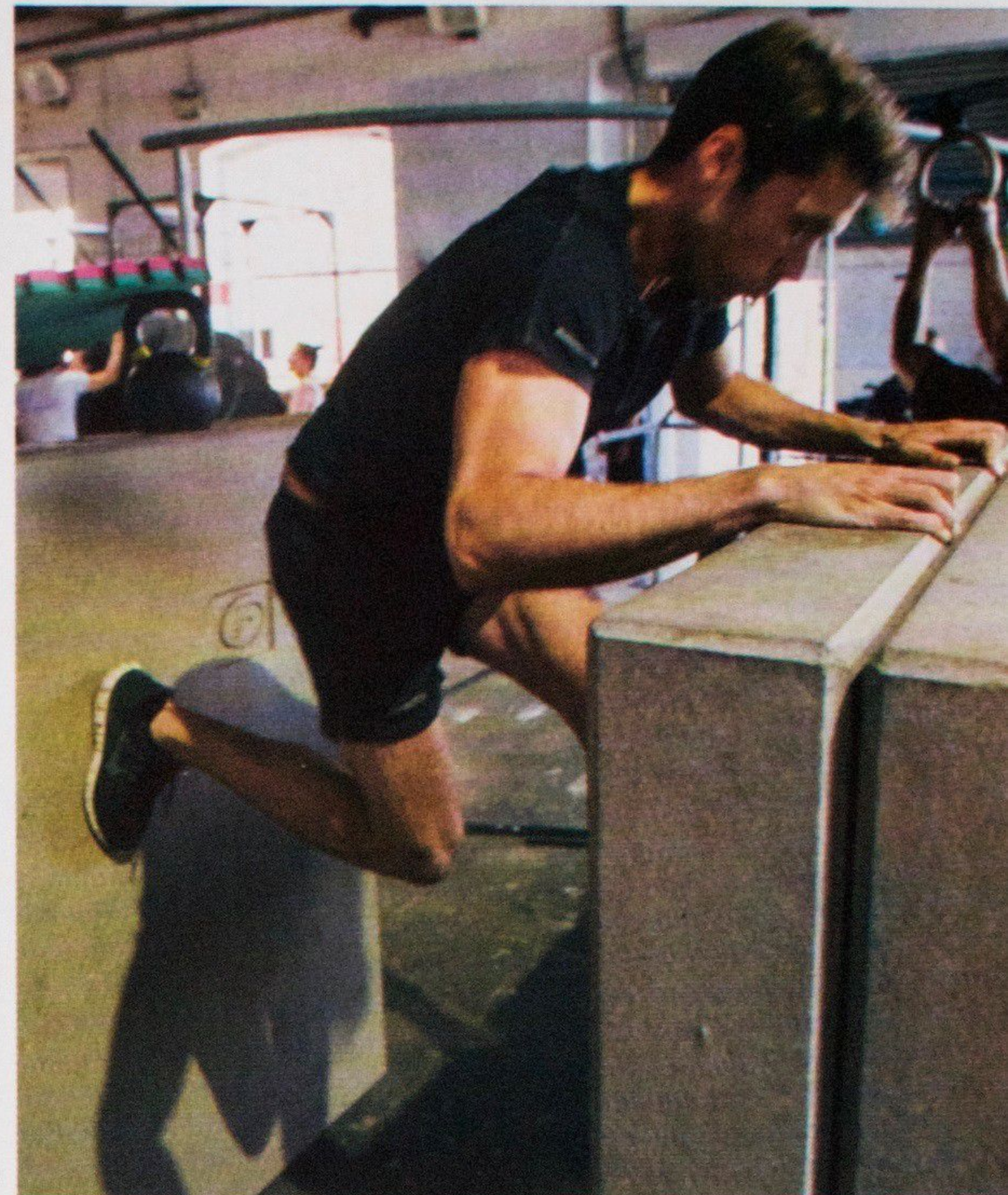
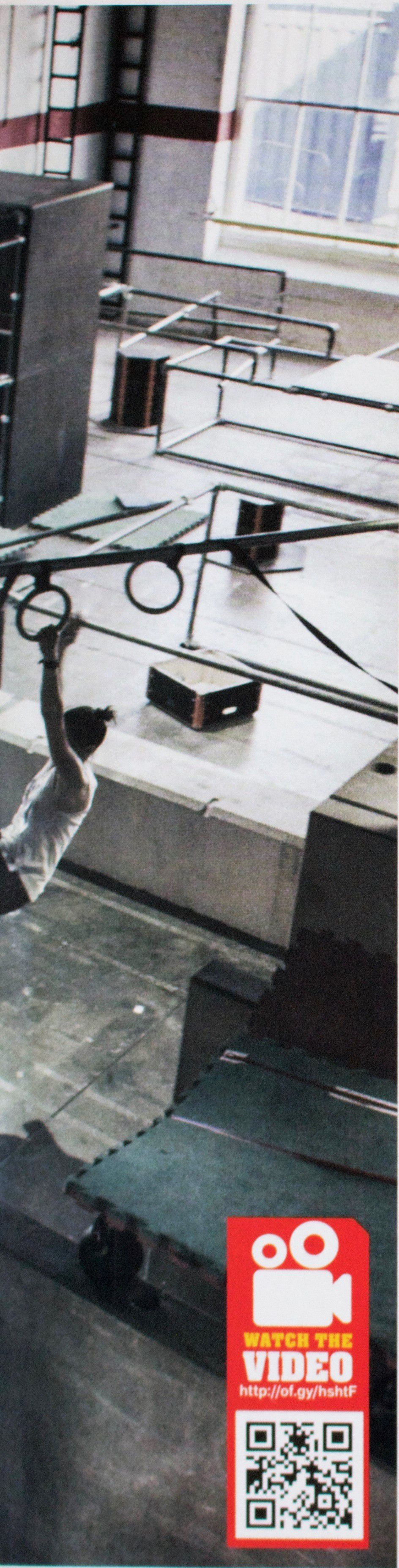




OCR Training GET Specific

Maxwell Roche takes heed from Classical Greece and embraces pain in the godly pursuit of obstacle course race training.





COMPETITIVE RACES BACK in Ancient Greece were described as "agon" - from which we get our word agony. This was largely due to the fact that naked competitors were often whipped with willowy rods if they made a mistake, i.e. a false start or if they simply needed some encouragement. Recently however, much to my delight and approval, we seem to have regressed a little, and the ancient Greeks (if they were to somehow reappear) may see in obstacle course races (OCRs) much to their liking.

Because obstacle course racing involves a balance of speed, strength, and endurance, training for events can be tricky, which is why I decided to go in search of a solution. Whilst running is the main constituent of most OCRs (excepting the Ninja Warrior) runners must also have strength and agility. It seems that functional total body training is what's required. So rather than do 200 burpees after my Wednesday evening jog I decided to find a place where I could practice obstacles for real, and in doing so properly prepare for my first OCR. Rumour has it that Parkour and Freerunning athletes are some of the best performers when it comes to OCRs, so I thought that might be a good place to start.

Along the gloom and grey of the industrial wilds of East London's riverside, amid the rusted remains of heavy commercial enterprise and the urban artworks of Banksy, there stands an enormous lofted barn. Light pours in through high vaulted windows and down through billowing chalk dust onto a mass of sponge, concrete and metal. The smell of the city and of hard graft lingers there and the ringing and working of exercise equipment echoes all around the cavernous space. When you walk in through the towering doorway and stand hands on hips to gaze around, you know immediately that you're in, "a proper gym" (yes, sometimes we at *Outdoor Fitness* do train indoors but with an outdoor purpose). Not a treadmill in sight just old fashioned, walls, bars, ropes, piles of iron ready-to-pump and even the odd tractor tyre (the use of which is soon to be revealed).

The gym at Trinity Buoy Wharf Docklands aka The Chainstore is run by Parkour Generations who are the largest international Parkour and

Freerunning academy in the world. They've been running dedicated Parkour facilities for over a decade and have bases in London, Asia, South America and the US. As well as Parkour and Freerunning they also now teach two OCR specific classes "Trail" and "Assault". The Trail class is orientated specifically around people looking to take on the likes of Tough Mudder and the Spartan Race whilst the Assault class is geared more towards the elite off-ground assault courses such as Ninja Warrior. I got in touch with the team at the Chainstore and being the smug character that I am managed to book onto both.

DAY 1 – TRAIL CLASS

On a Saturday afternoon we gather in a circle ahead of the 90-minute Trail class and Naoki our instructor, a lithe looking Japanese man, smiles with a cheeky salute and begins putting us through the warm-up. I'm surrounded by a reasonably serious looking bunch of boys and girls all dressed sports casual i.e. baggy cotton rather than slim fitting Lycra. I'm instantly surprised by the warm-up as we start rocking backwards and forwards on our haunches stretching dynamically and intensively. I've got tiny beads of sweat appearing at my temples even before we've finished the series of stretches. Once that's over we tackle the first obstacle. Naoki explains that we are to practice three different obstacles individually, and then string them all together into one long course towards the end of the session. The first is a series of boxes, one foot in height, laid out in a line and evenly spaced with a metre gap between each. Initially we jump onto each box with both feet, taking care to land on our toes, and then onto the floor between each until we've completed the whole line. Next we do the same on just one leg and then we try with the other. After that we jump double-footed between the boxes without using the floor, and finally one legged from box to box. After thirty minutes of this our calves and quads are killing us. Naoki smiles relentlessly and demonstrates often with gazelle-like agility whilst trying to explain that plyometric power (jump strength) is what's most important when you're faced with many typical OCR obstacles.


WATCH THE VIDEO
<http://of.gy/hshtF>


Words Maxwell Roche Pictures Grant Pritchard

Next up it's some vaulting exercises. Three boxes are placed in front of us of varying sizes. The tallest is five feet and the smallest three feet. Naoki demonstrates by running full tilt at the highest box and passing over it effortlessly using just the palm of his left hand. The challenge is to jump the box, maintain momentum, and skim over within a few inches of its surface. We all attempt the smaller of the three first and much banging and clattering ensues. Next we try the same technique using the other hand, and finally we are challenged to tackle the box head-on using both hands, allowing our legs to pass through our arms in a leapfrog type position. Eventually we all start getting the hang of it and it's immensely satisfying. When you get it right, vaulting the box feels effortless. This is just the sort of technique you want to master ahead of a big OCR.

Finally, we pit our wits against the wall. We all gather in front of an eight-foot high wall and Naoki shows us how best to tackle it. He demonstrates once again by running hell-for-leather straight at it, placing one foot half way up, two hands on the top and vaulting over, as if it were nothing. This is the point that we all start doubting ourselves a little. The first of us takes a run up, just manages to grab the top and proceeds to dangle from it embarrassingly with feet running and sliding beneath to no avail. Naoki has a little chuckle and demo's again trying to convey the importance of the feet for gaining momentum up the wall. We all hazard a few more attempts and eventually many of us are springing quite convincingly up, and scrambling not quite so elegantly over.

Once we've practiced all three obstacles we then link them together and it's amazing how much worse we are at each individual obstacle, when attempting to complete them in quick succession. There's certainly a lot to be said for stamina when it comes to OCR training. Naoki explains that we have to build not only our plyometric power but also our slow twitch endurance muscle fibre.

DAY 2 – THE ASSAULT SESSION

When I arrive on Sunday afternoon for my OCR Assault session, I'm altogether less sprightly. It turns out that despite being an avid runner and gym goer some of the exercises we did the previous day I was just simply not used to. As a result I was feeling pretty achy, and a little shaky. Chris aka Blane our instructor for the day once again puts us through a warm-up and explains the format. It will be similar to the previous day but with different obstacles this time; obstacles more akin to what you might see on the *Ninja Warrior* TV show. Rope swings, wall traverses and bridging, balancing stones, monkey bars and a tyre run (ah, that tyre – this puzzled us all).

We're split off into groups and first up for my group it's the rope swing; two ropes hanging from the ceiling about four meters apart and a box at the end to land on. All we need do is swing on the first, over to the second, and then onto the box. I've seen this on the telly many times and have always fancied my chances given that I have good upper body strength (so I thought), and a good strength to weight ratio. I swing clutching the rope with two hands and



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reach out quickly for the second rope before swinging back in the opposite direction. At that point I find myself hanging between the two ropes in a kind of iron cross position. Immediately as the tension builds the grip I have with my left hand fails. My hand slides down the rope when it's at full extension and I burn a substantial amount of the skin from my fingers. Chris explains that I needed to have held on higher up the rope and taken a slightly smaller swing to decrease the speed and strength required. I try again and fail miserably. Not liking anything to get the better of me I vow to myself that I will complete this seemingly simple obstacle before the day is out.

Next it's the tyre run – and now we know what we will be doing. The instructors stand either side of a huge tractor tyre, which we individually climb on top of. Once we're up, we stand straight (a good two metres from the ground) and each attempt to walk slowly backwards, moving the tyre across the room to the finishing platform. Many people struggle with this, moving too quickly or just losing balance and jumping off in fright. I take it steady, making sure the tyre never picks up too much speed and make it across the room. Great success!

Finally, it's the wall traverse and bridging. For the traverse we are required to hang from the top of a five-foot wall and move around it until we come to sections where we can bridge the gap between two separate walls with our feet. Then we have to switch the way we are facing and continue on the opposite wall. This exercise requires trusting your feet. Chris explains that as well as trusting our footing we must also, like a monkey, learn to hang on

straight arms. This helps to reduce fatigue apparently as fewer muscles are activated and we can therefore hang for longer. "You don't see monkeys swinging on bent arms," he says, and he's got a point. After a few attempts, having taken this intriguing advice on board, I complete the route around the walls.

With all three activities now complete, it's time once again, as with the previous day, to put them all together. I take on the wall first which I manage, then the tractor tyre, which I also just manage, and then finally the rope swing... my nemesis. This time I grab higher up the rope and swing with less momentum. When I grab the second rope I take hold toward the end where there is a knot to help my grip. I hang on, let go with my right arm and swing over to the box. Yahoo! This makes me incredibly happy. Practice, technique and determination inevitably lead to success and there's nothing like the feeling!

All in all it was a superb weekend at the Chainstore. I met some great characters, learned plenty of new skills and techniques, and had a truly epic workout. At a regular gym there is simply no way I could've achieved anything close to similar. Whether you're training for your first OCR or you're a seasoned veteran of the circuit, I highly recommend paying the Chainstore a visit – it's the full enchilada. It will put you miles ahead of the competition come race day and shatter all your nasty preconceptions about a day at the dreaded gym. And if you ever (somehow) get transported back to Ancient Greece for a race at least you'll be prepared for a bit of agon.....

More info, parkourgenerations.com/chainstore



Maxwell experiences a very real definition of heavy footed