

Attendee Questionnaire - Coach Europe 2019

[Ariella Abolaffio](#)

PREFACE:

I'm Ariella, a parkour practitioner and artist based in Edinburgh. During Coach Europe 2019 I gathered responses from Coaches and Community members/Students to a questionnaire that aimed to get a better understanding of what parkour classes can mean to their participants.

I collected 34 responses in total, analysed all the answers and drew conclusions based on the overarching themes that emerged. Below you can find a summary with some anonymous quotes from the participants. This was an informal questionnaire and I have included some personal thoughts, however the answers and summaries are gathered without bias and as objectively as possible.

Thank you all for taking part and I hope this will be an interesting read.

COACHES:

All coaches expressed how they hope to impact their students' approach to movement. Some of the recurring mentions include: safe practice, enjoyment, and gaining the confidence and skills that lead to more informed movement.

Parkour is a way of moving one's body, but as a practice it is inextricably dependent on the environment, both physical and social. Because of this, it also becomes a way of moving through life, our world, and through society. This transpires from some of the answers on what the coaches hoped to transmit:

*"A safe approach to parkour to get rid of the reckless image some people might have.
Basics: movements/techniques and safe application in various environments.
Creativity: inventing unique solutions for specific situations/tasks.
Independence/autonomy: learning how to use a 'tool-box' method."*

"Improve movement competency, social skills and performance capacity. Also, I see taking up and being in space (mainly cities) in a non-normative way as performative inherently and a protest against social contracts, limiting legislation and the seduction of capitalism/utility-based design."

*"For families: having a good time together through physical activities.
Young kids: Positive experiences related to physical activity. Enjoyment.
Older kids: Safe and healthy activities where they can feel welcome.
Adults: Improving their functional abilities and keeping them healthier for longer, providing them with mental and physical challenges."*

*"New and interesting ideas, safe ways of moving and challenging each individual.
Working towards their own values."*

Most of the focus however was not on the physical movement itself, but on how practice can have an important impact on one's lifestyle and mindset:

“My main goal with coaching is to make the students into better human beings and I find parkour to be one of the best tools for this, but it is a tool and my main goal isn’t necessarily always to make them better practitioners, even though it will almost always come in close second place.”

“My objective is to give the tools and the inspiration for empowerment and/or personal development.”

“I like the pass on the knowledge I have learned to my students, and give them a chance to have a different pathway/opportunity of life, than just a normal everyday one”

“Humility, strength (in all essence), self-improvement, persistence, Confidence, and being capable”

“The physical problems you experience act as a template for solving other, more complicated problems in your life”

“My hope is to pass on the values and the essence of what parkour has meant to me, and hopefully inspire and transform a few individuals’ way of life through Parkour, as parkour has done for me”

When asked about three main values that coaches hope to transmit, some recurring keywords were: creativity, resilience, determination, respect, play, freedom, humility, and self-improvement.

The most mentioned value was “be strong to be useful”, really showing what a huge focus there is on empathy, community and others.

“To help those in need, to always be as ready as possible and to not look at obstacles (physical or mental) as hindrances, but rather as challenges.”

“Support makes you feel better, no matter if you receive or give it. Knowing yourself helps growing up self-confidence and makes life easier”

“Think divergently to solve problems. Use your strength and abilities for doing good. Value friendship and support/help each other when needed.”

“Express yourself. In order to have a good life, we need to understand ourselves and understand others. Being honest with our feelings and overcoming our fears is an important step to start with. If we are able to share our feelings with others, we will build meaningful ties that will make us grow as persons.”

The next question asked the coaches what lessons they hoped would apply to the students’ daily lives. It was interesting to see how the coaches’ focus was not on success but on failure and adaptation. Perhaps the greatest success one can achieve is to accept and cope with failure and use it to one’s advantage, in the same way we can use a ‘difficult’ urban environment to create beauty of motion.

“That it’s okay to be uncompleted, unsuccessful or untalented at something. Approaching everyday problems by thinking, testing and practicing instead of just

quitting because it seems hard/impossible at first. Seeing their surroundings and body in new ways that have possibilities rather than obstacles or flaws.”

“Never say ‘I can’t’. It is clear that we can’t have everything we want in life, and we do not believe in “anything is possible”, but it is true that hard work combined with the right mindset leads to unexpected positive results. Our expectations have a strong role in our lives, we must be ready to challenge them, even if they come from our social groups.”

“Be strong. What is the meaning of strength? It’s not like you don’t get hurt or you don’t lose, it’s about improving with every challenge in life, in all senses. Finally, you’re really strong if you understand the power of helping and being helped.”

“You can’t control everything. Be ready for change, adaptation and mainly unpleasant situations. Face them, and eventually overcome them.”

When asked what coaches found most challenging the main points were the struggle to keep the students engaged (mostly for younger ones), to give individual students enough attention, and to make enough of a difference to help them succeed both in practice (breaking a challenge) and in life more generally.

“To give every student the individual attention that might be needed.”

“With the young ones: We have just a few hours a week to try to give so much to our students, and often, our teaching contradicts what they see and learn at home or in school. The result can be very limited and relies in the environment and personality of every student.”

“With adults: Some of them have no sports background and have had a sedentary life for years. This makes their physical and mental progress very slow. It takes time, and a lot of work to help these individuals to accomplish their goals.”

“Seeing myself unable to help a student make a breakthrough, seeing all my experience and assistance amount to nothing if I can’t get someone to succeed”

My personal advice to coaches is to practice what you preach and accept that you can’t always succeed, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t persist. Keep caring and learning how to be the best you can, because ultimately you do make a difference, as proven by the following answers on what makes your work rewarding:

“Seeing that the values that I’ve worked to instil in the students have started showing up as a habit, meaning that it’s that ingrained in their being that it now comes naturally.”

“When we see the changes in the students, both physical and psychological: Their attitude towards certain challenges or situations, the way they interact with others, the way they express themselves”

“Seeing people helping each other out to achieve a goal. And achieve that goal.”

“when the student breaks Their fear or discovers news skills”

"When students come to me after class and tell me how my coaching helped them grow personally."

"When students have moved into a place where they take agency upon themselves to improve and to challenge themselves. When the system functions without direct coach intervention"

"Not so much when people break a jump, but when they 'break' a movement/progression/personal challenge, or see how to apply complex concepts to their own training/movement "

"People overcoming their fears and prejudice about themselves. Having feedback from people that they have had an amazing time and have made new friends."

According to the feedback, coaching seems mostly to have a positive impact on the coaches, making them more insightful, well-rounded, and self-aware practitioners.

"My coaching experience, mainly in this last year, has pushed my training to a new level, getting deep in the understanding and reflection of my feelings, my mental barriers and physical limits. The work on frustration and fear it's been at the core. The progression to make scary or risky challenges comparing the results of specific skill training with general training has opened a new field for me."

"It has definitely increased my self-awareness in my own training which in most cases is positive. However, I feel that because I can coach at the level that I do I'll sometimes might skip things like a proper warm-up. This not due to of knowledge or even laziness, but because I spend so much time planning and thinking through my sessions I tend to just want to not think when I do my own trainings, and if I don't think I can easily miss important things."

"I realised I should explore more different movements instead of maxing out one in particular."

"In my practise I more and more focus on the mind, so I'd try to teach this awareness, too."

"I feel my coaching makes my personal practice smarter, better in structure and creates more insights because of better reflexive skills. My coaching is definitely based on my personal practice since it reflects various influences I've come across during my personal "research". In my classes I try to share what I found out through my personal practice."

"I find that my personal practice is split into two main areas. A physical grounding practice that keeps me connected with the very physical lessons of Parkour and a 'further down the way' side of Parkour, which challenges me to grow and challenge myself in my life. I find that my coaching exists as part of my more developed Parkour practice, challenging me to improve myself and others."

"My coaching experience helps motivates me in my training. I want to learn/improve things (partly) so I can share them with my students. However, at times, when I am

only coaching and not training, I have to almost 'relearn' how to train. My personal practice is a lot to do with trying to be a positive influence in the world - be helpful, responsible, respectful, collaborate with others - mixed with a love of gross challenges and 'seeing' space creatively and politically. These are all things I try to reflect in my coaching"

"In my personal practice I have to be more responsible to show a good example and being always physically able to coach when I'm needed. So I can't take so many risks or do things that might be morally questionable in the eyes of my participants or their families. When coaching I many times actually learn more about the movements since I try approaching them more in the perspective of another person. I like to practice with a lot of new and different people, so whenever I experience something new while training, there's a new possibility for my coaching"

Finally, here are some examples of memorable interactions with students:

"At one class of students aged between 9-12 there was one student who got injured. At this point we were quite far away from where we started and were going to be picked up by their parents. So after checking that the student in question was safe, the other students offered to carry him and his belongings all the way back. That's something that really put a smile on my face."

"Last year I ran an adults' class in which we had as a final challenge to cross the gym by the hand the whole group together. We had to overcome as many obstacles in the way as possible.

The challenge evolved by the will of the participants to go further. I was not leading anymore; the logic of the group was working with different leaderships and collective decision making. In the end, the group face the climbing of a big obstacle. I admit that I thought it wouldn't be possible for some students, so I advised them to change the idea. But they kept going. Finally, they managed to accomplish the climbing, nobody broke the chain, and every participant relied on the others to be pulled up to the top of the obstacle.

It wasn't just beautiful to see the collective success, but to know that group was stronger than ever. And still is today."

"While a "breaking jump" session I accompanied a student during his "mental battle". At the beginning he didn't think he could do it. It took at least 15min of my full attention talking him through the process and helping him overcoming his fears and doubts. In the end he did it and was very pleased with the process. "

"One of my favourite recent memories was during a rainy class as it combined a number of my favourite things. The weather wasn't quite as terrible as I wanted it to be, but I felt everyone in the class achieved more than they thought they would ('breaking movements'), everyone got to see rain as an interesting and rewarding challenge (not to be avoided), and everyone felt the joy of moving/being outside even when the weather is crappy"

"A group of elderly pensioners that I was delivering an intro class to parkour. Majority of them said in the beginning that "they are here just to see because they can't do anything". I said that it's completely fine. If they feel like joining at some point, they are very welcome. Throughout the class everyone joined and overcame physical and

mental barriers, and being actually amazed of the things they were capable. The 70-year olds did things they hadn't done in 40 years or ever before and what they wouldn't have dare to even dream. All this with zero injuries to their fragile (at least in their opinion) bodies. They had so much fun and were very positively surprised. My favourite class of the year"

COMMUNITY:

The sample of respondents was mostly from the Edinburgh parkour community (with a few exceptions). The practitioners ranged widely in age, gender, experience of practice, and class attendance frequency.

However, most of the responses were surprisingly similar. There were two main overarching themes throughout the questionnaire; the first being what an important role the coaches play not only in helping with breakdown of movements, but with building self-confidence and breaking down barriers, both mental and physical.

The other theme was the unanimous importance placed on the other class participants and community spirit.

Here are some answers to the question on what students found most helpful in class:

"Probably having a group of folk thinking quite carefully about movement - it's hard to take that kind of care on your own"

"Being able to focus on specific techniques and ask questions; having a knowledgeable person who is there to help us improve"

"The demonstrations and enough time spent practicing to see the improvement, and for the coaches to give detailed advice in personal movement."

"The team spirit, motivation and social aspect. Occasionally also the competitive aspect. "

"Coaches breaking down movements. Moral support. Building confidence"

"I love the community feel of the classes as it draws you into the other people with the same interests. I also love the guidance, direction and varied approach to practicing, learning and progressing that each coach provides."

"Encouragement from the coach. Being able to correct bad form. Motivating factor to actually get out and train."

"Being given direction and feedback and always working on a variety of things so that growth is quite homogenous between the various aspects of practice.

Being pushed out of my comfort zone.

Having a steady point in life: no matter how bad I feel I can turn up to class and for a couple of hours I feel like I can breathe again."

"Forcing me to complete challenges I wouldn't do without class, and finding new challenges outside of class."

“The coaches find ways to playfully: strengthen; build confidence; challenge; encourage; and inspire everyone in the class. If you have come to class to want to try your best, they will adapt Parkour training and techniques, so you get a gain, you learn how and why moves are done in a certain way to avoid injury build strength etc... They encourage creativity and playfulness. You feel part of the community straight away.”

When asked what the three main takeaways from parkour classes were, there was an overall balance between the mental lessons and progressions and the understanding of physical movement:

“That I can achieve more than I expect. That other people believe in me. That I can trust others to support me. That practice leads to definite improvement”

“Community, Belief in myself, Joy in Playfulness”

*“To challenge oneself, even if just incrementally small.
To communicate, help others and share insight.
To listen and continuously learn as there is always something new to experience.”*

*“1. What discipline looks like in the context of parkour training, and what hard work can do
2. How to engage with fear and find your courage to continue pushing your boundaries and comfort zone
3. How to break down techniques and movements into steps. I use this in my solo training too, and it has drastically changed my practice — I can approach new movements without relying on a coach, because I understand how to break the desired movement or technique down into manageable steps. “*

“Self-confidence, not to compare myself to others, and not to be so scared.”

*“-to communicate better with my body
- push through the fear voice when you know it’s not true
-to be there for others and with others, you want to be better only compared to yourself, everyone else is to be appreciated and supported.”*

“Incremental improvement, physical problem solving, confidence in motion”

“Start together, finish together, 5 second commitment rule, how to use basic looking spaces for many things”

*“1. Progression is more important than perfection.
2. There is always something you can do.
3. There is no shame in failing.”*

When asked what the most challenging aspect of class was, the majority of respondents expressed fear and self-doubt as the two major elements. Some also mentioned the challenging aspects of group training and how the energy of a class is so dependant on other class participants. Although this is mostly a positive impact it can have a negative effect sometimes and it is thus important for coaches to be aware of these dynamics.

“Judging the limits of safety”

“Overcoming fear, self-doubt, lack of confidence”

“New and scary challenges and battling the belief that ‘I cannot.’”

“Height work, also believing that I can do stuff”

“Not to compare myself to others, to work through a fear if there are distractions (other people, time constraints, etc)”

“Not being able to complete a set challenge”

“Not listening to my fears of what might happen if I make a mistake and get injured. Believing in myself, my strength and my body”

The community members then expressed how rewarding it can be to overcome the voice in one’s head telling them that they can’t do something, proving themselves wrong for the better. The participants seemed to value group challenges and being supportive of other class members just as highly as their own individual achievements.

“Achieving things in a group and development of a group feeling.”

“When we all rise together collectively; seeing someone else break a jump or nail a technique is inspiring and motivating. There is a lot of energy in training with a group of people and syncing up with it is a rewarding experience. It also exposes you to other training styles and responses to the movement which can be useful when considering your own process. It gives you perspective to be around other people”

“Internalising and managing to perform a movement that was unknown before”

“Achieving something I didn’t know I could do. Supporting others in their achievements”

“Working together to complete a challenge”

“One person succeeding or overcoming a fear/barrier is a win for the whole group!”

“Taking the steps to overcome those challenges, and occasionally achieving new and exciting limits.”

“That feeling when you’ve been feeling rubbish and not wanting to leave the house but you go out and train and life is just better. Also nailing something that I didn’t think I could do.”

“To do something I didn’t know I could do, or to watch someone else break a challenge. To keep positive and supportive even though I’m not able to do something. To complete a conditioning challenge and return to it to be there for someone else”

“I Benefit from being playful, getting strong, socialising and connecting with my family, friends and the Edinburgh Parkour community through training”

The students were asked what they felt they could get from classes that they wouldn't get otherwise; the responses were quite varied:

"I wouldn't overcome fear as much on my own"

"Certain mental challenges I can't get past unless someone tells me 'you can do this' "
"Forcing me to do something I haven't done before."

"A consistent group to practice with; advice about movement and about how I and my muscles work physically"

"Guidance, technical movement support - breaking movements down. The benefit of others' experiences. Knowledge of spots. A sense of safety."

"Learning some of the specific technical skills to grow to achieve more."

"Community. Feedback. Support. Direction. Being forced to do things I wouldn't do on my own or wouldn't think of and loving them. Safe space. Communal growth. "

"Being part of a community."

"The Edinburgh Parkour Community is so supportive and interesting. Class members encourage each other, share their experience of training or tips for how they broke moves and fears. The coaches nurture a cooperative style of training. Not competitive just working together so everyone gets a gain, progress, level up etc..."

"Having the creativity to see new challenges."

"Inspiration, mockery(motivation), guidance on how to improve."

"Self-exploration"

One question that had unanimously positive and strong responses was what effect other community members had on classes and their training. As mentioned before sometimes it can affect a participant negatively, but overall community is a huge and positive part of class experience:

"Very positively! The community is the heart of parkour. We carry each other, learn from each other and offer a judgement-free space - that is really rare. Plus hugs."

"Definitely! The community is a positive and supportive group of people. The energy and direction of the group can help (or on occasion hinder) a working session. It is always and interesting outcome"

"They are encouraging and enthusiastic, and the sense of being part of a club makes it easier to be regular"

"I'm not very creative, so my classmates and fellow community members help me think "outside the box" with different ideas. "

"yes, (...) being around other peoples' commitment to movement etc. Also, they're just nice folk"

"If I'm struggling with self-confidence and mental barriers it can be hard being around people with high energy and physical fitness but low experience. 99% of the time though it's really, really positive. There is a wonderful sense of community and we cheer and push each other forwards, often the other students are just as helpful or valuable as the coach."

"Absolutely, the people are often what make a hobby long term viable."

"Yes, positively. Inspiration and also cheering on."

"I think that sometimes I am struggling to find my own "space". Sometimes I look more at what other do than at what I can do."

"Yes! Part of the reason I come to class is for the community – it impacts really positively on my mental health. I also push myself more, whilst feeling supported"

Perhaps unsurprisingly from the previous responses, when asked to describe their community the students were really positive and appreciative:

"The Edinburgh community is one of the most welcoming and tight-knit communities I have ever experienced. There is so much support and encouragement, a great sense of playfulness while still being focused largely on progression and challenge. I love this community."

"My parkour community is centred around outdoor lessons in Edinburgh, and it includes a big range of ages, abilities, and consistency of practice; but it is always enthusiastic about the practice and easy to be with."

"Awesome, inclusive, creative, non-judgemental, supportive, dynamic"

"The community is an amorphous group of varied, dynamic and generally crazy people who come together to spend time in each other's company, learning, challenging and enjoying the time together being healthy and active."

*"My parkour community is the best. Some of the friendliest and most welcoming people I've ever met and always a pleasure to train/hang out with!
We had a class where we were all given a height challenge. Very straightforward in difficulty but more challenging mentally. One person was left that hadn't done the challenge, and instead of moving on everyone came together to help them through it. It took some time but the person did it, so I felt we all succeeded."*

"Incredibly diverse. Everyone is welcoming and a pleasure to be around, from middle aged men to teenagers. I have never had such a diverse environment of people around and it's beautiful, you really grow to love so many people. It feels like an extended family."

"It's become family"

CONCLUSION:

I hope this was an interesting read, perhaps you already knew all the things that transpired from these answers but hopefully it was enriching to hear them and see how many values are shared by different practitioners.

For the coaches, I hope it was useful to be reminded of how much of an impact you have, not only in practical terms but also on the self-confidence and self-improvement of your students and also what an important role you can have in helping to develop a community.

For the students, I hope you appreciate how much the coaches care to see you succeed and become better versions of yourselves, and that your success is not dependant on your physical ability but on your determination and will to improve. I hope you can also see what an impact you have on your fellow students, use it wisely.

For me personally it was beautiful to read all your answers, I found your passion and care incredibly inspiring, and it made me proud to be part of this practice and community.

I believe that the beauty of parkour is that it is not just movement but it's a life discipline. Every aspect of it can be applied to other areas of life, it's a physical expression of what one can aspire for their life to be: be strong and useful and confident. Seek challenges that bring growth. Be free, and open-minded, and playful. Be supportive for others. Move gracefully and purposefully through all situations. Take whatever life gives you and use it, obstacles are just challenges and facing challenges is what makes you stronger.

Keep practicing, keep trying, keep facing and overcoming your fears and your barriers, keep supporting each other, in your own communities and the International landscape.