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Ninjas by Nature

American Ninja Warrior brings sudden fame to previously unknown parkour athletes and freerunners who are only in it for the love of the sport.

By Chris Cooper

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All images: Chris Cooper/CrossFit Journal

The challenge is offered 10,000 times every day: "Watch me. I can do it. Can you?"

The universal language of children is spoken the world over. Every kid has performed a "tightrope walk" on a curb at the grocery store, and many adults can recall youthful days of climbing a chain-link fence, swinging a leg over, dropping to the ground.

What if that was your job?

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The television show *American Ninja Warrior* has bridged the gap between simple street tricks and sport. It has promised—and delivered—a measured degree of mainstream fame for popular YouTube antiheroes such as David “Flip” Rodriguez and Drew Drechsler. Hopeful contestants now train year round, building their own obstacles in garages and backyards, climbing gyms, and CrossFit boxes. Kids recognize them on the street and buy clothing on their websites.

And it could all go away tomorrow if the show becomes unpopular.

“The No. 1 rule of being a ninja: make it look cool,” Brandon Mears told a starry-eyed young pupil at a workshop in Columbus, Ohio.

If it doesn’t look cool, no one will watch.

Made famous by a sport invented for television, the top American competitors risk their asses without promise of a paycheck. None are paid to be on the show. There’s no

multi-season contract, no sponsorship, no quarter given or asked. Their only link to fame is through television; without the show, there is no sport.

What becomes of a ninja without a cause?

Sasuke and Its Spinoff

American Ninja Warrior is the U.S. spinoff of long-running Japanese game show *Sasuke*, in which contestants race along a four-stage obstacle course called Mt. Midoriyama. Each stage becomes progressively harder; the course is so difficult the winner is the athlete who survives the most challenges, not the fastest to finish.

An American has never stood at the top of Mt. Midoriyama. Since 1997, only three competitors have completed the course. One, Yuuji Urushihara, has completed it twice. “Total victories,” as they are called, generally result in modifications to the course to make it more challenging. According to [Sasukecentral.net](http://sasukecentral.net), prize money used to be about US\$20,000 for victory but was increased in 2007 and is now around \$40,000.



Forced to adapt, ninjas recreate elements of Mt. Midoriyama wherever they can, and online blueprints make the process easier.

In 2007, Americans Colin Bell and Brett Sims made their *Sasuke* debut after qualifying on the G4 Network's *Attack of the Show* competition. They had submitted YouTube videos of their freerunning (parkour) tricks, and G4's audience selected them through an online vote. When the competition proved popular, G4 replayed highlights of the Americans' performances in Japan on an hour-long special called *Ninjafest*.

By 2009, G4 had expanded its broadcast. The renamed *American Ninja Warrior* put 300 eager ninjas-to-be through an obstacle course that resembled *Sasuke's* Stage 1; the 10 fastest qualified for Mt. Midoriyama in Japan. None of the Americans finished Stage 3.

Three years later, as interest and the volume of competitor applications soared, G4 (which had been acquired by NBC) began to air regional qualifiers for its main event: a competition featuring a full-scale copy of Mt. Midoriyama in Las Vegas, Nev. The fastest to finish the course would win cash and the title American Ninja Warrior. Prize money shot up



Many Ninja Warrior obstacles demand a combination of gymnastics ability and climbing skills. Upper-body strength is key, as is agility.

to \$500,000 in 2012, and though the top 100 competitors from its regional qualifiers get to attempt the final course, none have yet finished to claim the prize. Once again, Stage 3 eliminated every competitor who reached it.

For *Ninja Warrior* contestants, the challenge of climbing to the top of their sport far exceeds the reward.

The challenge of climbing to the top of their sport far exceeds the reward. No one has finished the Mt. Midoriyama course in Vegas, which means the prize remains unclaimed. If two contestants finish in 2014, the fastest will win half a million dollars; second place won't win anything.

Season 6 will air starting May 26, 2014.

A Family That Bleeds Together

A ninja training workshop feels a lot like a meeting of CrossFit athletes circa 2005: homemade T-shirts, top athletes sleeping overnight in the gym, a private language that's unfamiliar to outsiders. They collaborate to make their challenges harder, share solutions, experiment with new tricks and tape each other's wounds.

Michelle Warnky, a *Ninja Warrior* competitor in 2012, hosted a workshop in Columbus, Ohio, on Feb. 17, 2014. Top competitors from across the country assembled at Vertical Adventures, the rock-climbing gym where Warnky is a personal trainer. Warnky has a deal with the owners of Vertical Adventures to build and store various ninja obstacles. Upon arrival, the visiting ninjas began to drag a jigsaw puzzle of two-by-fours, steel bars and bolts from a storage bin into the gym. By midnight, they had set up a "warped wall," a "salmon ladder" and several other obstacles between the climbing walls. Then they played before crashing for the night.

Video: [Salmon Ladder Tutorial With Drew Drechsel](#), by Mike Koslap

Obstacles vary widely between gyms and backyards. Many are rough copies of the apparatus on Mt. Midoriyama, built close to scale. Sometimes they're built higher or wider. Warnky's warped wall—one side of a halfpipe, on which athletes sprint upward before leaping to grab the lip at the top—is 15 feet tall; she speaks with reverence of a friend's 17-foot wall. Other obstacles look as if they came from sketches in Leonardo Da Vinci's notebook: large wheels made of wood, boards dangling from ropes, wedge-shaped boxes tied together at the base. None makes obvious sense on its own, but when a ninja kid sets his grip and swings from one obstacle to the other, the thought behind the construction is obvious.

Ninja Warrior enthusiasts find [blueprints and samples online](#), grab a drill, and knock together their rigs. Like many early CrossFit affiliates, they scour the Internet for discussion on the ideal pipe diameter for pull-ups. When someone, like Warnky, has amassed a collection of homemade toys, athletes are drawn from afar.

Despite the pressure to be first to finish the Mt. Midoriyama course, competitors are only too happy to help others overcome obstacles.

In 2011, the four ninjas to reach Stage 4 in Japan all failed at the "ultimate cliffhanger" event: a fingertip shuffle along a narrow board, then a fingertip leap to a higher board, and another leap of faith down to a short, narrow board. At the Columbus workshop, several ninjas leaped onto the cliffhanger mockup and progressed through with ease—backward and forward. Veterans have shared their strategies with rookies, and the community has become better at the obstacle as a result.

"Experience is a huge aspect of *Ninja Warrior*. You could be one of the fittest athletes, but if you don't know the obstacle well, you'll fall off," Warnky said.

Ninjas who bow out earlier in the course cheer loudly for those who continue, knowing the lessons learned will be passed down to them. It's trickle-down experience, and it's



The salmon ladder is completed by using a sort of kipping pull-up to elevate the athlete and allow him or her to quickly move the bar up a rung.

the only help they'll get: a hand up from the guy who's climbed a little higher.

Most *Ninja Warrior* enthusiasts don't make a dime from their sport. They deliver pizzas, wash cars or do any other job that will allow the flexibility to train. A very few work at small gyms as coaches.

To cover their travel to Ohio, ninjas taught a kids class in the morning and an adult class in the afternoon, and they staged a "competition" on the final evening. They trained as they coached, demonstrating methods for overcoming popular obstacles. Attendees were treated to tiny coach-to-athlete ratios. Kids and parents had full access to the athletes at the top of their favorite sport, and the *Ninja Warrior* competitors didn't have a moment's rest. Between sessions, many quickly hopped onto an obstacle to practice; over the course of the 12-hour day, they performed dozens of short challenges each, with most lasting 30 seconds or less. It looked like play, but make no mistake: it was training, and it took its toll.

One of the athletes at Warnky's event was Paul Kasemir, who failed on the cliffhanger obstacle in *American Ninja Warrior 3* (2011). Kasemir describes the "community feel" of



An athlete practices on a contraption designed to replicate the challenges of the "rolling escargot" obstacle on Mt. Midoriyama.

Ninja Warrior as the best part of the sport. He trains at Apex Movement in Longmont, Colo. When he talks about his gym, he could easily be speaking of a CrossFit box:

"The community is really strong. A lot of the people who take the classes with me, they feel like a family. They're always at the gym, always having fun together, several even live together," he said.

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"I have fun doing it, and that's why I'm really good at it. I can always get better at it. There's no upper limit. You can always get closer to the impossible," he said.

He also does Argentine tango dancing once or twice every week.

Outside of *Ninja Warrior* competition, Kasemir only sees other top-level competitors once or twice per year. He hopes for more special events like the 2013 USA vs. Japan team challenge in which he competed last summer.

Possibly the most recognizable ninja is oddly the man with the obscured face: David "Flip" Rodriguez, who wears a black-and-white mask when he competes. Kids dress up as Flip for Halloween, and their parents write him letters, thanking him for the inspiration. While in Ohio, Rodriguez made a first-time revelation about his troubled past and said he had been physically abused by his father.

Video: [The Man Behind the Mask](#), by Mike Koslap

He credits the abuse with making him stronger.

"If I had to do my whole life again, I wouldn't change it. I'd go through it all again to become who I am now," he said in February.

Kasemir and Rodriguez both hope to finish Stage 3 and Stage 4 in 2014.



Some obstacles, such as the “jump hang” from trampoline to cargo net, require a literal leap of faith.

An Easy Transition

Rex Alba came to *Ninja Warrior* after he found CrossFit. He lost 20 lb. training at Ohio Krav Maga and Fitness (a CrossFit affiliate), and he believes his workouts help with his *Ninja Warrior* training, and vice versa.

“I’ve never been athletic,” he said. “They’re very complementary.”

Alba continues to use CrossFit to train and hopes to qualify for a *Ninja Warrior* event this year or next.

Popular CrossFit Games athletes are also attempting to make the show. [Kenneth Leverich](#), who finished 28th at the CrossFit Games in 2013, submitted his [video application](#) on Feb. 18, 2014. Other CrossFit athletes are testing their transition potential and posting their application videos on YouTube daily.

Qualification for the Vegas championship course begins with the submission of a video. One hundred athletes are chosen for each regional event from among the applicants.

Most freerunners and *Ninja Warrior* enthusiasts train on homemade equipment in parks or backyards. Where gyms exist, they look a lot like CrossFit boxes.

Jamie Rahn is co-owner of one such gym: Pinnacle Parkour in Cherry Hill, N.J. Though he doesn’t do CrossFit, he’s familiar with the workouts, and his rock-climber’s body would fit in at any affiliate: broad shoulders, narrow waist and powerful legs. In Columbus, his performance is brighter even than his chartreuse hair.

Pinnacle’s membership structure is similar to that of many CrossFit affiliates: unlimited memberships, twice-per-week memberships and open gym. They have an intro program that serves the same function as a CrossFit on-ramp or foundations course, and they have kids programs.

So why aren’t more ninjas doing CrossFit? Or, for that matter, why aren’t more CrossFit gyms adding *Ninja Warrior* obstacles?

One huge reason is the specificity of training: though *Ninja Warrior* obstacles are exciting and novel, the conditioning



At the seminar in Columbus, ninjas including Jamie Rahn practiced in between instructional sessions.

potential of each is low. Climbing and hanging require localized muscular endurance that may well build a better athlete, but the risk-to-reward ratio of some things isn't ideal for safety. Storage of a 15-foot halfpipe can also be difficult.

Training science hasn't yet penetrated into the underground parkour culture, either. CrossFit Tour stops, weekend courses and competitions are full of quality food; ninjas ate everything available, including Egg McMuffins, pizza and pretzels.

Nonetheless, the parkour movement was popular in earlier days of CrossFit, and for good reason. Kinesthetic awareness, balance and agility form the base of all parkour skills, and using *Ninja Warrior* obstacles or climbing walls make training more fun. Ex-gymnasts are drawn to parkour because the ends—just get to Point B—justify any means necessary. Good form is encouraged, but controlling the body through three planes of movement requires uncommon positions. Rahn says this helps prepare the body for everyday physical stressors.

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"I think body conditioning is a big part of parkour and CrossFit," he said. "One of our instructors does strongman stuff, and we do these 'meathead challenges' all the time: 10 muscle-ups, salmon ladder, roulette wheel, handstand walking, farmers walk, and do that over and over for conditioning," Rahn said. "We do a lot of quadrupedal movements. It sounds like there's a lot of commonality."

Many CrossFit gyms have climbing holds. Building quad steps (see Page 8) might be an easy task for gyms that routinely build plyometric boxes, and ideas such as a sliding rope for climbing may make life easier for CrossFit coaches. Kids flocked to the obstacles at Vertical Adventures and swung with unfeared ease from ring to rope to board.



Variations on the “steps” obstacle have challenged competitors over the years. If you can build a plyo box, you can probably build a set of steps to start your own ninja career.

Video: [Modified 70-Foot Rope Climb With Michelle Warnky](#), by Mike Koslap

Each of the ninjas in Ohio was impressed by the growth of CrossFit. Nationwide, Rahn estimates that fewer than 20 parkour gyms are successfully running programs. While the sport is exciting, there’s a missing element: lack of an affiliate infrastructure is its Achilles heel. Gymnasts, freerunners and street kids with a taste for risk are drawn to the sport but lack a place to train, a centralized portal for knowledge and a coaching hierarchy.

While the CrossFit Games reward top performers, CrossFit affiliates provide a “home base” for athletes. Boxes are collaborative centers, with members cross-pollinating ideas, and CrossFit seminars teach world-class technique all over the globe on any given weekend. The CrossFit Level 1 course provides a common jumping-off point for all coaches. And communities united in the pursuit of virtuous movement attract hundreds of thousands of newcomers each year.

That crucial middle layer between the athlete and the big event is absent in for ninjas: there’s the show and the crazy kids, and nothing in between. When ratings dip and ninjas receive a roundhouse kick to the curb, where will they wind up?

In the meantime, the two communities can learn from one another. Ninjas can teach CrossFit athletes how to fall, how to leap, how to rekindle joy in the simple act of movement over, around and through obstacles. CrossFit athletes can teach ninjas how to survive.



About the Author

*Chris Cooper is a writer for **CrossFit Journal**. He frequently finds himself upstream without a salmon ladder.*