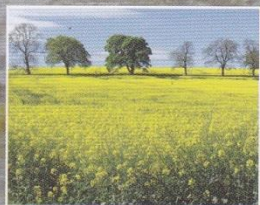


horizons

professional development
for outdoor practitioners

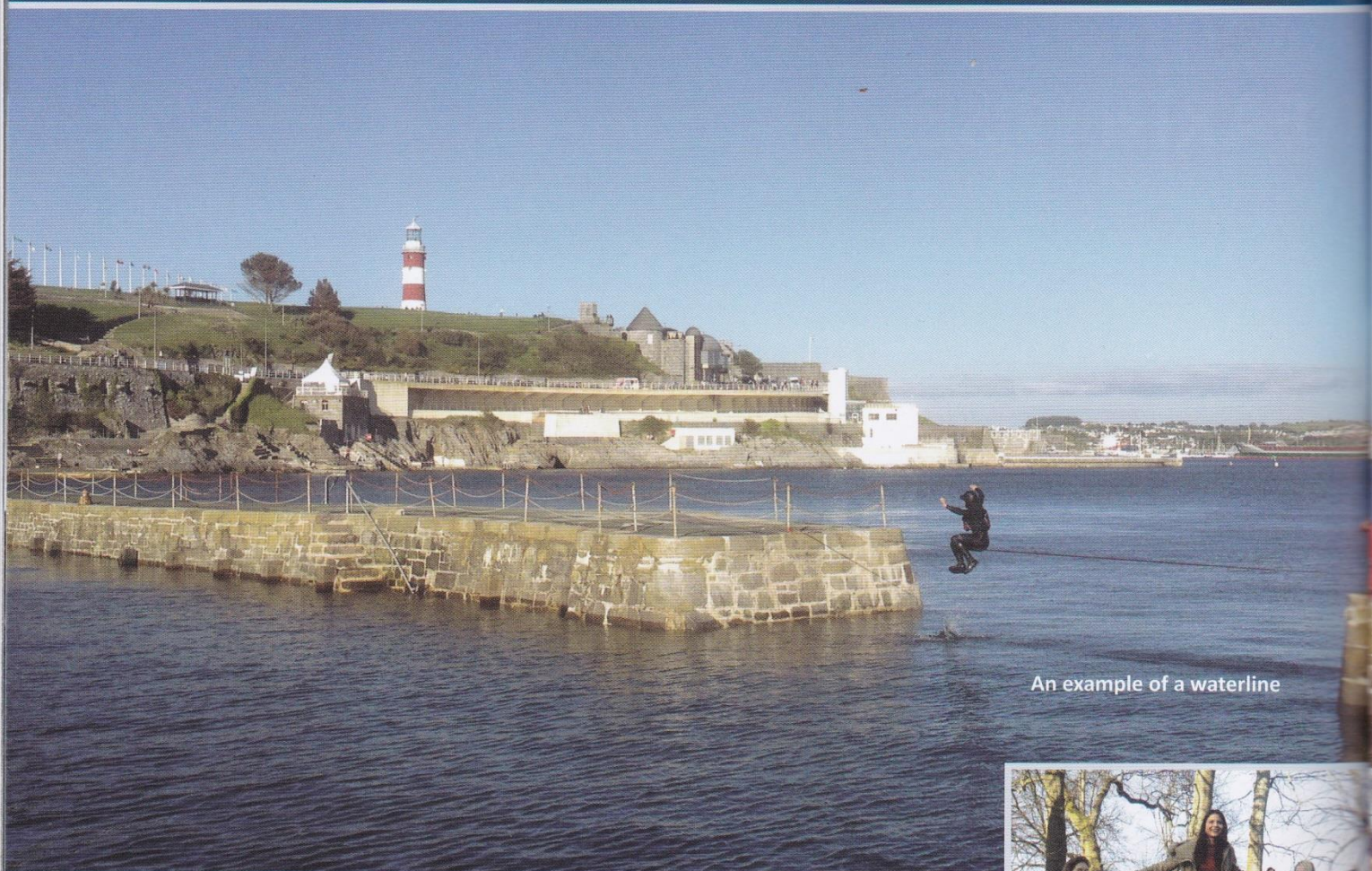
Issue 66 Summer 2014



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R U Slacklining yet?

by Ben Hughes



An example of a waterline

With so many people starting to take up this new and exciting sport, and with people such as Tim Emmett, a climber and extreme sports athlete, saying that “Slacklining is where climbing was 30 years ago”, I thought it might be time for us to look at some of the potential benefits that slacklining could bring to the outdoor industry and beyond. So you might ask....

What is slacklining?

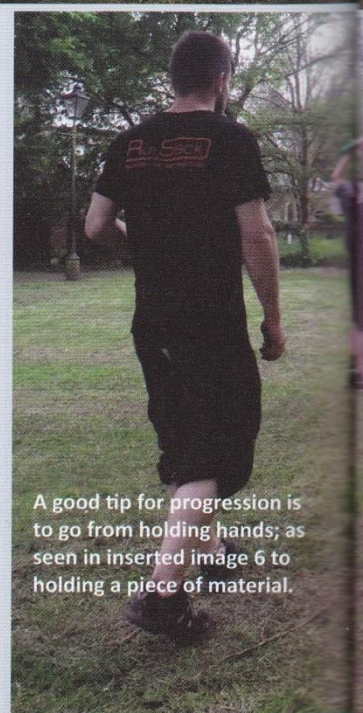
Well slacklining is essentially a balancing and challenging activity that typically uses polyester or nylon webbing (a bit like a very wide climbing sling) tensioned between two anchor points e.g. trees. The most commonly seen and easy to use slacklines use a ratchet for the tensioning system however there are other options available depending on the style of slacklining you go for. As the slacklining community grows and the sport develops more people are pushing the limits of what is commonly known as slacklining. Here are a few different variations of (self-explanatory) slacklining styles to try your balance at; tricklining, longlining, highlining, waterlining and yogalining. Slacklining has grown extensively over the last few years here in the UK, Europe and the USA and boasts a world cup, national competitions, slackline clubs and even a couple of festivals devoted to it.

Using a buddy system not only keeps the sessions safe and controlled it also allows upto three people to be engaged at the same time



One of the great things about slacklining is that it can be done almost anywhere that there are suitable anchor points and if there's not any you can make your own. Generally two trees of about 1m in circumference are used (always with tree protection); for beginners these tend to be spread over a distance of about 9-14 metres with a clear level space between. However, If you don't have access to any trees then a system of either temporary or permanent ground anchors can be fashioned from metal stakes or wood in the form of a dead-man's anchor. If this is the case then a simple A-frame can be used to raise the line from the floor (please see imagery for different variations).

Once the line is up (no higher than your crotch) you're ready to go. First, there are four unbreakable rules to keep in mind that will help perfect anyone's slacklining ability:



A good tip for progression is to go from holding hands; as seen in inserted image 6 to holding a piece of material.

"Slacklining is where climbing was 30 years ago"

- Eyes forward – find a fixed point at the end of the line such as the anchors or the tree.
- Toes forward – keep your toes and heels facing along the line towards the anchors.
- Hands up – keep your arms raised and hands up, bending at the elbow as opposed to the shoulder.
- Breathing - ensure to keep breathing at a steady rate and not to hold your breath.

What relevance has slacklining for outdoor learning?

In the first instance there are the obvious benefits for balance, co-ordination and personal motor skills development. These fundamental skills that work on posture and core strength are useful in a wide variety of outdoor activities. In addition, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, there is evidence of an increase in the structural and functional plasticity of the hippocampus, an area of the brain responsible for navigation and memory^[1].

More recent research^[2] explored how slacklining could be used as a means of engaging youth who are at risk of, or who are, offending. The research revealed not only a lessened involvement in crime but also an improvement in 10 key areas attributed to personal development^[3] which included: self-awareness, communication skills, interpersonal skills, ability to explore and manage feelings, ability to understand and identify with others, value development, problem solving, negotiation skills, action planning and reviewing skills.

Slacklining can be a great addition to any centre, organisation or school due to its ease of set up, low financial investment and no requirement for activity specific qualifications. Good outdoor education risk management does help! For example I have recently been involved in incorporating slacklining into the full time curriculum of a special school. There have been some fantastic results with the majority of children really enjoying the activity, partly for the new and different aspect that it brings to lessons but also, I believe, because of the individual nature of the challenges it provides in a very simple format. The teachers have also been giving great feedback with some even staying behind after school in their own time to practise. Incorporating slacklining as a new sport into the schools full time LOTC curriculum was relatively easy. All that was required was: a risk assessment, an agreement on some specific learning objectives and progression levels, site specific training for staff and ensuring that insurance was in place.

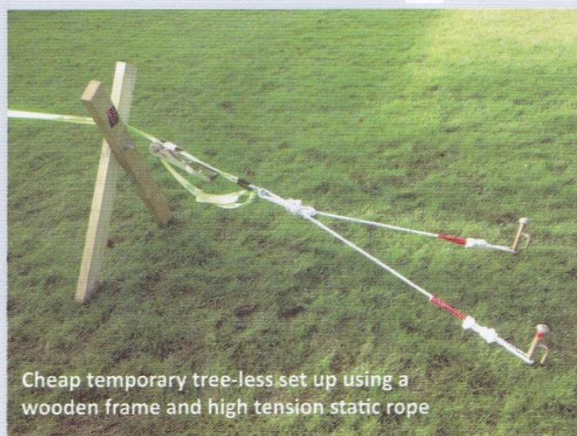
Suggestions for your professional practice

Outdoor centres: Slacklining can be incorporated into your programme with ease, either as a session of its own, or as a complementary task to activities such as team building, low and high rope challenge courses, or climbing and abseiling sessions. For instance, it provides the group with the opportunity to not only warm up but also partake in a relatively safe activity whilst waiting to participate in the 'main event'.

Schools: Although you may naturally think that slacklining belongs in the PE or LOTC areas of a school, in reality the possibilities of using the sport elsewhere within a schools' curriculum is extensive: imagine the practical application of Science, Maths and even Design & Technology that can be incorporated into a session. Slacklining can be a great addition to any teacher's or educator's tool box and can be used to teach number of different skills and meet with a range of learning outcomes required by the national curriculum.

Organisations such as youth offending

teams: A previously mentioned study found that slacklining could be used as a tool to engage those who either are, or who may be at risk of offending. Those involved with the slacklining programme showed a significant decrease in their criminal activities. For this reason Plymouth City Council is currently funding a programme that sees slacklining delivered free at the point of delivery to a number of youths who are either self-referred or referred by the youth service, community policing teams or schools.



Cheap temporary tree-less set up using a wooden frame and high tension static rope



Example of a Slackline set up in a school using only one tree.

A two tree set up in a school. *note the use of tree protectors.



Targeted interventions: Currently I know of one group that are using slacklining as a way of engaging with youth at unsociable hours when they may well be otherwise engaged in anti-social behaviour or petty criminality. Due to the ease, quickness and simple equipment needed for basic sessions, slacklining is perfect for target intervention for youth workers carrying a couple of lines with them as a means of increasing social cohesion and bonding groups into teams.

Physical rehabilitation: Numerous people point towards the benefits associated with using slacklining concerning certain injuries and disabilities. Poor posture control, knee injuries and ankle strains, to name but a few, can all be significantly improved through time spent on a slackline. Injury prevention through psychological improvements are also said to be apparent in the areas of discipline, focus, self-awareness and concentration.

Individual practitioners: Slacklining is an excellent, proven activity for the development and training of motor control and as such is a great way of conditioning the body and mind for other adventure sports such as climbing, surfing, mountain biking and snowboarding.

So why do I want to incorporate slacklining into my practice?

As slacklining is a relatively new activity to be offering, there are currently a limited number of providers and facilitators offering these sessions to the general public. This provides a great opportunity for an organisation to be offering something new and exciting that most groups wouldn't have had the opportunity to try. Slacklines are also relatively cheap when compared with other outdoor activities equipment, for example a quality slackline can be purchased for approximately £60 for a 15m ratchet system. It's also an activity in which participants can progress at their own rate without being forced or held up by others.

Qualifications involved and risk assessment

Currently, here in the UK there is no National Governing Body for the sport. There is, however, a group who are currently trying to develop and promote one. The arguments about the need or appropriateness of yet another National Governing Body for outdoor educators are probably too extensive to be considered here. Whilst it is apparent that some level of understanding and technical competence is desirable, or even essential, especially for anyone slacklining on anything but a low level line, some hold the view that there is no need for a governing body. They would rather a continued use of the approach currently in place, that of shared best practice.

Risk assessments are carried out the same as any other outdoor activity and can be adapted to meet with your organisations current format. Currently, there is only best practice to be followed and this is dictated by each organisation on an individual basis. In my view this is great as it allows a wide range of professionals to facilitate slacklining, making the sport easily accessible by all.



Using a 1 tree set up this time with a sturdier more durable metal frame and round sling anchor system.

...have a go, yourself, your staff, friends and family, and be open-minded as to the possibilities this activity can bring you

At one school the slings kept sliding up due to the shape of the tree so we used custom wood attachments to stop this happening.



Children lining up to have a go on a slackline in the woods

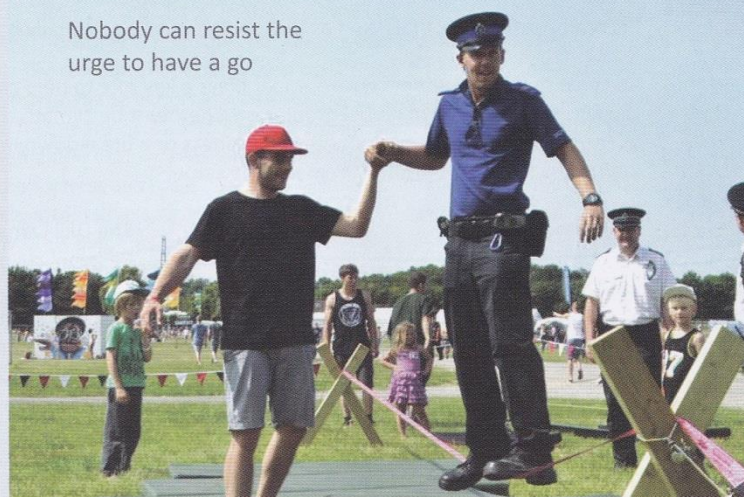


Final notes

My advice to you is to have a go, yourself, your staff, friends and family, and be open-minded as to the possibilities this activity can bring you. At first you may only be able to stand up with assistance and then only be able to take a couple of steps but in no time you will be walking backwards and then maybe even some bouncing. At the recent SW regional IOL conference I ran an information and introduction to slacklining session where participants gained useful knowledge about the sport and improved their slacklining ability by just giving it a go! I hope to see you all bouncing back in the near future. Before then why not check it out on YouTube?

As a final note, if I were to highlight three things I think that you should take away from this article, they would be; to always use tree protection, seek advice if you ever plan to set up a slackline that is above waist height, but most importantly, give it a go! ■

Nobody can resist the urge to have a go



Notes:

1. Hübner K, Binetti C, Hamilton DA, Stephan T, Flanagan VL, Linn J, Labudda K, Markowitsch H, Glasauer S, Jahn K, Strupp M, Brandt T. (2011) Structural and functional plasticity of the hippocampal formation in professional dancers and slackliners. *Hippocampus*. 21(8):855-65.
2. Hughes B, An investigation into the use of slacklining as a means of engaging youth who are at risk of or who are offending. (unpublished 1st class dissertation, University of Saint Mark & Saint John, 2013)
3. Huskins J. (1996) Quality work with young people. Bristol: Youth Clubs UK.

Author Biog



Ben Hughes has been working teaching outdoor based skills in a primary special school for the last year. He has recently graduated with a first class honours degree in Outdoor Adventure from the University of Saint Mark & Saint John. Making the most of his time at Marjon he gained both the Most Inspiring Student Award and also the Best Business Start-up 2013 for his Slacklining social enterprise; Ru-Slack, which has also seen backing from the School for Social Entrepreneurs.

He would like to thank both Dr Mark Leather & Dr Roger Hopper for both their oversight of this article and continued support with Ru-Slack.

You can find out more about Ru-Slack at www.ru-slack.co.uk.