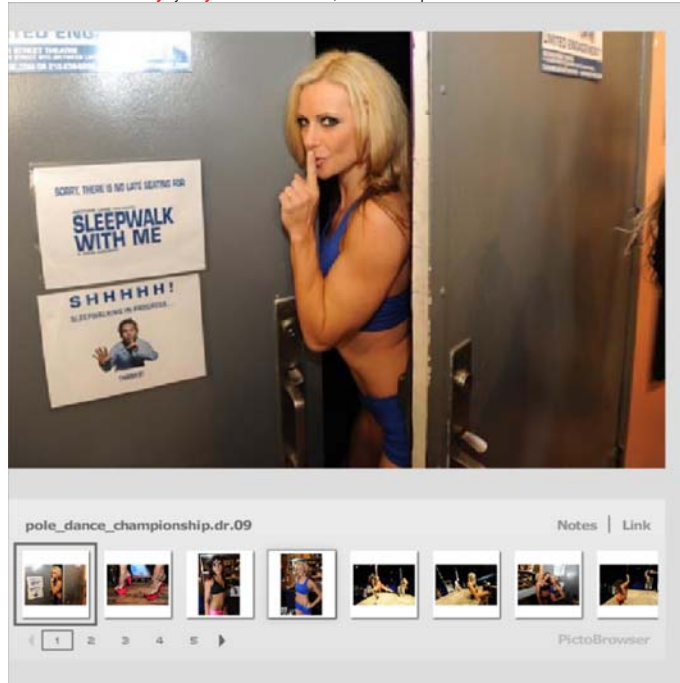




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Hot Recap: U.S. Pole Dance Championship '09

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Photos by [David Rosenzweig](#)

On Sunday 15, 11 of America's brightest and most flexible gathered to compete in the first annual U.S. Pole Dancing Championship, at the Bleecker Street Theatre. Originally, 12 women were chosen from more than 100 video submissions, but Michula Renee Nunez of California dislocated her elbow while rehearsing a handstand hold. She attended the competition in a full-arm cast just to cheer on her fellow contestants. These ladies are hard-core.

The competition is set up similar to an ice-skating event (complete with sit spins and footwear that could put your eye out). First is the compulsory round, in which each woman performs a 90-second fitness-focused routine. The women are required to dress more conservatively, and demonstrate required elements including splits, inversions, spins, climbs and floor work. The judges are also looking for entertainment, sex appeal, fluid transitions and "routines that make our toes curl," said Brook Notary, one of the three competition judges.

After the compulsory round comes the optional round, in which the contestants can get more creative with jewelry and costumes, and have five minutes to perform. These routines are anything but routine, with as much style and personality as the ladies themselves. Alethea Austin started with gymnastics in small-town Indiana; now she dances in black, and her music of choice is Alice in Chains and Guns N' Roses. She was the bad girl of the competition, and elicited a sharp gasp from the crowd when she dropped five feet down the pole and landed hard—in a perfectly executed side split. Chika Bradley from Oklahoma has been pole dancing for eight years, but took time off to have her son. She favors slow music, and her slinky floor work is almost reptilian.

One audience favorite was Denise Brown, who is a mother of two. The junk in her trunk is solid gold, and her crowd-pleasing routines married strength and extension with some old-fashioned booty-shakin'. Jenyne Butterfly stunned the audience and the judges alike with her strength and flexibility. At one point, she hung in a "flag" move close to the top of the pole, her body parallel to the floor, with the pole squeezed behind her knees. She paused for effect, then executed a full-body wave. Jenyne's double joints were triple jointed. Sarah Cretul, a paranormal investigator originally from Transylvania, had the crowd white-knuckled with her headfirst upside-down pole fall, using her strength and remarkable control during a lightning slide that stopped mere inches from the floor.

Cat Gennaro thinks pole dancing is the perfect sensual escape from her daily duties as a busy professional and mother of twins. At 43, she's never felt sexier or more confident, and it showed in her powerful and lyrical routines. Lauren Goldstein's parents not only support her pole passion, they came to the event to cheer her on. She's known for her feline floor work, sure to make Papa proud. A little razzle-dazzle was added to the competition courtesy of Brynlyn Loomis. She has an extensive theater background and abs that could shred documents. Her strength moves were matched by her pinup-style showmanship. Jessalynn Medairy describes her style as "edgy and infectious," and performed with high energy and graceful phrasing. The USPDF (United States Pole Dancing Federation) went with chrome poles for the competition, so she couldn't show off her self-styled signature move: a

suspended back somersault. Jessalynn broke it down for us: "Brass gives you stick, chrome gives you slick. I'm a brass girl, but chrome is prettier and cleaner."

Lian Tal was the rookie in the group, and humming with nerves. She's been pole dancing for a year and eight months, and her enjoyment outshone her nervousness in two routines packed full of energy, personality and props. When she fell during a pole trick in her second routine, she got right back up and finished strong amid roars from the crowd, proving you can be a pro even when you're still a rookie. Gabrielle Valliere danced for the NFL for five years and is currently becoming a nurse. Her drive shone through with athletic routines that utilized her mile-long legs, and included a pole-hang headstand move that shouldn't have worked within the earth's atmosphere.

At the end of the perfect afternoon full of splits, twirls and buff ladies laughing in the face of the laws of physics, there could be only one winner. Alethea Austin earned an honorable mention and was proclaimed "Miss Sexy" and Sarah Cretul was honored with the title of "Miss Trickster." But it was Jenyne Butterfly and her joints of putty that walked away with the crown and will go on to work the international pole.—*Heather Pamula*

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