



# FLIPPING OUT

## Murrysville's Steel City Parkour teaches the art of movement.

By Jennifer Brozak

**A** young boy perches precariously atop a tower of large foam blocks. Seconds later, he launches himself backward and flips through the air, landing softly into a pit of foam cubes. As he climbs out of the pit, a group of young men cheer on the little boy, encouraging him to try it again.

This is not your average kids gymnastics class! This is Steel City Parkour, the area's only gym dedicated to the art of parkour, acrobatics and obstacle course training.

Parkour, which means "the path" in French, is the art of moving quickly from Point A to Point B using acrobatics, jumps and climbing. The movement is massive in Europe and on the West Coast, and has seen steady interest in Pittsburgh over the past few years, says Steve DiGirolamo, Steel City Parkour's owner.

Business at the gym is flourishing, partly because many of the competitors on the popular TV show "American Ninja Warrior" are also parkour athletes.

"Although they require very different skills, parkour and Ninja Warrior tend to go hand-in-hand," says DiGirolamo. "We're drawing a lot of people because of the interest in that show, especially since they filmed in Pittsburgh last season."

The gym's state-of-the-art equipment includes a trampoline wall, a foam pit, a roof gap simulator and a replica of one of the "American Ninja Warrior's" most challenging obstacles: the "warped wall," which extends 14 feet straight up before curving backward.



DiGirolamo, 24, has been a parkour athlete for about seven years. While studying business in college, he found a gym that offered a parkour class. Soon, he began coaching. He then spent a week at the first-ever Parkour Week at Camp Woodward in State College, where he worked with multiple professional parkour athletes, further cementing his passion for the sport.

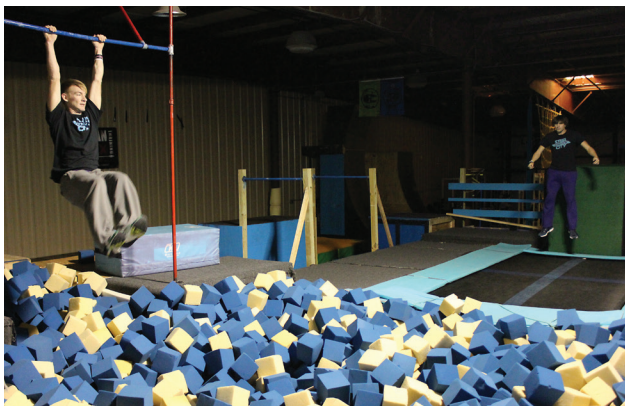
He opened the gym about a year ago after what he calls a series of "fortunate events."

In August of 2014, he heard that the former Murrysville gymnastics studio Flip City Gymnastics was going out of business. At first, the previous owner was interested in forming a partnership with DiGirolamo, but when she couldn't find a head coach, she decided to quit the business entirely.

"I always knew that I wanted to open a gym, and just by luck everything fell into place," he says. "It was the bargain of a lifetime – I was in the right place at the right time, for sure."

The parkour scene in Pittsburgh is tiny compared to that of New York City, Washington, D.C., or California, so DiGirolamo was at once anxious and excited about launching his own business. When he first opened in November of 2014, he only had about 30 students and a few of those, he says, were "leftovers" from the gymnastics studio.

"There were a few moments at first there that were tense and scary," he says. "Business didn't start to really pick up until January."



He needn't have worried. Steel City Parkour now has about 300 clients who come in for classes or to use the open gym. The majority are between 10 and 30 years old – and some are even older. People flock to the gym, he says, because of its “no competition, no pressure” approach.

“It’s completely the opposite of a gymnastics program. No one is judging you, and you’re not competing. You learn what you can do, and then you learn to push yourself to do more. If your form isn’t perfect, that’s OK. It’s about having fun,” he says.

Students are divided into programs based not just on age, but also on skill level. The beginner class is for 5- to 7-year-olds, but skilled children can quickly progress into a more advanced group. The youth program is for 8- to 12-year-olds, and there are also programs for teens and adults.

DiGirolamo and his instructors focus on teaching “body awareness” so that students know how to run, climb and jump properly and land safely. They train on soft foam blocks and trampolines before progressing to more advanced acrobatic skills.

“Parkour gives you the confidence to take on challenges and still land on your feet. It’s the same philosophy in life, and these are skills that you can use throughout your lifetime,” he explains.

Steel City Parkour is located at 2080 Borland Farm Road in Export. For more information, visit [steelcityparkour.com](http://steelcityparkour.com) or call 724.799.1038. ■



## Pint-Size Prodigy: Six-Year-Old Has Skills to Turn Pro

When Liam Bernadowski first set foot in Steel City Parkour, he and his parents weren't sure what to expect.

The six-year-old had become fixated with parkour videos on YouTube, and had begun to use the family couch as a practice surface. This, his mom says, “drove us insane.”

“We tried to appease him with a trampoline in the backyard,” Carianne Bernadowski says. “He began playing around in the yard trying out different tricks. Before we knew it, he had an audience at the baseball field, basketball court or anywhere there was a place to practice.”

Liam, a kindergartener at Sloan Elementary School, wanted to train at a parkour gym, but his parents told him one didn't exist. They enrolled him in a traditional gymnastics class, but quit immediately after a coach told him he couldn't do a flip off the trampoline because of his age. He was five at the time.

That's when they found out about Steel City Parkour.

“A friend of ours heard a parkour gym opened in Export, so we called immediately,” says Bernadowski.

Within one session, DiGirolamo told the Bernadowskis that Liam was ready for a more advanced class. They said that having DiGirolamo be so open to allowing Liam to learn at his pace is tremendously helpful.

“I think this provides Liam with independence and discipline,” explains Bernadowski. “Steve is very open to teaching the kids, despite their age, the skills they are developmentally ready to try. Liam took to parkour easily and advanced pretty quickly, and Steve recognized that and nurtured it.”

Liam, who is one of the gym's youngest students, says he started practicing parkour because “it looked cool to do.” He loves to jump on walls and practice flips, and his favorite skills are the double back and kong gainer, in which he uses a vault to propel himself into a flip.

“The hardest thing about parkour is probably the warped wall,” says Liam.

His progress continues to surpass expectations, and he's been invited to attend “jams” as a special guest with professional parkour athletes. He also has his own Facebook page, “Parkour by Liam,” where his parents post videos to highlight his skills.

“We joke that he can't tie his shoes, but can do a round-off back flip with his eyes closed!” his mom says. “Once we saw how limber he was, we were not surprised at how quickly he learned new tricks. He practices at home and at the gym countless times until a new trick is mastered. He has developed rapidly under Steve's supervision.”

DiGirolamo has been impressed with Liam's extraordinary abilities and sees potential for him to pursue professional opportunities doing stunts for movies or commercials.

“When he first came to class, he was more advanced than some of our most advanced kids,” he says. “I've never seen anything like him, and I've searched. He can do what adults can't even do. He's going to be a pro in the sport, for sure.”

