

On The Edge

EXTREME SPORTS



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Heat and Dust

Running in desert conditions is as tough as it gets. Yet athletes in the 'Marathon of the Sands' run 233 kilometres over six days across the Sahara. Loaded like packhorses, they carry everything they need in a rucksack weighing around 11 kilograms – and all in a 50°C heat!



'I love nature and I love the desert... that's why I'm back!'

In 1994, Italian policeman Mauro Prosperi (*right*) entered the desert marathon known as 'the toughest foot race on Earth'. Though he was an experienced athlete, this was his first competition in the desert. By the third day, he was in seventh place and going well.

At the 32-kilometre mark, he reached the checkpoint where runners were given water, and set off again. Then the wind started to blow. For six hours, a fierce sandstorm swept across the desert. Soon Mauro was lost. He kept running, but further and further in the wrong direction.

Going bats

Mauro decided to wait for help. A helicopter buzzed over his head, but no one saw him. To stay alive, he rested in the shade of cliffs during the day. On cold nights, he buried his body in the sand. He drank his own urine and ate bats, snakes and lizards – raw!

◀ *In the gruelling third stage of the 2007 Marathon of the Sands, contestants face midday temperatures of up to 120°C. Roughly three-quarters of the distance is over rough, stony ground like this; the rest is over sand dunes.*



After nine days in the desert, Mauro was found by shepherds. The local police thought he was a spy and took him to the town of Algiers. He was 300 kilometres off-route, and had lost over 14 kilograms in weight. But he was still alive.

Hero's welcome

Mauro Prosperi became a hero back in Italy and was nicknamed the 'Robinson Crusoe of the Sahara'. Though it took him a year to recover, he was soon back for more. In his own words: 'It was a terrible experience and yet it was a great one. I love nature and I love the desert; I could not stay apart from it too long; that's why I'm back.'

'ULTRA MARATHONS'

Ultra marathons are races that are more than 50 kilometres long. In Antarctica, a 100-kilometre ultra marathon is held where temperatures drop to -20°C. 'Adventure marathons' combine running with whitewater canoeing, mountain climbing, skiing and even caving.

Urban Tumble

A person in a white t-shirt with blue graphics and grey sweatpants is captured mid-air, performing a parkour move. They are upside down, with one leg extended towards a dark building and their hand reaching towards a red brick building. The background shows a cityscape with various buildings under a blue sky with light clouds.

▶ In Parkour, speed and agility are everything. It's down the fire escape, over the nearest wall and off to the next obstacle... fast!

Technically, Parkour is the art of getting from one place to another in a straight line – whatever obstacle gets in your way. Skilled exponents turn the city streets into a crazy playground, leaping walls, balancing cat-like on ledges and performing death-defying rooftop leaps...

'Parkour can be spectacular, but it isn't about showing off...'



The man who dreamed up the spectacular sport of Parkour was Frenchman David Belle. David's father Raymond served in the fire service in Paris, France. A born athlete, Raymond was an expert rope-climber and joined an elite team of fire-fighters who were always selected for the toughest missions.

Inspired by his father's heroic rescues, David always loved athletics, gymnastics and martial arts.

Later, he joined the army and, like his father, became a champion rope-climber. But the strict army life was not for David.

The Yamakasi

In 1997, David formed a group called Yamakasi with a group of old friends dedicated to Parkour. The area of Paris they lived in, Lisses, was a perfect playground to learn moves and try out jumps. They also adapted rolls from martial arts that helped them land safely.

Martial art

Parkour can be spectacular. But it isn't about showing off. Like David, you need the balance and strength of a gymnast, the agility of a cat and the self-control of a martial arts expert. You imagine someone is chasing you, then you move in a way that gets you at top speed from A to B. Easy to understand – harder to perform!

FIGHTING FIT

Parkour became famous after a member of the original Yamakasi group, Sébastien Foucan, performed a series of amazing stunts in the opening scene of the James Bond movie *Casino Royale*. After hearing about it, military units such as the British Royal Marines were soon clamouring to use Parkour in their training.

Big River Man

More than 800 people have swum the English Channel, but few swimmers can match the remarkable achievements of 'Big River Man' Martin Strel. In April 2007, the 53-year-old from Slovenia swam 5,268 kilometres down the Amazon River in just 66 days!

▼ *Swimming the Amazon River is like running a marathon every day for two months – with the added attraction of insects, piranha fish and crocodiles. It took Martin more than a year and a half to train for the swim – and seven months to recover. His motto is 'swimming for peace, friendship and clean waters'.*

MARTIN STREL, RECORD-BREAKER

- 1997 *First to swim Africa to Europe, covering 78 kilometres in less than 30 hours.*
- 2000 *Swam the Danube, covering 3,004 kilometres in 58 days.*
- 2002 *Swam the Mississippi River, USA, a distance of 3,797 kilometres, in 68 days.*
- 2004 *Broke his own long-distance record, swimming 4,003 kilometres down the Yangtze River, China, in 51 days.*

'They had buckets of flesh and blood at the ready to distract the piranhas...'

Martin Strel taught himself to swim when he was six and became a professional marathon swimmer in 1978. He has made record-breaking swims along some of the world's most famous rivers, but swimming the Amazon River was his biggest challenge ever.

How do you prepare for a swim?

'I train two times a day for three to five hours. During the swim itself, I eat lots of soup and pasta and drink at least 10 litres of fluid a day.'

Why was the Amazon so difficult?

'The water is muddy and you can't see anything.'

Bugs and scorpions

Setting off from jungle deep in Peru, Martin swam across Brazil to Bélem on the Atlantic coast. He wore a pillowcase mask to shield his face from the fierce sun and a wetsuit to protect him from animal bites.

He needed it. Spiders and scorpions dropped on to him from overhanging trees. Larvae burrowed under his skin. Wasp stings made his head buzz, and birds flew down to peck his face.

Sharks and piranhas

Martin swam the final 10 kilometres to Bélem in the dark. Despite the risk that lights on the safety boat would attract sharks, he made it safely to dry land.

How did you stay alive?

'On the boat alongside me I had two armed guards in case pirates attacked. They had buckets of flesh and blood ready to throw in the water to distract the piranhas. I knew I had to swim 12 hours a day and cover 80 kilometres. So I would talk to myself. I had to be stronger than the Amazon.'

▼ *Deadly flesh-eating piranha fish were just one of the hazards Martin faced during his epic swim down the Amazon River.*



In at The Deep End

Many people have experienced the thrill of diving down below the waves, but very few have reached depths of 120 metres or more – without oxygen!

▶ In competitive freediving, the aim is to reach the greatest possible depth, time or distance, without the use of breathing equipment. It can be very risky. In deep water there's a huge pressure on your lungs and a very real danger of losing consciousness on the way up.

'Monofin' helps propel the diver through the water.

Undulating movement known as the 'dolphin kick' starts in the shoulders and ripples down the body.

Swimmer extends arms forward, clasping hands together and locking the head between the biceps.

'On the seabed the water is dark and very lonely. It's a scary place...'

In 2003, Tanya Streeter, the champion British free-diver (right), took a deep breath and plunged 121 metres into the deep, using only a giant monofin flipper. Three minutes 38 seconds later, she burst back onto the surface.



On the seabed, the water is dark and very lonely. It's a scary place. Tanya explained how important it is to stay calm and alert: 'I know that I have to touch down and head back up again immediately.'

Though Tanya had enjoyed snorkelling since she was young, she only began freediving six years before. For a record attempt, she trains for three months. She does weights while holding her breath, and swims underwater laps in a pool.

Tanya was very aware of the risks of diving so deep. A few months before, her arch-rival Audrey Mestre died while trying to set a new record. When Tanya broke the world record, there were 14 safety divers close by. Tanya explained: 'I'm a chicken and I simply wouldn't do it if I thought it was dangerous.'

▼ *Freediver Jaques Mayol (1927–2001) was the first to descend to 100 metres and was the holder of many other world freediving records.*

THE HUMAN DOLPHIN

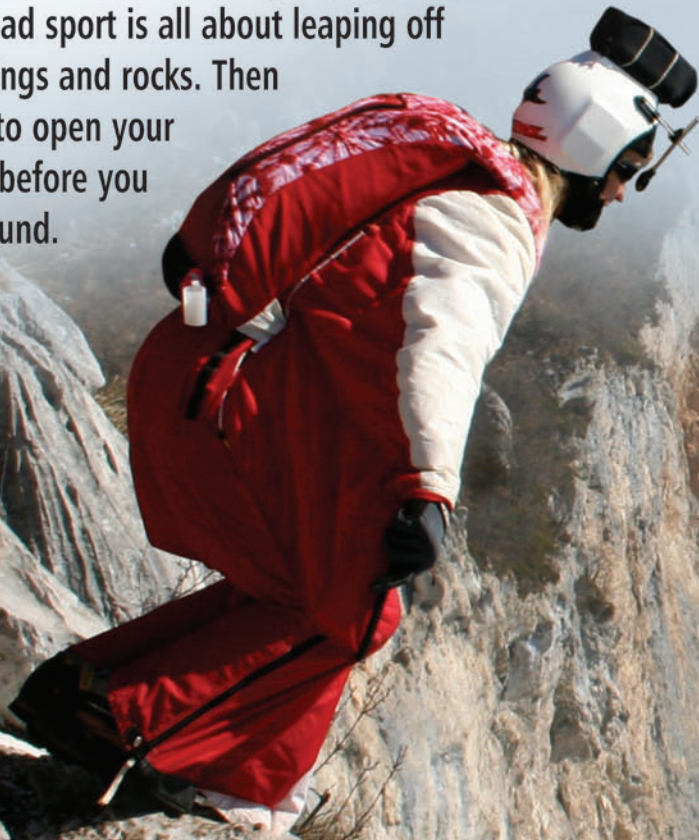
Frenchman Jacques Mayol (right) was one of the great pioneers of freediving. While working in an aquarium in Florida in 1955, he met a female dolphin called 'Clown'. Imitating Clown, Mayol learned how to hold his breath and slow his heartbeat, just like a dolphin or seal.



Free Fall

Most extreme sports are risky. Some are so dangerous, they're against the law. BASE jumping is top of the list. This mad sport is all about leaping off high buildings and rocks. Then it's a race to open your parachute before you hit the ground.

▼ Wearing specially adapted bodywear called wingsuits, husband and wife BASE jumpers Heather Swan and Glenn Singleman launch themselves from the summit of Mt Brento in northern Italy.



'... then there's the danger of plummeting next to a jagged cliff face'

At 47, Heather Swan is no ordinary Australian mother. A world record-holding BASE jumper, she's also the other half of the only husband-and-wife BASE jumping team on the planet!

Upside down

Heather's world was turned upside down in 1998 when she married adventure-loving Glenn Singleman, 51. Glenn lived a double life, working as a hospital doctor during the week and throwing himself into extreme sports in his spare time.

At first, Heather stayed at home with the children and bit her nails while Glen went skydiving over the Australian outback. Then she decided it was time to join him.

Before long, Heather was completely hooked on her new life as a daredevil. Six years after her first skydive, she began BASE jumping.

World record

In 2006, the couple set a new world record for the highest-ever BASE jump, leaping off the 4,566 metre-high peak of Mt Meru in Tanzania in specially designed wingsuits.

Now the couple are planning to become a daredevil family. Heather and Glen's four children are all expecting to make their first skydive when they reach their 14th birthday!

CONQUERING FEAR

'It took me a long time to conquer my natural fear of throwing myself off mountains, but somehow BASE jumping seemed more real and more dangerous than a skydive. Plus you've the added danger of plummeting next to a jagged cliff face.'

Heather Swan