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## Pole Dancers Swing into F.C. to Compete in East Coast Regional

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DIVAFIT IN FALLS CHURCH, a pole fitness studio, hosted the 2010 U.S. Pole Dancing Federation's East Coast Regional Competition last Sunday. (Photo: News-Press)

It seems as if any obscure activity a person can think of has its own professional league. People who eat have Major League Eating, attractive women who hate wearing pants have the Lingerie Football League, Major League Soccer, and so forth. But now a new contender has entered the professional sporting ranks and is trying to make a name for itself in a market that has been traditionally dominated by male-centric sports like football, basketball and (in certain areas) hockey: the United States Pole Dancing Federation.

Founded in 2008 by Anna Grundstrom and Wendy Traskos, the USPDF claims to be "the first organization in the United States to host professional pole dancing competitions based on a fair judging format."

Three judges, all with extensive backgrounds in dance, choreography, fitness and several other similar areas, judge the competitors using a 10-point system during two rounds. The points system was implemented in order to replace the old-fashioned method of using the volume of the audience's applause. But in the USPDF competition at the State Theatre in Falls Church Sunday, the support screaming from the audience for various dancers, particularly local competitor Kristen Novosad, seemed similar to a Justin Bieber concert or a scene from "Twilight" where one of the male characters is shirtless, which could have effected the score if the judges were even a smidgen less professional.

The line to get into the event at the State Theater was fairly long for an event held on a Sunday afternoon, especially with the Washington Redskins on TV playing rival Philadelphia, let alone for an event with "pole dancing" in the title.

Stretching from the doors of the State Theater to right across the Kaiser Permanente doors on one side and almost to Clare and Don's on the other, the crowd was overwhelmingly made up of women in their mid-20s to early-30s. While this would appear to be unusual to outsiders, those who had paid the \$65 ticket price were well aware of the physical feats they were about to witness, as several members of the audience were also members of the pole dancing physical fitness program Diva Fit, based a few blocks away in Falls Church, who came to support their mentors and fellow dancers.

Make no mistake. These contenders had the strength to crush a cinderblock with their legs, the agility to climb up a pole (sometimes with their arms, sometimes not) and the sheer concentration to perform complicated maneuvers high above a slightly waxed pole. This sport is clearly not for the timid or the uncoordinated.

The work that the participants put into the sport is enough to break even some of the most fit people.

**“ No matter how much I explain it, people still think that when I say pole dancing I mean stripping. It's not until I actually show them a video of what I do that they say 'Oh, thats like dance!' ”**

"To train for the competition, I did a lot of cardio, especially on the elliptical machine, for an hour each time, and that really seemed to help me tone up and be able to finish my routines without being completely exhausted at the end," said third-place winner Allison Cox.

2010 winner Rebecca Starr said that most of her exercise was done entirely on the pole, other than some stretching beforehand.

"Once I get on the poles the workout is pretty self sufficient. Pole dancing is unique in that it is an all-over body sport that works every muscle in your body simultaneously," she said.

The emphasis of the show seemed to be a desire to combine feminist empowerment with "sexy" femininity. As Starr said, "I think women like to see other women being confident and sexy. I think we all see a part of ourselves in the competitors, a part that we are striving to become... someone who has the strength and courage to get up on stage and wow a room full of people!"

Cox stated that the mostly-female audience was drawn to the sport due to a desire to reconnect with related sports from their youth (gymnastics, dance, ballet, etc.)

"Pole Dance and Fitness combines gymnastics and dance, which many women had participated in during their youth, and are seeing that pole is a way to revisit that later in life," she said.

"Women are hearing and seeing other women try Pole and loving it, so it's not a surprise to see that the majority of the audience in a pole show/competition is women," she added.

Although some participants have had to deal with accusations that their sport is inherently "sexist" or somehow undermines the social advances women have made in the past few decades, but Starr chalks it up to "just a misunderstanding of what we are doing."

"No matter how much I explain it, people still think that when I say pole dancing I mean stripping. It's not until I actually show them a video of what I do that they say 'Oh, thats like dance!'" she said.



Falls Church's historic State Theatre hosted pole dancers from across the East Coast on its stage. (Photo: News-Press)

"I have unfortunately experienced negative reactions from people seeing it as 'sexist' but I don't let it bother me. Anything can be viewed as 'sexual' or 'sexist.' It just depends on your point of view," said Cox.

When asked about the somewhat-expensive ticket price of \$65 (less than the average Redskins individual ticket price of \$90 but more than the average \$50 ticket price for the now-popular Capitals), Cox is quick to defend it.

"I don't think people realize how much it can cost to put on a production like a pole dance competition or show. Renting the venue, paying the stage crew to set up the poles, audio and lighting engineers, advertisements, promotions, and insurance can add up pretty quickly," she said.

"For the amount of money some people are willing to spend on a night out of drinking, I think \$65 is fair for a couple hour show to see some jaw-dropping performances they will not see anywhere else," she added.

Rebecca Starr, however, feels that "\$65 seems a little bit steep for the ticket price. I believe that if the ticket prices were a little lower we may get more spectators and the sport would be a little bit more accessible to the everyday person."

"However, the promoters have to balance tickets prices against the cost of putting on the show and I am sure there are considerable expenses that I am unaware of," she added.

Nevertheless, both women see the sport becoming more popular as shows like these become more frequent and the sport becomes more well-known.

"I see pole as a sport expanding a lot in the future. It has already come so far in the past few years. There is even a petition signed by several thousand people trying to get pole dancing into the Olympics!" said Allison Cox.

Rebecca Starr agrees, saying, "Pole dancing combines the athleticism of elite level sports, the danger of aerial acts (ed. note: one contender fell face-first off the pole onto the stage) with the artistic expression of dance and is evolving into a unique form of art just waiting to be noticed."