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## A live report from the US Pole Dance Championship

By Jacob E. Osterhout

While most sports fans eagerly awaited the NCAA Tournament bracket on Sunday, I headed over to the Bleecker Street Theatre in New York City for a very different sort of Selection Sunday.

The US Pole Dance Federation, better known to acronym lovers as the USPDF, was hosting the first annual US Pole Dance Championship. Twelve female contestants, chosen from more than 50 applicants, would be competing for the honor of representing the United States at Miss Pole Dance Australia 2009 and for a spot on the cover of next month's *Pole2Pole Magazine*.

If I was looking for a lascivious time, something akin to a Sunday afternoon brunch at the The Bada Bing! club, I was bound for serious disappointment. As many of the dancers and organizers would repeatedly point out during the afternoon, pole dancing is not stripping.

The dress code from the USPDF rulebook states, "No nudity, no G-strings or thongs. Violation of this requirement leads to immediate disqualification."

(Which is a good thing considering that, at the same time as the US Pole Dance Championship, the Bleecker Street Theatre was hosting "Night of the Butterfly: A musical for children and their adults".)

As contestant **Denise Brown** a happily married mother of two from Tennessee said, "We are not strippers and it is not a stripper pole unless someone is taking off their clothes. Sure, a form of pole dancing is exotic, but that's not all there is to it. Pole dancing is really about fitness, athleticism and artistic design."

In fact, pole dancing has recently become the newest exercise fad to hit America. Model and TV host **Heidi Klum** has even joined the movement. "I've never done it before, but I know that pole dancing is very in right now," she told the New York *Daily News*. "It's an actual workout ... I don't know how good I'll be, or what I'll be wearing."

But while pole dancing has certainly gone from erotic to aerobic, not all the sensuality has been lost. At the championship, five-inch heels, belly-button rings and tattoos were just as prevalent as washboard abs, well-toned biceps and calves the size of peaches.

"It is certainly a great workout," said **Carmit Bachar**, one of the three judges and an original member of The Pussycat Dolls. "But there is a performance aspect to pole dancing as well and that involves sexy."

According to competition rules, contestants compete in two rounds: a 60-90 second compulsory round with required elements, and a 3-5 minute optional round in which competitors choreograph their own routine. A panel of three judges then selects the winner based on execution, transition, originality, difficulty, flexibility, and sex appeal.

Sitting in the theater before the show and watching the audience stream in to the sold-out theater, I was surprised to see that the majority of those in attendance were female, and there were also many couples. One especially nervous-looking pair turned out to be the parents of contestant **Lauren Goldstein**.

"We're both nervous for her, and for us," said **Jean Goldstein**, Lauren's mom. "But we're here to support her. For a little girl, she is very strong and we hope she wins."

The favorite entering Sunday's championship, at least according to the contestants, seemed to be **Jenyne Butterfly**, a petite blonde from Eastern Washington. Despite her diminutive stature, Butterfly had already won pole dance competitions across the nation, including the highly regarded Pole-a-palooza in Las Vegas, which she has won three years in a row.

But a younger generation of pole dancers hoped to dip Butterfly's wings. **Alethea Austin**, a photographer from Los Angeles, and **Sarah Cretful**, a paranormal investigator who lives in Florida, each had the aerial skills and pole prowess to overtake Butterfly.

Let's I thought pole dancing was easy on anything but the eyes, before the show, it was announced that, due to an injury sustained by one of the competitors during Saturday's practice session, only 11 contestants would participate. **Michula Renee Nunez**, a pole dance instructor from California, had fallen during a photo op the previous day and dislocated her elbow. At the championship, Nunez sat in the front row and watched with her right arm in a large cast and sling.

The first round of competition failed to distinguish a frontrunner. Pole dancing, when performed at such a high level of skill, combines the strength of gymnasts, the flexibility of dancers and the artistry of entertainers. On a raised stage with vinyl tiling and two poles, all 11 contestants performed their monkey climbs, chair spins, candlesticks, firemen, tuck spins, and inversions admirably, drawing loud applause from the lively audience. (One group of women wore T-shirts that read, "Peace, love and pole dancing".)

In the second round, the competition heated up. Cretful, the little-known newcomer, dazzled the crowd with a sequence of aerial moves while hanging five feet off the ground. Never one to be shown up, Austin then took the stage and, with Guns N' Roses blasting from the speakers, blew the crowd away with a passionate performance that utilized the entire pole and all 640 muscles in her body.

But catching a butterfly is a tricky task. The favorite took the stage as the night's second to last performance and showed why she truly is "The Pole Queen." Dressed in a white two-piece outfit and veil, Butterfly lived up to her name. She defied gravity. At times, one arm supported the entire weight of her outstretched body. Her moves were elegant, her transitions seamless. By the time Butterfly capped off her performance with her signature "flag move" -- think of her as the flag on a flagpole -- the capacity crowd was on its feet.

And while the judges took 10 minutes to give the appearance of a formal debate, everyone knew the winner had already been decided. Jenyne Butterfly was the 2009 US Pole Dance Champion.

"It feels really good," Butterfly said afterwards as the crowd streamed out the theater. "I've never won a medal for pole dancing before. Normally, they just hand me an envelope of money."

And with a slight smile, the champ sauntered away from the stage to find her boyfriend and grab a bite to eat.

After all, a girl can work up quite an appetite winning a national championship.

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- Twelve contestants are chosen from more than 50 applicants
- Strict dress code: No nudity, no g-strings, no thongs



Caterina Gennaro showed off some impressive skills.

Jacob E. Osterhout/SI.com

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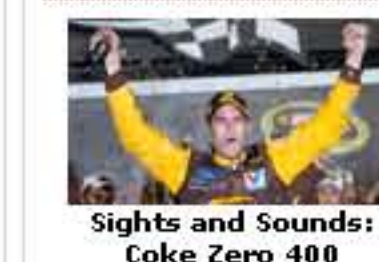
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