



Pole Position

Laura Rowe gets in a spin over a rather controversial fitness craze taking over Bristol

As usual, I'm a little late jumping on the bandwagon. Pole fitness, for those similarly uneducated in the term, is the act of moving your body round a pole, in different shapes and using different muscles, in order to strengthen, tone and generally get fit – essentially pole dancing gone respectable.

It's been nationally publicised over the past five years or so as one of the best ways for women to get fit, and seems to have become increasingly popular with students and young professionals through to bored middle class housewives – some even going so far as to install the relatively cheap poles in their own homes.

It's also been criticised, heavily. Some female commentators have called it “feminism gone nuts” others associate the sport with the seedy image of stripping in dingy basement clubs. But for Spin City founder and instructor Kate Johnstone, this is a far cry from the fitness classes she holds in her dance studios off Cotham Hill.

“I think it's a shame that such an artistic and gymnastic dance form developed through stripping. It's a challenging form of exercise and all of our teachers come from a dance and fitness background. We tend to find that a lot of people come to our studio with preconceptions, yet by trying pole fitness they realise

the health benefits and how addictive it can be!”

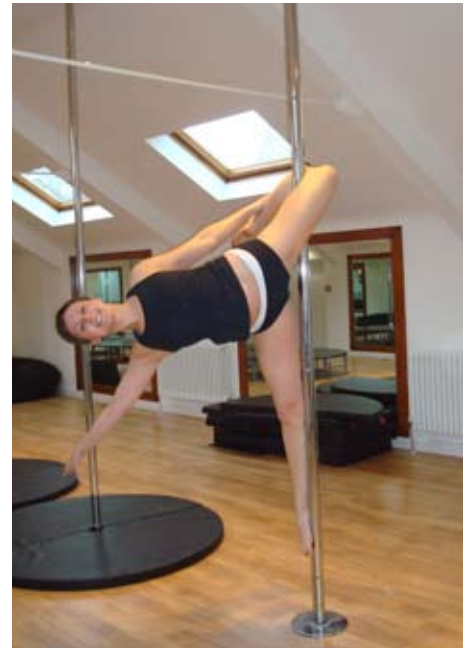
Kate first discovered pole dancing after sustaining an injury from Muay Thai kickboxing, which she had been practising for nine years. Pole dancing offered the chance to keep fit and strengthen, but with much lower impact and risk of serious injury. Kate launched Spin City at The Berkeley Centre in September 2008. By April 2009, the classes were so popular that Kate and her instructors (which incidentally cover an age range of 21-45 years old) moved to The Workshop, two dedicated dance studios, complete with spinning and static poles.

So, with this in mind, I headed to my first pole fitness class. I was told to wear comfortable clothes, although bare legs and arms were essential (to help grip the pole better). I wore my usual gym gear, shorts and top, and didn't moisturise my body that morning on Kate's advice. There wasn't a tassel or high heel in sight.

We warmed up. Like any other fitness class, we stretched and bent, and then we moved towards the poles. For someone like me who doesn't even like doing weights in front of people at the gym, this was the most intimidating bit. What if I looked like a bumbling buffoon? What if I fell off? Kate instantly relaxed me, showing me the moves on the pole next to me, helping me to mirror

“It's a challenging form of exercise but highly addictive”

(From left to right) Kate, who has been practicing pole fitness for two years, shows what a little practice can do



her, and repeating anything I was unsure about.

We started with the most basic, and famous, move 'The Fireman'. Kate showed me the motion (which as it sounds was just like spinning round a fireman's pole) and I copied. We started on a spinning pole, which moved naturally with my body weight, and helped me master the move more quickly.

"You're a natural," exclaimed Kate, as I ungraciously thudded to a grounding stop. We then tried the next move, 'The Vanessa'. This consisted of wrapping my inner right thigh around the pole, touching my toes together and pushing our hips forward and spinning to the floor, either landing on our knees or releasing and landing on our feet. (It sounds a lot more complicated than it actually is.) I was beginning to warm up and actually enjoy myself. Perhaps it was the fact that I was getting increasingly dizzy or maybe it was those much talked about

happy endorphins but this was a million times better than doing ab crunch after ab crunch in a gym. I could feel every muscle in my body being worked out. And I felt even more out of breath when we tried the same moves on the static pole, having to physically force my body to swing around in such an unnatural fashion.

We also attempted several transition moves – the walk and drop, presenting the ring and body rolls. After I seemingly mastered these basics Kate put together a routine. And, before I knew it, I'd just done a fluent, if not wholly elegant, pole-dancing routine.

"The benefits of pole fitness are firstly the strength gains (women tend to tone their arms and abdominals) they also get cardiovascular benefits (from the routines we teach) their posture improves as their confidence increases," explains Kate. And, I can certainly vouch for this. My muscles ached terribly for the next few

days, but in that satisfying "first bout of exercise I've done in a year" kind of way. I am confident these aches would diminish with each lesson and I've already booked my next one. The difference with these sorts of classes are that you look forward to them, instead of dreading the monotony of the gym.

"I think the lessons are so popular, because you tend to find most men are part of some sort of sports team or community, whether its Sunday afternoon rugby league, or a kick around on the downs with friends every Tuesday night. Women tend not to have this. Spin City offers them the opportunity to join a friendly and welcoming community, they don't have to be fit, or coordinated, they can be any age, shape or size."

Indeed, Kate's got nearly 500 students who range from 18 to 62 in age and in levels of fitness. One of her students has lost an incredible two-and-a-half stone after having lessons. Forget the men. Pole fitness is for women, by women. 🐾



Each of Kate's instructors can help you progress at your own pace

In detail

The class: Pole fitness (beginners)

Price: A four-week pole course costs £40 but you can drop-in for £12.50. Spin City also holds pole practice courses, pole Pilates courses, burlesque courses and dance courses. For a one-to-one private course like I had lessons cost £40 for one hour or £20 for 30 minutes.

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