

History of Ropes Challenge Courses

The military have been using "commando" or "assault" courses perhaps ever since the Ancient Greeks groomed their young soldiers via horse-riding and other adventure activities. The purpose of assault courses was to provide tough physical and emotional, multi-element physical training exercises. Occasionally members of the public encounter may have participated, e.g., for physical selection and fitness testing for particular jobs (e.g., army, police, fire fighting, etc.). But they really were and are designed for people who are very physically fit.

Some of the basic elements of commando courses have been creatively adapted and extended for use in civilian education and training. And this has been the real story of the growth of ropes challenge courses during the second half of the 20th century.

Ropes Challenge Courses have "exploded" in the recent couple of decades - their birth can be traced to Outward Bound and Project Adventure in the 1960s in the USA. With school and community playgrounds sadly becoming overly safe and "stock standard" and with less access to open, natural spaces, there was a real need to invent more creative and challenging ways in which adventurous physical and psychological play and learning could take place for children, youth and adults.

The early development of Ropes Challenge Courses was within the [Outward Bound movement](#). Outward Bound was developed in the UK during the second world war and spread to the USA in the 1960's where Ropes Challenge Courses were pioneered in 1968. Then in the 1970's an Outward Bound offshoot program, [Project Adventure](#) got underway.

Project Adventure was developed to create in-school adventure learning activities using Outward Bound type principles. As a result, Ropes Challenge Courses are used as educational elements or tools in and of themselves, and not just as one components of an Outward Bound program. By the 1990's Project Adventure had created an attractive series of ropes course elements and related fun, educational and training activities which could be delivered in a variety of settings.

Ropes Challenge Courses often operate using a [Project Adventure philosophy](#), which emphasizes "Challenge-by-Choice" -- it is made clear to all participants that they are to exercise personal choice about whether or not to attempt or complete any activity. At other times, Ropes Challenge Course facilitators use more of an [Outward Bound](#) philosophy, which tends to "push" people a little further.

Today, there are roughly 6000 to 12,000 ropes courses around the world, with the vast majority being in North America, followed by at least several hundred ropes courses in each of Australia/New Zealand, Asia, Europe and the UK.

References

Experience Based Learning Inc. (n.d.) [Ropes challenge course history](http://www.ropecourse.com/ropes_history.html). http://www.ropecourse.com/ropes_history.html

Pieh, J. (2002) How it all began. *Zip Lines (Spring)*, 13.

Prouty, D. (1990). Project Adventure: A brief history. In J. Miles, & S. Priest (1990) *Adventure education* (pp. 97-109). State College, PA: Venture.

Prouty, D. (2002). [Project Adventure at thirty](#). *Zip Lines (Spring)*, 6-13. [pdf; 1.7mb]

Rohnke, K. (1989) The ropes course: A constructed adventure. *Zip Lines (Spring)*, 14.

Schoel, J. (1986). The early days. *Zip Lines (Fall/Winter)*, 9.