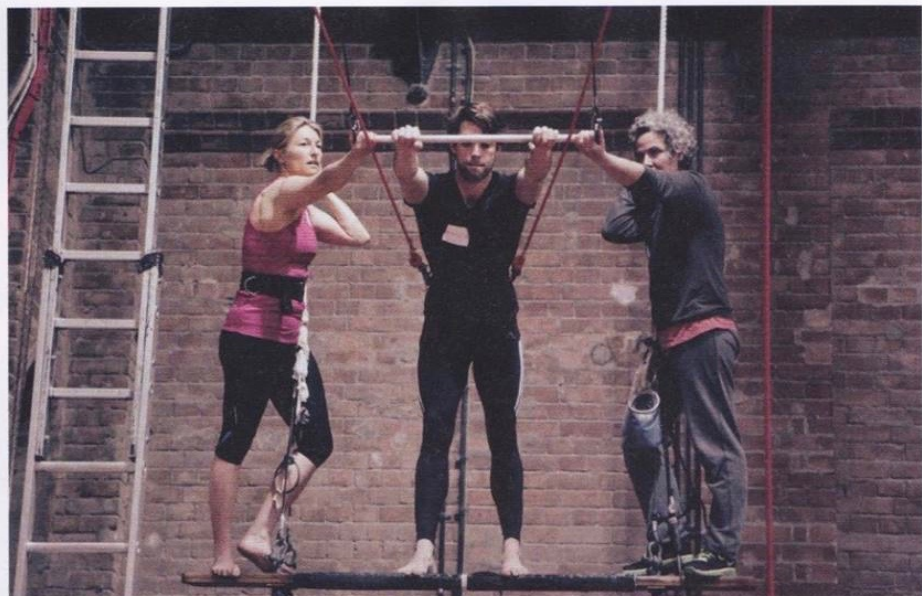


# Not clowning around

Can an usual activity actually benefit outdoor fitness enthusiasts? Specifically can circus skills training instill confidence and faith in you? Faith that can be translated into downhill MTBing, bouldering, climbing and obstacle course racing or simply boost overall self-confidence. Maxwell Roche clowns around (OK, no he doesn't) to find out.





"BOTH HANDS ON the bar, arms straight, chin up, thaaaat's it. And... step off!" These are the careful instructions voiced by my cheerful trapeze trainer Judy, seconds before I fly down from the elevated platform way up in the eaves of a restored nineteenth century North London power station. Before the substantial looking red crash mat can have its wicked way with me, my dangling lycra clad pins are whipped away and back up toward the vaulted, iron framed eaves. Looking straight ahead as instructed I watch as the towering red brick wall streams past in a blur. It stands still momentarily as my pointed toes come into sharp focus ahead of me, before I disappear off backwards toward the mat once more. The sensation brings back childhood memories of the swings at playtime. Generating momentum to get as high as possible; that heavy feeling at the bottom of the swing, and the stomach rising sickness at its zenith.

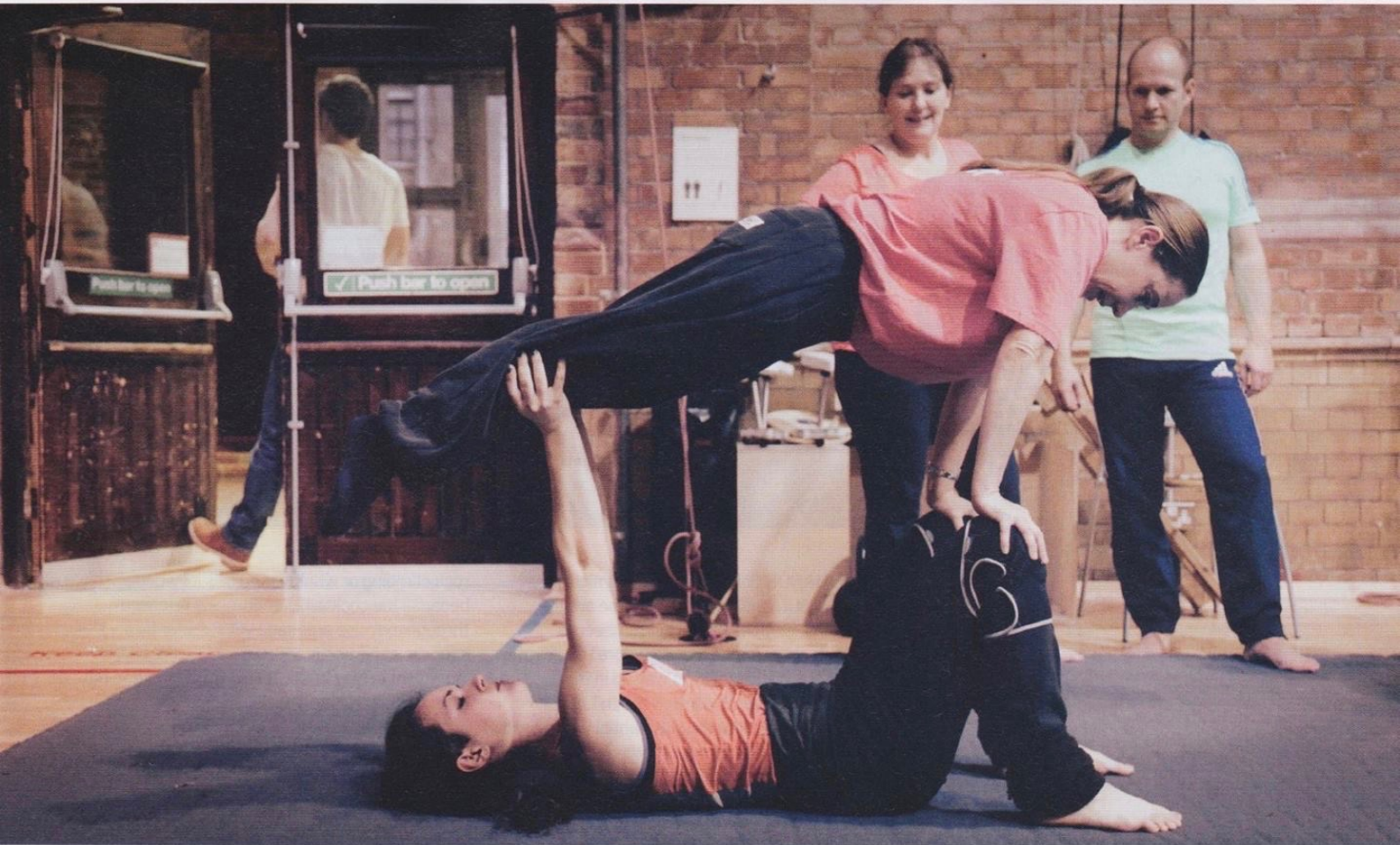
It's a drizzly Saturday in November and I've just waltzed into The National Centre for Circus Arts (NCCA) in Hoxton. I peer through the panoramic windows in the reception area at the cavernous room beyond. The wooden floor is mottled with mats, all manner of strange and unfamiliar equipment lays propped around its perimeter and an array of ropes, pulleys, wires and chains, the like of which I've never seen, dangle from the iron framed and riveted roof. I can't help but be excited by the prospect of an afternoon spent in such a space. My excitement is stirred yet further as a young lady of unnervingly pliant physique unravels herself down two giant ribbons in the centre of the room only to stop suddenly, legs akimbo, inches from the floor.

Earlier in the year I was lucky enough to see the famous Cirque du Soleil perform at the Royal Albert Hall. Any of you who have seen it will, I have no doubt, join me in my awe and appreciation of such theatrical athleticism. What interested me most however, being a sporting character myself, was not the athleticism itself, but it's relationship with confidence and courage; my interest in this relationship has been increasingly stirred of late given that more and more of us these days are combining the two. It is now becoming intensely fashionable to not only be fit, but also to achieve fitness goals in daring and adventurous ways, be it mountain biking or

rock climbing or whatever else. Is it I wonder because the cocktail of endorphins released through exercise are made yet sweeter by a squeeze of adrenaline? Is adrenaline the secret ingredient in the constitutional Cosmopolitan for which we all thirst? The skills and disciplines possessed and mastered by circus performers may on first inspection present themselves as distinctly disadvantages to the outdoor fitness enthusiast but I'm determined to prove the contrary, I want to find out if such skills, despite being acquired indoors, breed both courage and confidence; two very useful qualities when *OF* readers wits are pitted against the elements.

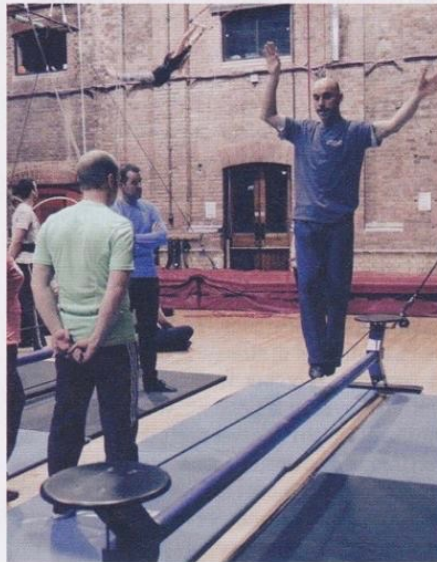
In order of appreciation for the late great Jules Leotard, famous circus performer of the nineteenth century, after which tight outfits were named, I bit the bullet and wore my running tights on that fateful Saturday in November. The pre-course brief online said "no shorts" and being the proud owner of not even a single pair of tracksuit bottoms, I was left with no other option; this was much to the amusement of my ever smirking compatriots. When we arrived at the centre that Saturday we were each given a name badge and asked to trot around the space whilst doing a variety of warm-up exercises. Being a group of around fifty strong we were then asked to split into groups of ten. There were four separate disciplines that we would undertake that afternoon, each group following a circular rotation. First up for my motley band of circus conscripts... yep, "The Flying Trapeze".

As I described earlier the sensation of said trapeze was exceptional, but the skill of it lay in generating the momentum and maintaining composure throughout. All of us struggled with the technique. Our legs had to be held straight forward whilst swinging forward, and back whilst swinging back, only to be brought forward again by the time we returned to the platform. The beginning of the swing was, needless to say, a little disconcerting when we were asked to step off the suspended platform into thin air. The set-up at The NCCA serves perfectly as an introduction into such disciplines. All the activities are conducted moderately, close to the ground, and with the protection of a harnesses. Although you're not introduced to the extreme danger of the circus, you are familiarised with the



fabulous sensations and perhaps not assumed complexity of the art. On my second attempt at the trapeze, memory met coordination and I succeeded in generating enough momentum to bring the bar almost horizontal. Quite a feat according to the trainer... cue smug grin.

Next up for my eager group of circusathletes was... "The Tight Rope". Again this was conducted relatively close to the ground to prevent heavy casualties. We are each given a pair of sexy ballet shoes and the trainer demonstrated how we were to go about conducting ourselves on the wire. "Stand straight," he said "knees slightly bent, arms held high just above the horizontal. Focus on a point in the distance just below ninety degrees from eye-level, place your foot pointed straight forward on the wire snugly between big and second toe, then... using that foot as a guide, place your other foot directly on top, sliding it forward in line until the space between big and second toe unites once more with the wire, and repeat. Oh... and never look down". Having only last week seen *Man on a Wire* about Philippe Petit's famous walk between the Twin Towers, the don't look down bit, seemed obvious. The rest however not so, as one by one we proved ping-pong in all directions from the quivering wire, equilibrium escaping us. Despite how terrible we all proved to be, and how tricky a customer the wire determined to remain, I think we all came away with a better understanding of how to balance, support ourselves, and progress, which would certainly come in handy if ever we were faced with such an obstacle in the outdoors for instance. Bravery and courage it would appear though only yields reward when connected



to solid technique.

Later we move away from the frustrations of the wire and onto the mats for some basic acrobatics. First up was the construction of an eight man human pyramid... obviously. This was dexterously achieved given that our trainer was kind enough to let us in on a few trade secrets, i.e. how to effectively balance the weight so the poor souls at the bottom escaped a thorough crushing. Our trainer for this discipline, struck me as a very unique lady. Although small in stature and clothed in all over baggy cotton, she emanated poise and strength. On one occasion whilst demonstrating a particular feat of balance she casually, whilst standing, touched shin to

forehead in an impromptu display of agility, while doing so the tendons and sinews in her neck and feet pulsed ferociously. This was certainly a woman from which we could all learn a thing or two about athleticism. After an hour or so of bending, rolling and balancing we finished with some juggling. What the practice of juggling lacks in physicality it makes up for in coordination, and above all concentration. This I felt was the overriding theme that day in Hoxton. When strength, flexibility and agility are practiced in conjunction with technique and concentration, amazing things are possible. I can only wonder how an accomplished acrobat, with good cardiovascular fitness, master of tumbling mat, tightrope and trapeze would fare when faced with say, an obstacle course race? My guess is they'd make absolute mincemeat of it.

An afternoon at the NCCA, will set you back a modest £75. For your money you'll be introduced to the fantastic sensations of the circus, the delicate techniques that make the various disciplines possible, and be shown how by people, who's book, athletically inclined individuals like us could almost certainly care to take a leaf. If you really enjoy yourself you can then move on to more advanced tuition in your chosen discipline and practice hard, until you become nothing short of a semi-naked netless trapeze master like old Julsey Leotard. The NCCA is an experience that inspires confidence and teaches the importance of focus and technique, balance and dexterity and overcoming fears; all valuable lessons which we can take with us into the great outdoors and if ever we need to tightrope over a ravine say...

**More info,** [nationalcircus.org.uk](http://nationalcircus.org.uk)