim that competition is incompatible with the definition of parkour prior to their involvement is nonsensical. Although many practitioners reject competition in their practice,<sup>170</sup> competitive and commercial parkour events have existed since at least 2007 including those on artificial obstacles and urban architecture.<sup>171</sup>

Moreover the FIG’s own accounts are contradictory. On one hand, seemingly in an attempt to legitimize its efforts in front of the parkour community, the FIG have attempted to sell a narrative where parkour has its roots in gymnastics, citing almost 200 years of gymnastic evolution back to the work of Amoros. In public however, they only identify parkour as a modern practice, obviously to align gymnastics with parkour’s youthful urban appeal. For instance, the FIG’s website states that ‘the Parkour adventure began in France in the 1990s.’<sup>172</sup> These contradictions are evident across the FIG’s documentation, such as this press release:

The FIG’s work will be based on a clear understanding that *parcours d’obstacles*, or obstacle course competitions, are necessarily artificial. Meanwhile the FIG deeply respects the development of parkour as a non-competitive training methodology, based on obstacles that were not created as such.<sup>173</sup>

Here, the FIG is identifying that parkour competitions under their remit will utilize artificial obstacles created specifically for parkour. In other words, parkour was not born on man-made obstacles or apparatus as they had previously claimed were at the root of parkour and gymnastics.<sup>174</sup>

In summary, the FIG has ‘justified’ its appropriation of parkour using particular and carefully constructed historical narratives, making claims to the historical lineage between parkour and gymnastics, and hence FIG’s ‘ownership’. Alongside this they strategically compared the integration process with that of trampoline and acrobatics.

They stated, ‘for Parkour to be officially recognized as an FIG discipline, the General Assembly must approve the necessary changes to the federation’s Statutes, as it previously did with Trampoline and Acrobatic Gymnastics.’<sup>175</sup> Yet, with both these activities, the FIG built relationships with their ISFs following *decades* of apparent interest, and made joint decisions to merge. With parkour, the FIG undertook almost two years of development that can be considered *ultra vires* (i.e. beyond the powers of their Statutes), before making the unilateral decision to acquire parkour as a gymnastics discipline. Furthermore, analysis of MIPFA Statutes reveals that dissolution of MIPFA could only take place via an Extraordinary Congress specifically for that purpose, and be decided by a majority of votes.<sup>176</sup> However, MIPFA had no Active Members (i.e. National Parkour Federations) throughout their time communicating and partnering with the FIG, and thus no members to vote on a merger with the FIG.<sup>177</sup> It has subsequently been revealed by the other MIPFA founders, that Mark Cooper, David Belle, and Charles Perrière had acted without their knowledge or permission.<sup>178</sup> Thus, MIPFA never had a mandate in which to consider a merger with the FIG.

### The FIG and Globalization

An extensive body of literature has examined the various layers of power and politics in Global Sports Organisation (GSOs), including the IOC and IFs.<sup>179</sup> However, less attention has been given to the shifting relationships between these international sporting bodies like the FIG, the IOC and related GSOs.<sup>180</sup> However, it is clear that an increasingly complex, and shifting network of power exists both within and between GSOs<sup>181</sup>; On one hand the IOC and IFs structures allow members a ‘privileged autonomy’ which virtually guarantees maintenance of the status quo, yet, non-profit’ GSOs and IFs such as the FIG operating in this increasingly commercial environment, ‘are caught in a web of contradictions that they struggle to resolve.’<sup>182</sup> These observations are evident in this historical account.

Cervin has argued that gymnastics is one of the most popular sports in the Olympics and therefore has great financial value to the IOC; yet, the power balance is unequal, with the IOC pressuring the FIG on how it governs gymnastics.<sup>183</sup> This pressure is evident in the FIG documentation. For example, President Watanabe told attendees at the 2018 FIG Congress that despite being a tier-one Olympic sport, ‘many young people had given up [gymnastics] in order to practice other activities’, and that he ‘wanted to have [an] urban sport under the umbrella of the FIG’.<sup>184</sup>

Many young people have walked away from the sports in the Olympic programme, and they are attracted by high impact sports such as those in the X Games. We must keep our eyes on the changes happening in society. Those IFs who felt it was a crisis became actively engaged in Urban Sports ... They have been very successful. I made a proposal at the Congress to introduce Parkour to the FIG as an urban sport and the proposal was approved ... I want to develop Parkour as the FIG’s urban sport discipline.<sup>185</sup>

Within this narrative are clear references to the IOC’s Agenda 2020 objectives to make the Olympic Games more youthful and more urban, and the recognized

potential of action sports such as skateboarding, BMX and sport climbing within the IOC's strategy.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, at the FIG Council, on May 6–7, 2017 it was explained that the IOC's investigations into popular youth sports had proven that parkour was very popular and thus they (the IOC) had 'became very interested in this discipline.'<sup>187</sup> The FIG also said that gymnastics and parkour could be compared to skiing and snowboarding, recalling the IOC led appropriation of snowboarding under FIS in 1998,<sup>188</sup> and that this would provide the FIG 'with new opportunities to collaborate with the IOC'.<sup>189</sup>

Despite some attempt to modernize, the FIG has failed to significantly diversify its revenue streams, remaining dependent almost exclusively on IOC funding.<sup>190</sup> President Watanabe clearly recognized the potential of parkour to address this stating he 'was confident that [parkour] would allow the FIG to attract new sponsors' and that the FIG would grow because of it.<sup>191</sup> The FIG's parkour project had already helped secure two new sponsorship contracts for the organization.<sup>192</sup> Watanabe identified a sense of urgency for the FIG to bring parkour under its aegis; he recognized that possibly 'he had gone too fast and that he should have established a solid foundation in the first place' but that 'it was necessary to act quickly'.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, the FIG were quick to propose parkour for the Olympic programme, first in May 2017<sup>194</sup> and then in November 2017 (for Tokyo 2020)<sup>195</sup> over a year before parkour was even voted on at the 2018 Congress. The FIG made another proposal in 2020 for Paris 2024, challenged by Parkour Earth and the parkour community.<sup>196</sup> The IOC ultimately rejected all the proposals. However, as IOC Sport Director Kit McConnell, stated, the key reason parkour was not included (in Paris) was because the FIG did not choose to replace parkour with an existing gymnastic event.<sup>197</sup>

Absent from FIG's internal narrative is any indication that the inclusion of parkour was to bring (re)alignment of the FIG's values or scope back to its holistic roots, as promoted in their historic narrative of parkour. Rather, we argue they expose the FIG's aims of commodifying and thus globalizing parkour to solidify its financial and Olympic position, even at the potential cost of its traditional disciplines. Alongside this other longstanding non-Olympic gymnastics disciplines were overlooked for proposal to the Olympic Programme by the FIG, causing further frustration and concern within the gymnastics community. One of the FIG's vice-presidents voiced their concerns about the negative impact the FIG's parkour project could have on the future of gymnastics.<sup>198</sup> This evidence therefore supports research that indicates that while the FIG and IOC have a symbiotic relationship of mutual benefits, the FIG is also subservient to the IOC.<sup>199</sup> There are substantiated concerns with the narratives put forward by the FIG in their rationale for their appropriation of parkour governance based on their purported historical relationship with parkour, and on incorporation processes mirroring the inclusion of other gymnastic disciplines. Rather than a desire to develop and promote parkour, their motives appear to be to modernize and 'broaden even further the appeal of' gymnastics.<sup>200</sup> The FIG's actions were centred on commercial ambitions, underpinned by maintaining their privileged relationship with the IOC. As Angel has also argued, the FIG's narrative is 'biased and uniformed when presented with a larger view of the history of various movement and sporting cultures', arguing that 'were it not for the popularity of Parkour and its obvious youth and spectator appeal, I have no doubt this

would not be happening.’<sup>201</sup> This narrative supports Wheaton and Thorpe’s claims that ‘the IOCs incorporation of other youth-focused action sports is an exemplar of the “celebratory capitalism” of youthful “cool” ... to build global youth audiences and associated sponsorship dollars.’<sup>202</sup>

Ritzer’s globalization concept has been helpful in identifying the intertwined relationships and global economic agendas of the IOC and the FIG and their ambitions to perpetuate the modern sport system through the International Olympic Network. They do this by governing a myriad of standardized and replicated activities that are, ‘stripped of their sociocultural heritage in order to appeal to fans globally with the ultimate aim of securing new revenue.’<sup>203</sup> However, sports are cultural constructs shaped by, and to fit, the realities of the people involved in them.<sup>204</sup> In the words of David Belle ‘parkour belongs to the ones who live it, not the ones who want to live thanks to it.’<sup>205</sup>

The willing participation of ISFs (and NSOs) in appropriating action sports is central to the IOCs globalization of sport; only IOC recognized ISFs can govern sports in the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. As Cervin has argued, the FIG is ‘vulnerable to Olympic whims’<sup>206</sup> and ‘remains firmly under the rule of the IOC, diligently adhering to IOC demands’<sup>207</sup> to ensure it maintains its place on the Olympic programme.<sup>208</sup> Through this mutually beneficial relationship ISFs like the FIG receive the significant sponsorship and broadcasting revenue paid to and distributed by the IOC. Andrews and Grainger outline such processes have ‘resulted in the relatively rapid establishment of a global sporting hegemony through which many traditional pastimes became either subsumed within, or largely expunged in the face of, the unrelenting march of the modern sport order.’<sup>209</sup> Although Andrews and Grainger were discussing British imperialism, they were also highlighting capitalist market forces and their words succinctly parallel the IOCs power in establishing a global sport order; an order which allows the FIG to globalize parkour whilst ignoring the voices of the global parkour community. The representatives from ISFs like the FIG claim that their intentions are noble and that they wish to see action sports grow and develop. Yet, behind these justifications lies healthy profits for both the IOC and their ISFs. In other words, ‘global forces are strategizing ways of seeking to capitalize on, to exploit, local sporting practices.’<sup>210</sup> Nonetheless, the continued growth of informal action sport participation, including parkour, is evidence that, despite this process of globalization and incorporation, less dominant, though nonetheless potent cultural practices outside of traditional sport institutions continue to thrive. However, this is not without contestation.

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## Disclosure Statements

The first author is the CEO of Parkour NZ and was involved in the formation of Parkour Earth, acting as an Elected Director on the Board from 2017–2019. Since late 2019 to the time of publication he volunteers as Parkour Earth's CEO. The second author was an Independent Director on the Board of Parkour Earth from 2017–2019.

## Notes on Contributors

**Damien Puddle** works for Sport Waikato as the country's first Local Play Advocate, activating the Hamilton City Council Play Strategy. He works to embed equitable and innovative play concepts into district planning, strategy development, and capital projects previously unrelated to play to make Hamilton the most playable city in the country. Damien completed his PhD 'Making the jump: Examining the glocalisation of parkour in Aotearoa New Zealand' at the University of Waikato in 2019. He has been heavily involved in parkour since 2008 as a practitioner, coach, and administrator. He has been volunteering as the CEO for Parkour NZ – Tauhōkai Aotearoa since 2013 and played a key role in the formation of the international federation Parkour Earth, of which he also volunteers as the CEO.

**Belinda Wheaton** is Professor in the School of Health, University of Waikato, Aotearoa/New Zealand. She is a cultural sociologist, with research interests across leisure, sport and popular culture, and a focus on identity, inclusion and inequality. Belinda's extensive research on informal and lifestyle sport cultures, including parkour, includes a monograph (*The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sports*, Routledge 2013) and three edited collections. Her research on action sport and the Olympics over the past 10 years is the basis of *Action Sports and the Olympic Games: Past, Present, Future* (Wheaton and Thorpe, 2022). Belinda is Managing Editor of *Annals of Leisure Research*.

## ORCID

Damien Puddle  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7543-3220>

Belinda Wheaton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6465-3199>