

Empowering?
Or merely a
tool for the
“sexploitation”
of women?
Jane Cadzow
balances the
arguments for
and against
pole dancing –
an increasingly
popular pursuit
that some say
should be an
Olympic sport.

Photograph Dean Sewell

Spinning around

FELIX CANE SASHAYS OUT OF HER DRESSING ROOM, ALL THIGH-HIGH boots and even white teeth. We are backstage at Miss Pole Dance Australia, a competition that Cane, 25, has won twice. In April, she went on to blitz the field at the world championships in Jamaica, dazzling the judges with her daring and dexterity. A small, pretty woman with a tattoo on her left shoulder, she makes doing the splits upside down in a sequined G-string look effortless. No one spins around a pole by one leg with more proficiency or panache. “She’s very much our inspiration,” says Shavaya Huskinson, a trainee dental therapist from Canberra who is one of the finalists in the national contest.

As the current title holder, Cane is barred from competing this year, but she has accepted an invitation to perform in the show. For her, pole dancing isn’t primarily about prizes. “This is an art form,” she says, earnestly batting her false eyelashes. “The things the girls do on the poles are just beautiful. And difficult. They have to be so strong and flexible.”

Whether it’s art or a flimsy excuse for scantily clad women to writhe around phallic symbols, pole dancing is a booming business. Five years ago, fewer than 10 dance studios around the country offered pole classes. Now the number is reported to be closer to 100. “There has been a huge surge in interest,” says Cane, a former instructor, pointing out that women of all shapes, sizes and ages are flocking to specialist dance schools with names such as Pole Princess, Pole Fetish and A Pole Lot of Fun. “You get, like, old ladies, young ladies, girls. Mums and daughters come in. I think the oldest person I ever taught was 72.”

Pole position:
(above) Allegra performs the “Superman” at the 2010 Miss Pole Dance Australia competition, held in Sydney in October.

Cane herself started pole dancing only after her mother had a trial lesson and came home urging her to give it a go. This was in Perth in 2006. Cane was at university, studying mathematics and biochemistry with the aim of becoming a geneticist – but suddenly none of that seemed important. “Literally from the first hour, I dropped everything to dedicate my life to pole dancing.” Neither her mother nor her father, an ophthalmologist, was pleased. But Cane couldn’t help herself. “It was love at first pole!”

POLE DANCING USED TO BE SOMETHING STRIPPERS DID LATE AT NIGHT IN seedy bars. Now, educated middle-class women are doing it, too, albeit in brightly lit studios with mirrored walls. “You walk into a class and there are doctors and tax lawyers,” says Ellen Rasidi, 28, who trains at Pole Divas and works in research administration at Melbourne University. She and her sister, Philippa, finalists in the Miss Pole Dance doubles division, ventured into a pole studio for the first time last year. “It was a bit of a dare,” says Philippa, a 22-year-old database consultant who is wearing black bikini pants with “Pip” written in silver sequins on the back. “It was just a bit of a joke. But, yeah, we started to love it. The fitness you get out of it is amazing.”

New-generation pole dancing is slightly different from the original – more aerial and acrobatic, less bump-and-grind. Essentially, the dancer climbs up a pole, which can be spinning or stationary, and arranges her body into a series of improbable poses with names like the “fireman”, “crucifix”, “inverted back-hook” and “shoulder-mount jackknife”. A guest performer in tonight’s show is American star Jenyne Butterfly, whose

notoriously difficult signature move, the “flag”, involves grasping the pole with both hands and holding her torso in a horizontal position, as if she were an ensign flying in a stiff breeze.

Butterfly (possibly not her real name) took top honours in the first US Pole Dance Championships in March and has twice won the keenly contested Pole-a-Palooza competition in Las Vegas. A former gymnast, she doesn't hesitate when asked what she likes best about pole dancing. “It's the height,” she says. “The higher, the better. I am such a klutz on the ground but once I get in the air, I feel like I have all the control in the world.”

Pole dancing proponents say it is an excellent form of exercise, burning calories while building strength and stamina, not to mention doing wonders for the upper arms. “As you are supporting your entire body weight, you will see results much faster than you would using dumbbells and barbells at the gym (plus pole classes are a whole lot more fun!),” writes Suzie Q (definitely not her real name) on the website for her pole studio in Parramatta in western Sydney.

Runner-up to Cane in last year's competition, Q is a breezy redhead with a communications degree and a spectacular figure. She says many women have misgivings when they arrive for their first pole dancing lesson: “They're sort of shy about their bodies and really uncomfortable about putting on a pair of shorts.” To Q, a former Miss Nude Australia, the modesty is puzzling. “I'm like, ‘What are you doing? No one cares! Everyone's too worried about their *own* legs.’”

Pole dancers need to keep clothes to a minimum because fabric slips on the pole; skin is stickier. In any case, inhibitions fall away fairly quickly. “By the end of the eight-week course they're in hot pants and high heels,” says Q. “And they're just so much more confident and happy with themselves.”

Queensland finalist Kerrin Bradfield is a 31-year-old psychology graduate who teaches pole dancing at a Gold Coast studio. She says she has given a lot of thought to the motivation of the women who come to her classes. “Fitness is what gets them in the door, because that's the way it is marketed – as a fitness activity,” she says. “But I think they get a lot more out of it than that. It's a boost to their self-esteem and increases their awareness of their own sexuality.”

“I think that's what keeps them coming back – not only the changes they see in their physical appearance, but the psychological changes they get out of it.” It seems to Bradfield that learning pole dancing can be liberating. “I think these women walk out with an understanding that it's okay to be a sexual being,” she says. “And I think that's really important. I like to give my students that empowerment.”

IAM MULLING OVER BRADFIELD'S WORDS AS I sit in the darkened auditorium of Sydney's Enmore Theatre, watching one contestant after another teeter onto the stage dressed in towering heels (flat shoes are against the rules) and little scraps of spangled material. The women whirl, they gyrate, they do backflips and splits. They remind me of extraordinarily limber Barbie dolls. The audience, which is predominantly female, applauds wildly. Even the less impressive routines get encouraging cheers and whistles.

I clap, too, but a little uneasily. “‘Raunchy’ and ‘liberated’ are not synonyms,” wrote Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, a 2005 book that examined the apparently widespread belief among young

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women that dressing and behaving as sex objects is an expression of freedom. “Why is labouring to look like Pamela Anderson empowering?” Levy asked incredulously. “And how is imitating a stripper or a porn star – a woman whose job it is to imitate arousal in the first place – going to render us sexually liberated?”

Katrina George, chair of Women's Forum Australia, doesn't get it, either. “The definition of empowered sexuality represented by pole dancing is a sexuality that imitates red-light entertainment,” says George, a law lecturer at the University of Western Sydney. “This is a caricature of female empowerment.” From her point of view, “the popularity of pole dancing is just one example of the mainstreaming of porn.”

Nevertheless, pole dancers seem to think of themselves as a stiletto-wearing sisterhood. They talk about belonging to “the pole community”, they read *Pole2Pole* magazine (recent cover line: “A Pole Is a Girl's Best Friend”) and claim to be bound by a strong sense of camaraderie. According to Philippa Rasidi, it is not unusual for clapping to break out in a lesson when someone masters a new move. “The whole class will go, ‘Oh my god, that's amazing,’” Rasidi says, “because they know how hard you've been working for it.”

Suzie Q believes the just-us-girls atmosphere in studios is a large part of the appeal of learning to pole dance. “It's a chance to dress up, and you're in a very safe, female-friendly space where you're not going to be ogled,” she says. “You don't have that male gaze to contend with. It's just women supporting other women, and I don't think that occurs a lot in society.”

If women aren't disporting themselves on the poles for the benefit of men, is it possible they are doing it for their own titillation? “No,” Q says crisply. “I don't like that question. If you watch a beginner pole-dancing class, there's nothing sexy about it. Nobody's getting turned on. Everybody's struggling to learn some moves.”

Granted, the aim is to *look* sexy: “Obviously, you are learning to move your body in a more erotic way,” she concedes. But that doesn't mean it feels erotic. Far from it. “It's really difficult. You've got to sort of hold everything in, and everyone's pelvis is so tight that to get them to do a massive big hip circle and stick their bum out is very difficult. It hurts them a lot.”

As with so many endeavours, it's practice that makes perfect. “If you move your pelvis more

Princesses of the pole: (top) Allegra demonstrates the splits; (left) Felix Cane, the current world champion and two-time winner of Miss Pole Dance Australia.

Finals fever:
 (from left) Emma McDonald, Rebecca Hafner and Philippa Rasidi prepare for the Australian Pole Dance Championships in Melbourne last month; (below) Ellen Rasidi performing at the championships.



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and more, all the muscles around it sort of loosen up, so you're able to move it further and further,” says Q.

GW: “In a more sexy way?”

Suzie Q: “A better word is ‘flow’. A more ‘flowy’ way.”

FELIX CANE IS IN FRONT OF A MIRROR, FIXING HER FACE. “You know when you put your make-up on at the beginning of the night,” she says, “and you look at it later and there are these creases and smudges and you're like, ‘Why didn't anyone tell me?’” She catches sight of two tall, blonde Queenslanders who are nervously waiting for their turn to perform. Bec Cort and Blythe Tait are wearing brief but elaborate gold costumes and feathered headdresses they made themselves. “Are you, like, Amazonian warriors?” asks Cane.

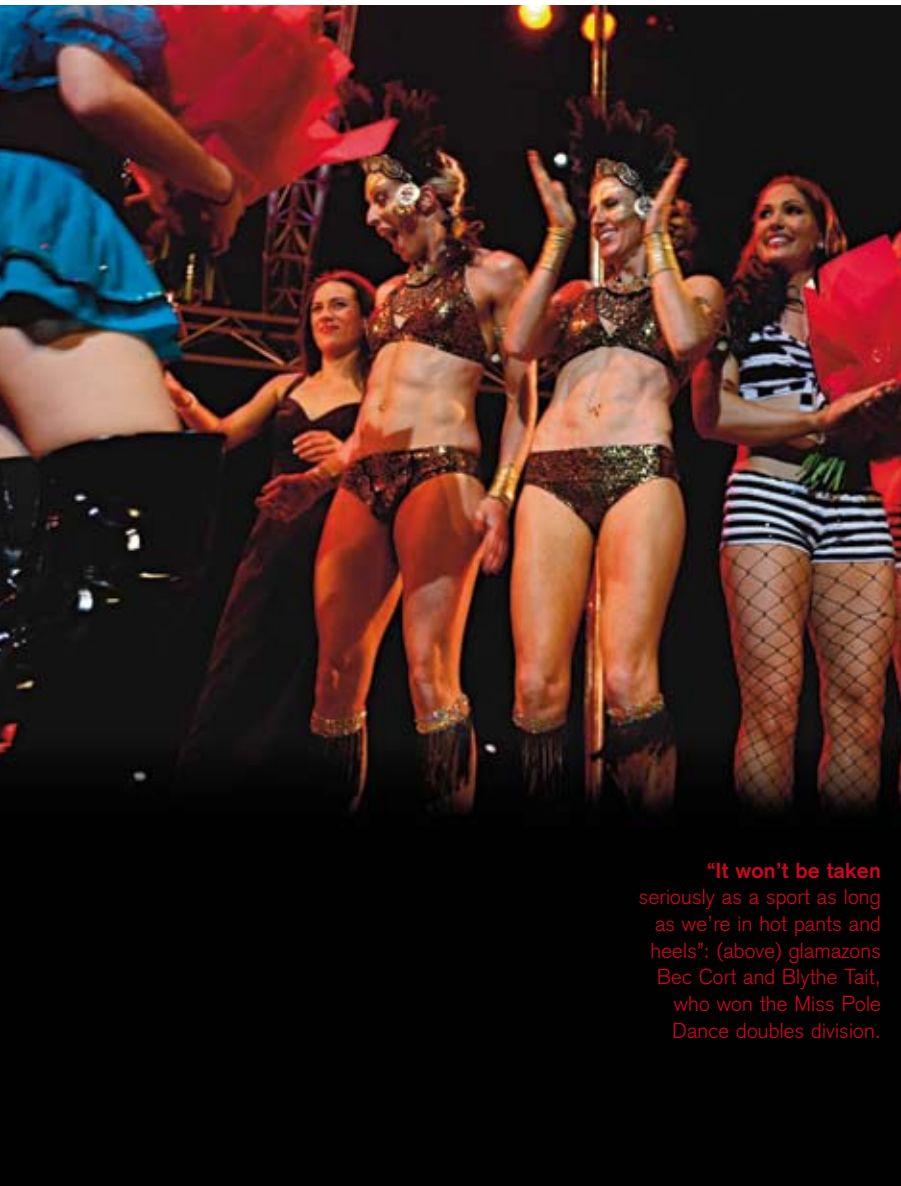
The young Brisbane mothers perform brilliantly, getting a standing ovation and winning the doubles category. The main winner, the new Miss Pole Dance Australia, is 31-year-old Allegra (no surname that she is prepared to divulge), a graphic artist turned pole dance teacher from Perth. Surrounded by thrilled supporters carrying large red letters that spell A-L-L-E-G-R-A, she sips champagne and explains that, for her, this is more a calling than a career. “I wasn't very active before I started pole dancing,” she says. “I was a bit of a couch potato, really. I'd tried other activities and never stuck with them.”

The gym, jogging ... none of them appealed. “I'd run for two minutes, then want to go home and die. Even now, I don't like other forms of exercise. It's only pole dancing.” Allegra has lost 15 kilograms in the past two years. “I eat a ridiculous amount of bad food,” she confides. “But I've continued to lose weight because it just uses up so much energy to do what we do.”

Behind the scenes, there is much shrieking and embracing as the contestants prepare to go out and celebrate at a nearby pub. Someone rushes past me muttering, “Things to do. Friends to hug. Boys to shag.” About a week later, I phone Allegra, who is still on a high. “Absolutely fabulous!” she says. “It was the best day of my life.”

THE US POLE FITNESS ASSOCIATION IS LOBBYING TO HAVE POLE dancing recognised as a sport and included in the Olympic Games. In a recent document, *Pole Sports: A Roadmap to the Olympics*, the association urges pole dancers to “fight the stigma that detracts from our fine profession ... Anybody who has seen one of our competitions knows that beyond the glitz and glamour of the lights lies the heart of a true athlete.”

Women's Forum Australia's Katrina George doesn't buy this for a minute: “Pole dancing is essentially different to athletics or acrobatics. When an audience is watching an athlete or an



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DEAN SEWELL

acrobat, they are primarily focused on the skill and athleticism, not the sexual value of the sportsperson. But that is the whole point of pole dancing.”

Two years ago, *The Daily Telegraph* provoked outrage when it reported that an 11-year-old girl was having lessons at a Sydney pole studio. Her instructor said the girl was merely getting fit but critics such as Julie Gale, founder of an organisation called Kids Free 2B Kids, countered that she would have been better off playing on monkey bars. It struck Gale as ironic that, while the argument was going on, girls of similar age were working as pole dancers in bars across South-East Asia. “It's interesting that privileged Western women have turned a symbol like pole dancing into something that's supposed to be sexually empowering, when for most women on the planet who use the pole, it's a symbol of exploitation, abuse and subjugation,” she said.

Miss Pole Dance Australia is staged by the Bobbi's Pole Studio chain. Each year since the competition started in 2005, it has been won by a Bobbi's Pole Studio instructor – a pattern that helped prompt a breakaway group to hold a rival event in Melbourne last month. The Australian Pole Dance Championships were open to men, and more attention was paid to physical prowess than to saucy outfits. “I don't think it will ever be taken seriously as a sport as long as we're in hot pants and heels,” says one of the organisers, Natalie TeKanawa, from the Girlfriend Fun and Fitness studio in Brisbane.

When I phone Bobbi's Pole Studio director Vanessa Brecht and ask why Bobbi's teachers always win Miss Pole Dance, there is a long pause. “I don't know how to respond to that,” she says. “I mean, we get the most impartial judges we can... I guess we've got good teachers.”

ARIEL LEVY MAKES IT CLEAR IN *FEMALE CHAUVINIST PIGS* THAT SHE doesn't want to be seen as a killjoy. If women like to gyrate in G-strings, good luck to them: “I am happy for them. I wish them many blissful and lubricious loops around the pole.” Katrina George is less relaxed. “If this is how far women have come,” she says, “we've still got a long, long way to go.”

For her part, Felix Cane has never regretted changing her mind about becoming a geneticist. For the past year, she has had a leading role in a Cirque du Soleil cabaret at a casino in Las Vegas. “It's a very sensual, very sexy show and it's really enjoyable to work there,” she says. “I couldn't ask for a better job, really.” **GW**