



The power of the pole

If you think you're too old to give pole dancing a go, meet the women who are embracing the sport for much, much more than its sexy shimmies.

WORDS / ELIZABETH FRITZ

It's fun and a little bit cheeky — and it's different. It may also appear to be a younger woman's domain, but a short survey of 16 pole-dance studios across the country revealed that more and more women in the over-40s age bracket are taking up pole dancing. In those 16 pole studios alone, at least 200 women in this age group currently attend pole-dancing classes. These are women from all walks of life including mums, businesswomen and academics. They have taken notice and they're signing up.

Pole-dancing women have discovered that this sport not only delivers an excellent all-over body workout but also offers many unexpected and highly desirable benefits that simply keep them coming back for more.

These are exciting times for women when something as "controversial" as pole dancing is proving to be the number-one choice of physical activity for so many, both here and overseas. Perhaps it's time to finally let go of the outdated stigmas that are still attached to pole dancing and to shift the focus to what really matters: the incredible physical and psychological benefits this exciting sport delivers.

"AGE DOESN'T MATTER"

Once you start pole-dancing classes you'll soon realise you have entered a whole new world: the "pole world". Terms such as "back-hook spin", "front crucifix" and "aerial straddle" will become part of your new vocabulary. And every time you hear a great song you will start choreographing routines in your head and, mentally, you'll be practising tricks and combinations, also known as combos.

Bruises and pole burn become a fact of life and, yes, ladies: short shorts will be your new workout gear. This will be a quick and natural adaptation, though, once you learn that having bare skin is essential for a good grip. And as for those "stripper" shoes, well, they're optional — but you only have to dance in a pair of these specially designed and highly functional shoes once and you'll never dance without them again.

Mother and accountant Simone Gribbin, 55, knows all about the wonderful world of pole and she now has her own collection of hot pants and pole shoes. Six years ago she was looking for something fun and physically challenging to do. "I always wanted to dance but never did; I thought it was something children learnt, not adults," she says. "I felt embarrassed and thought I was too old to start now." She did a Google search, anyway, considering all styles of dance, when she noticed something called pole dancing. In one of those synchronous moments, Gribbin recounts, "Soon after that Google search I went on holiday and I met a toned and fit-looking older woman who told me she does pole dancing!"

As soon as Gribbin returned from her trip, she signed up for classes at Pole Divas in Melbourne. She talked her daughter Shin into coming along for company and support and now they are both committed and dedicated pole dancers. Pole dancing helped Gribbin overcome her initial insecurities. "My attitude has changed," she says, "I've realised you can learn new things and that age doesn't matter. I never imagined that at the Christmas showcase I would perform a pole-dance routine in front of a group; it's my confidence that has probably changed the most."

THE HISTORY OF POLE

Many people still view pole dancing as too risqué due to its link to the exotic dance industry, so be prepared for silly comments and strange questioning looks when you tell your friends and family that you've taken up pole dancing. This is something pole dancers shrug off easily.

Yes, it's undeniably sexy, but there's plenty more to pole dancing and it actually has a much longer history than many people realise. It certainly predates the French can-can and the American hoochie coochie dancers of the 19th century, the latter being one of the precursors to the modern-day art of striptease. The earliest recorded pole dancing, in fact, dates back to 12th-century India and China.

Pole dancing, as we know it today, is a relatively young industry that has evolved from its diverse and colourful predecessors to take on a new form that's fitting for now; it's innovative, powerful, artistic and constantly evolving. The first official modern-day pole-dance studio opened in Canada in 1994 and has been credited to Fawnia Dietrich.

Since then, pole-dance studios have opened up all around the world and Australia wasn't far behind. In 2004, Bobbi opened the first pole-dance studio in Australia — Bobbi's Pole Studio in Sydney — and the same year Kennetta Hutchens opened Pole Divas, the first pole studio in Melbourne. This was just the beginning. You'll now find pole studios just about anywhere, from Launceston to Dubbo, from Darwin to Alice Springs — yes, even in the desert. Such is the popularity of this sport.

Dina Schmid, the founder of Desert Pole-Fit in Alice Springs and its former owner, says, "We are a small studio

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with not as many students as in the city, of course, but we do have two ladies over 40, two ladies over 50 and even a 54-year-old gentleman!" She explains, "It gives them a huge confidence boost to see that they are still able to do what the 'younger' ones do, how strong they have become and how good they feel in their own bodies."

Some of the over-40s women who've taken up pole dancing have gone on to become pole-dance instructors, like mother-of-two Sarah Thompson, 52. She started pole dancing when she was 40 and is now the owner of Miss Fit Dance Studios across three locations in New South Wales. She says, "Proving that you're physically far more capable than you thought is a real confidence booster. Our older students are extremely dedicated and focused on their sport, and it has become an important social outlet for them, too."

Australia now boasts many high-profile pole dancers, some demonstrating their exceptional talents and skills by competing in national competitions such as the annual Miss Pole Dance Australia and in various international competitions, including the International Pole Dance Championships. Other local talents sit on judging panels, teach workshops around the country and even perform at events like the Pole Expo in the US, where more than 40 countries from around the world are represented.

Top-level pole dancers display awe-inspiring skill and strength and easily slot into the "supreme athlete" category. Two such over-40s Australian women who have reached this high level of athleticism are Andrea Ryff, 42, from NSW, and Joanna Littlewood-Johnson, 47, from Western Australia. Both of these women competed in the 2015 International Pole Championships in Hong Kong, where Littlewood-Johnson won the Masters Ultimate Champion title and Ryff won the Masters Pole Art division title. These women are a testament that age really isn't a barrier.

Of course, not everyone is destined to become an elite-level pole dancer; in fact, it isn't even something that many women would entertain. More and more people are drawn to pole dancing, however, and it has developed into a legitimate sport in its own right with a worldwide following of women and men. It's no longer seen as some craze or trend and it's here to stay.



STRENGTH, BALANCE, FLEXIBILITY

So what exactly is it that makes pole dancing so infectious? After your very first class, you will quickly begin to understand what pole dancing is all about, what it can do for you and how it can make you feel. You'll also appreciate what is required to be a competent and strong pole dancer. One look at a pole dance instructor's strong and capable body will reveal the physicality and technicality pole dancing demands. You will develop a newfound respect for this sport and you may even wish you had discovered it sooner.

Perhaps one of the commonest reasons women take up pole dancing is for the exceptional physical benefits. The physical requirements of this sport are truly impressive; think of it as gymnastics on a pole. It's the ultimate combination of strength, technique and flexibility, with balance, timing and choreography thrown in. No part of the body gets overlooked — you will become toned, strong and flexible. No

wonder it's one of the best all-rounders currently available.

Pole dancing is the ideal upper body workout: you constantly lift your own body and move it into various tricks and combinations. It requires considerable upper-body strength and core strength to execute the tricks, which makes it an ideal sport for gaining and maintaining muscle tone, something many women struggle to attain.

Good muscle tone is crucial for women, according to Dr Matt Chamberlain, a sports physician and doctor to the Melbourne Vixens Netball Team and the Australian Swimming Team. "Ageing is associated with a decline in muscle mass and bone density, and an increase in body fat, and these are part of the reason for loss of physical function, increased falls and loss of mobility," he explains. "'Sarcopaenia', the term for loss of skeletal muscle associated with ageing, begins insidiously at around the age of 30 and [your muscle mass] slowly begins to decline."

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Adds Dr Chamberlain, "Muscle weakness is also commonly associated with lower-back and pelvic pain, which can be linked to weakness and tightness of gluteal muscles and weakness of both trunk flexor and extensor muscles, front and back." This, he says, explains the rationale behind core strength and back pain. "Pole dancing ... has components of weight bearing, resistance and aerobic activity; it seems to cover a lot of bases."

Helen Fleming, a Melbourne-based specialist musculoskeletal physiotherapist, agrees that it's essential to maintain strong muscles later in life, as well as balance and flexibility. Many of Fleming's older patients come to see her with issues due to loss of balance or function, which in many cases are linked to loss of muscle mass and a weak core.

"It's a combination of muscle weakness and stiffness," she explains. "As we get older, parts of our bodies get stiffer, and when we are stiff compensation occurs somewhere else. ... A strong core and strong gluteal

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muscles are really important to have. Core stability controls the lumbar spine, the pelvis and the hip, and the gluteal muscles support the pelvis and the hip. It's the combination of strength and support that gives you the optimal movement of the spine."

Pole dancing can help with that, as mother-of-three Charlee Fox attests. The 51-year-old co-owner of Suzie Q Studios in Sydney says, "I had no flexibility at all when I started pole dancing 10 years ago. I had the tightest hamstrings in the world — and now I can go down in the splits." Such was her enthusiasm that she now holds qualifications as a certified personal trainer and even went on to become a pole-dance instructor.

Fox has dedicated countless extra hours to stretching and to learning about fitness: "Once I started pole I realised I wanted to learn more about body movement. It's something I have always been passionate about. And now, standing in front of my students and being part of a family of strong women is my happy place."

POLE'S OTHER PAYOFFS

In addition to the physical benefits, there are numerous psychosocial benefits important to the overall health of women, such as self-acceptance, a healthy body image and a sense of empowerment.

"Pole dancing can be life changing for women and it fundamentally affects how you view yourself," says Sarah Thompson from Miss Fit Dance Studio. "To get fit and strong and to improve self-confidence is one of the main reasons women join up. It's a powerful self-affirmation to see yourself evolve and, considering we are living longer and are more enlightened, it's really not that surprising that more women over 40 are attracted to pole." The key benefits, she says, are "physical and psychological and that can occur at any age and life stage".

Pole dancing has the added benefit of being a great platform for mindfulness practice. When you pole dance, you pole dance. You are 100 per cent present. This is not the place to start wondering about what to cook for dinner or start stressing about something that happened at work. As Gold Coast psychotherapist and counsellor Linda Franke explains, "Mindfulness is simply being with the job at hand, just peeling the potatoes, just drinking the water, just dancing with the pole. ... With the physical and mental practice of concentration and the use of core muscles to move around the pole, there is a focus required that removes any need for mindless chatter. The practice of pole dancing could be compared to a moving meditation."

Pole dancing is also a powerful way to celebrate the body and to bring real movement back into your life. Franke expands on this by explaining the psychological benefits of moving the hip and pelvis. "Emotions such as anger and frustration can be a very uncomfortable stuck feeling in the body and the use of strong exhalation and movement, especially through the hips and pelvis, can help to release this discomfort."

Franke mentions the work of Dr Alexander Lowen, the man behind the revolutionary bioenergetics method (a form of body-psychotherapy), who talks about the "stuckness in the pelvic region of our culture due to sexual repression and lack of natural mobility". "With this wisdom in mind, I encourage anyone to move the pelvis and hips on a regular basis through activities that intensify the movement," she says.

It's the "dance" element of pole dancing — a choreographed piece which is usually incorporated into the classes — that many pole students look forward to the most. This is where you learn a dance routine that includes lessons on how to move the hip and the pelvis. Booty rolls and hip grinds, hip dips and pelvic thrusts are some of the movements you will learn. At first you might feel awkward, even embarrassed, but before long you will be grinding away like a pro, with purpose and confidence. It's incredibly liberating to try these primal moves and it's made easier when you have the support and encouragement of strong and confident instructors.

"Pole dancing also includes a powerful element known as group energy," Franke adds. "This is a community of women experiencing a journey of pole dancing together. Group energy has more vibrancy and humans are attracted to being part of a pack." Sharing experiences of joy and laughter, fear and pain, highs and lows is a huge part of the journey of pole dancing. This is certainly an added bonus and one that many women in the pole community value.

The powerful feeling of self-satisfaction that derives from pole dancing cannot be underestimated, either. It can take many weeks, months or even years before you master an aerial trick and you will never forget the moment it happens. This feeling complements the physical strength you gain and it's this combination that is truly empowering.

Besides all the incredible physical and psychological benefits pole dancing delivers, there is one other major drawcard: it's not boring! Women often stop going to gyms, quit jogging and find it difficult to stay motivated with these more traditional forms of exercise. Pole dancing, on the other hand, somehow gets under your skin and seeps into your subconscious and you simply won't want to stop.

It isn't surprising then to find out that one of the most frequently heard comments in pole studios is, "This is so much fun!" Fun is something too many women simply stop having — and pole dancing just happens to be a really fun way to bring a little sexy back into your life. 🍷

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