

A History of Challenge Courses
By Mark Wagstaff, Ph.D.

The Origin of U.S. Challenge Courses

As the challenge course industry continues to grow, it is important that we have a clear picture of our roots. Understanding the history of our trade allows us to chart a more intentional future. The popularity of challenge course programming has taken on a life of its own since the early Outward Bound days. The first Outward Bound Schools gave birth to the industry we recognize today. It is estimated that in the early 1980s, up to 700-800 courses existed in the United States. Today, it is believed that over 15,000 courses operate in the United States alone (Attarian, 2001). This article is an attempt to add to the historical knowledge of challenge course development.

Challenge course use for educational and recreational purposes found its way into American culture through the Outward Bound School system. Miner and Bolt (2002) discuss the use of ropes courses as an integral part of the first U.S. Outward Bound Schools. They also stated that the British Outward Bound schools borrowed the ropes course concept from their military training regiment. Jim Hogan's book, Impelled Into Experience, provided the first detailed account of Outward Bound's development in the United Kingdom. Hogan was hired by Kurt Hahn, the founder of the first Outward Bound schools, to organize and serve as warden of the first Outward Bound School. This significant, historical account of Outward Bound's birth did not document the use of ropes courses at any of the first British schools. Former Outward Bound Instructors and pioneers of the adventure education industry were interviewed to record their memories of the first challenge courses.

Rafe Parker, Outward Bound Instructor at Aberdovey in 1963, believes that the first challenge course was built at Aberdovey as opposed to Gordonston. Gordonston was the first Outward Bound School established in 1934 by Kurt Hahn. Aberdovey was established in 1941 by Jim Hogan under Hahn's supervision. Parker remembered his interactions with Captain Freddy Fuller, the second warden at Aberdovey and one of the original instructors. According to Parker, Fuller maintained that a ropes course had been on the Aberdovey site since its inception. The original Outward Bound curriculum required that each "cadet", as they were called then, was graded according to his ability in events such as the challenge course, shot put, long and high jumps, javelin and other athletics events. Grading was based on progress made in each event (R. Parker, personal correspondence, February 10, 2003).

Eskdale was the third Outward Bound School to be developed in England. John Lagoe, the third Warden of Eskdale, felt certain that the first ropes course was developed at the Aberdovey School. He stated, "the staff there have told me they have old photos of the early days, showing a ropes course. Being a sea school, it was obviously sensible to train boys to climb ropes on land before they were asked to climb rigging at sea! I suspect there'd be a ropes course there from the start in 1941 – but there's no one left from that time to confirm it." Lagoe went on to describe his memories and experience with the Eskdale ropes course. "A ropes course was included from the start at the Eskdale Mountain School, clearly inherited from Aberdovey... There's a photo of the ropes course in the first brochure describing the school, and one of the staff on Course Number 4, in 1950, tells me that it had the usual vertical rope climb, a rope bridge

(always known as the Burma Bridge), a rope swing to reach and regain on to a horizontal rope, a scramble net. A zip wire, luridly called the Death Slide, was added a little later.” (J. Lagoe, personal correspondence, November 10, 2003).

Eskdale Outward Bound Instructor, John Lott, recalls distinct similarities between military and Outward Bound ropes courses. Lott was a British Marine in 1956 and 1957. Lott recalls that the assault courses he experienced in the military were almost mirror images of the courses found at the Outward Bound schools (J. Lott, personal correspondence, February 8, 2003). From the beginning, the core group of original Outward Bound instructors had significant military experience. It is not surprising that these military trained instructors integrated their prior experience into the developmental process of the Outward Bound curriculum. While we know the inspiration behind the first ropes courses, the author of this article has yet to find undisputable documentation that determines who and where the first course was built within the British Outward Bound system. While the Outward Bound movement is responsible for challenge course development in the United States, it is also important to know that challenge course curricula were not unique to the British Outward Bound Schools.

A movement in France must be mentioned that integrated challenge course type experiences into educational settings in the early 1900s. This movement was known as *hébertisme*, which was derived from the name George Hébert. From 1895-1903, Hébert served as a French Navy officer where he cared deeply about the physical conditioning of his sailors. He later became responsible for the physical training of the French navy. In 1913, he gave a demonstration of his training methods before the French Physical Education Congress (Cousineau, 1976). “Hébert’s view on education was return-to-nature approach with emphasis on development of ‘moral values and virile character’” (p.3). He was opposed to analytical exercise and controlled movements when nature offered so many opportunities for varied physical movements. He developed obstacle courses in natural areas that required the use of fundamental movements such as jumping, climbing, running, walking, crawling, balancing, throwing, lifting and carrying. Drawings of *hébertisme* obstacles, found in Cousineau’s manual, resemble modern-day challenge course elements. In addition to emphasis on physical conditioning, *hébertisme* created opportunity to discover personal potential and limitations while moving in a natural environment. In 1949, *hébertisme* was first implemented in North America at Camp Ecole Trois-Saumons located near Québec City, Canada. Two Canadian army officers who served in France during WWII brought it to Canada. It has yet to be determined if Hébert’s original thinking influenced Outward Bound challenge course programming (Cousineau, 1976).

The First American Challenge Courses

American educators interested in Kurt Hahn’s educational model brought Outward Bound to the United States in an effort to immerse American youth in this new brand of educational reform. The first Outward Bound School was established in Marble, Colorado, which opened for business in 1962. The challenge course, along with many other outdoor adventure activities, became an important part of the first Outward Bound curriculum. “Tap” Ernest Tapley, designer and builder of the Marble base camp, constructed the first Outward Bound challenge course in the United States in 1961. Tapley was sent to the United Kingdom to take an Outward Bound course at Eskdale and

experienced a ropes course as part of his preparation to become an Outward Bound Instructor. Tapley brought back what he had experienced and built the first course in an aspen grove with the help of fourteen students from the Colorado Academy in Denver. Tapley also picked up design ideas from his past service with the U.S. army's 10th Mountain Division. British Outward Bound instructors, Nigel Peacock and Ralph Cough later approved the course and made a few minor adjustments (T. Tapley, personal correspondence, January 16, 2003). The entrance to the course was a forbidding 35-foot rope ladder. According to Miner and Bolt (2002), the challenge course produced apprehension in the students the same way rock climbing and rappelling did.

Tapley also served as mountaineer advisor for the Colorado Academy in Denver. The headmaster and founder of the Colorado Academy, Chuck Froelicher, was also a founding member of the Colorado Outward Bound School. Froelicher believed deeply in the Outward Bound process and integrated key principles into his school's curriculum. Froelicher asked Tapley and academy students to build a small challenge course in a one-acre wooded area on academy grounds area known as Sherwood Forest (C. Froelicher, personal correspondence, January 3, 2003). This was probably the second course built in the United States for educational use. Students participating in these first U.S. challenge course experiences were put on belay and encouraged to take a practice fall so student belayers could practice catching a fall. Students were debriefed after the event to bring out the whole experience (T. Tapley, personal correspondence, January 16, 2003). The use of challenge courses for educational purposes had taken root in the United States!

Continued Push Toward Mainstream Education

Early American Outward Bound instructors began taking their expertise to other settings. Programs were slowly being established in the late 1960s and early 1970's. Outward Bound instructors built a challenge course at Lincoln-Sudbury High School in Lincoln, MA. Mike Stratton, former Colorado Outward Bound Instructor, constructed a few elements for the Carroll School near Walden Pond in MA. Stratton created a climbing wall out of boulders, sometimes over 100 pounds each, by imbedding them into a cinder block, gymnasium wall. Karl Rohnke, NC Outward Bound instructor, created a challenge course for Southern Illinois University (K. Rohnke, personal correspondence, January 16, 2003).

The Outward Bound phenomena also spawned an entire movement of adaptive Outward Bound programs that promoted challenge course use. One of the most influential organizations in challenge course development has been Project Adventure. Project Adventure is noteworthy because its focus was on reforming the traditional education system. Jerry Pieh, principal of Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School, Massachusetts, had a genuine interest in educational reform. Jerry had helped his father, Bob Pieh, start the Minnesota Outward Bound School. Jerry developed a deep appreciation for the power of the Outward Bound experience (Prouty, 1999). Jerry and a colleague, Gary Baker, submitted a grant proposal to the federal office of education to integrate Outward Bound into mainstream education. The new program, developed in 1971, was called Project Adventure (Prouty, 1999). Jerry was able to hire staff with Outward Bound background to help Hamilton-Wenham faculty develop the new curriculum.

Staff member Karl Rohnke and a group of after school high school sophomores built a challenge course used primarily in physical education classes (Rohnke, Tait, Wall, 1994). The course was built behind the school's football field in a stand of beautiful, mature beech trees. The course was constructed with whatever materials were at hand - goldline and manila hemp ropes, 1/2-inch cable and a ladder. The height of elements went only as high as the ladder or tree climbing would allow. High elements included a cable Zip Line, Two Line Bridge, Cat Walk, Commando Crawl, Belly Buster and Cargo Net Swing. Goldline belay ropes were hung through single alloy or steel carabiners. Low elements constructed included an All Aboard, Everybody Up Stumps, Vertical Pole and Tire, Tension Traverse, Barrel Pull, Wall, Beam, Spinning Spool, Hickory Jump, Sneaker Graveyard and Flea Jump. Debriefing the experience was primarily a question and answer session similar to what had been passed down from the Outward Bound process (K. Rohnke, personal correspondence, December 17, 2002).

The majority of the new curriculum focused on the 10th grade physical education class. "But, English, history, science, theater arts, and counseling were also explored in the context of what became to be known as 'adventure activities' (Prouty, 1999, p. 94)" Bob Lentz, former Outward Bound instructor, teacher and principal, became the first director of Project Adventure. "Bob found in the Project Adventure curriculum a way to help students become more 'alive, alert, and responsible' inside schools, and to institutionalize the process" (Prouty, 1999, p. 94). In 1972, Karl Rohnke built the first Project Adventure indoor climbing wall for Newburyport, another northeastern high school (Prouty, 1999).

Birth Of An Industry

All courses in the 1960s and 1970s were constructed in-house reflecting individual ingenuity. No universal standards or formal risk management protocol existed to manage these programs (Attarian, 2001). No formal staff training existed, so experience was gained through trial and error. There were no national organizations promoting the use of courses, which left the early pioneers of challenge course programming isolated. The first formal gathering of challenge course professionals occurred in 1988 at the North Carolina Outward Bound School. In 1991, this seminal group of professionals decided to form a national organization to support the development and standardization of challenge course practices (Attarian, 2001). This was the formation of the ACCT.

Tracking down the information contained in the article was difficult but rewarding. Much of our history has been oral and as a result the true facts may be somewhat distorted. While Outward Bound can be singled out as the first educational curriculum to jump start U.S. challenge course programming, you could see that many individuals added their own brand of creativity to shape our present. I invite readers of this article with historical knowledge to contact me if you feel facts are inaccurate or misrepresented. It is important that we accurately record our past before it is lost!

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