

Pole dancers show style - but no stripping allowed

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Friday, November 12, 2010

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Chalese Stevens of Portland, Ore., practices onstage more than an hour before her performance in Redwood City.

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Although there was no award for best stage entrance at the U.S. Pole Dance Federation West Coast Regional Competition, Melissa Hein would have been a shoo-in.

Kneeling before two brass poles in a nun's habit and veil, she looked to the heavens until the Madonna song "Like a Prayer" kicked in. She tore off her tunic, Chippendales-style, to reveal a white bikini and 6-inch heels, then swung herself upside down onto the pole, did the splits and propellered down to the floor.

The audience in the Fox Theatre in Redwood City went nuts.

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Eleven women with serious abs and bone-crushing quadriceps competed Saturday for the title of West Coast regional pole dance champion, in a contest devised by the U.S. Pole Dance Federation, which formed in 2008 to steer pole dancing from the strip clubs to the sports arenas.

Popular for fitness

In the past few years, pole dancing has emerged as a popular fitness class, and fans are already studying the YouTube videos of the genre's first pole stars such as the first national champion, Jenyne Butterfly, and Miss Pole Dance Australia Felix Cane.

"These competitions open people's eyes to what it is pole dancers do," said judge Kira Lamb, a professional dancer and aerialist who has toured with P. Diddy and Gloria Estefan.

"A lot of people understand and accept aerial fabric for dancing, and it's pretty much a similar art form but with a pole," she said.

Because pole dancing is still somewhere between cabaret and athleticism, judges came up with some rules of decorum:

No nudity. No G-strings. No vulgar music or language. No talking to the crowd. And it wasn't even listed because no one felt the need to say it: Absolutely no passing money to the dancers.

But officials aren't blind to the fact that pole dancing's strength is its sultry style. That could be the reason behind the rule that all dancers must wear at least 6-inch heels in the compulsory round.

"That's what's so great about the pole community, it embraces both being sexy and strong," said Christina Kish, co-owner of Polepotential studio in Redwood City.

The competition consisted of two 10-point rounds. The first compulsory round was scored much like ice skating. All performers had 90 seconds to perform a minimum number of tricks: two spins, an inversion, a three-second inner thigh hold, three-second splits, and 20 seconds of floor work.

Dancers devised their own routines for the three- to five-minute optional round, and were allowed to go barefoot.

Las Vegas yoga teacher and silk trapeze dancer Amy Raven, 29, dazzled the crowd with her signature move, "the yogini." Holding onto the pole only by her armpit, she grabbed her ankles in the yoga "bow pose."

Top routines

Her routine earned her third place, behind second-place winner Shelly Lamb (no relation to Kira) from San Francisco.

Performing to Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love," Lamb showed great core strength, extending herself out from the pole at a 90-degree angle, doing the splits, and holding herself in a gravity-defying pose.

"It's really difficult to hold your body up, and when you practice and practice and finally get it right, it's this incredible adrenaline rush," said Lamb, 47.

"I'm definitely the oldest one in this competition, I think most girls are in their 20s and early 30s," said Lamb, who started pole dancing in 2007 and now has a business, Shelly's Pole Studio. "I hope I can change attitudes about women who are older doing this."

This year's crown went to Natasha Wang of Santa Monica, a contortionist who began her routine in a ball at the top of the pole, slithered down, then held herself in a vertical handstand on the pole, while undulating her entire body like an eel. She finished with a somersault rotation down the pole to the floor, in a magical move that amazingly didn't dislocate her shoulders.

All three winners will be given "pro" status, which allows them to submit videos for a chance to compete in the 2011 National Pole Dance Championships.

"I don't see pole dancing being a fad," Shelly Lamb said. "As people's opinions and stereotypes fade away and it becomes more acceptable, I think you are going to see a lot more of these competitions and learn what incredible things these girls are doing out there."

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This article appeared on page F - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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