

learn ... VERTICAL BALLET

THE ART OF POLE DANCING HAS
BECOME A NEW FITNESS TREND

Words by **Yayeri van Baarsen**, photographs by
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No, it's not scantily-clad women bumping and grinding a pole. It's not just something a group of giggling girls do for a laugh on their hen party, and there's definitely a whole lot more to it than wiggling your hips. It might be described as vertical ballet; but then, Marjan says, that's not the best way to put it either.

Belgium-born Marjan Richards owns Steeldivas, Cornwall's first pole-dancing school. Searching for a way to lose some weight after giving birth to her youngest child, she took up pole-dancing in 2004; with no classes in Cornwall, she taught herself by copying moves from DVDs. Having since obtained her Exercise To Music (ETM) qualification, the 35-year-old teaches pole dancing classes in Truro and Penzance.

Walk into the first 15 minutes of Marjan's class, and you could easily mistake it for some sort of Zumba. Eight girls in sporting outfits are stretching their arms and lifting their feet in sync with the beats blasting from the speakers. It isn't until after the warm-up that you notice that this is not your average dance class.

Marjan climbs onto one of the three steel poles and demonstrates a Marley variation move. She slides seemingly effortlessly around the pole, but when her students try to copy her afterwards, the groans – from pain, not from pleasure – prove it isn't →



as easy as it looks. In fact, from my own experience as a pole dancer, I know trying this the first few times will most likely hurt a lot and leave the inside of your knees black and blue. Marjan agrees: "Just as with any other sport, you'll probably end up with bruises and maybe even some friction burns."

I started pole dancing in my native Holland a couple of years ago. My personal reason was fitness; hanging upside down on a pole just seemed a whole lot more enjoyable than lifting weights in a gym.

In the past few years, pole dancing has seen a massive increase in popularity in the UK. Marjan thinks the appearance on TV shows such as Britain's Got Talent made people curious. I can affirm that the massive thrill you get when, after weeks of practising, you finally manage to let go of your arms and hang inverted on the pole supported only by your legs, is worth all the effort it took to get there.

One of Marjan's advanced students, Isla, 26, who'll be teaching the Penzance classes, agrees. "It's a challenge: once I see a really hard move, I want to master it, so I practise until I get it." Isla has been pole dancing for two years now. "I started because I wanted to try something that was good for all-over toning, as well as being a bit different and sexy. Now I dance once a week and I absolutely love it," she says. "It got me fitter and more flexible. Also, it has certainly given me more confidence."

Pole dancing originated in Canadian strip clubs in the 1980s, but nowadays there are all sorts of pole-related activities, ranging from pole fitness to pole sport. And despite being more widely accepted - there are even dancers who want it to be in the next Olympics - most people still associate pole dancing with strip clubs.

According to Marjan, who wants her students to be able to put moves together in a routine rather than performing one trick at a time, strutting your stuff on the pole can definitely

be sexy. "It can even be a bit naughty, it all depends on how you dance," she says. "My husband doesn't see it as sexy anymore, though, having seen the blood, sweat and tears that go into it." I can only confirm that attitude: my partner first thought it was appealing having a pole-dancing girlfriend. However, seeing me practise new moves with a red face, sweating, puffing and struggling to lift my body weight, he now prefers to watch the football instead.

Another common stereotype is about the kind of women practising pole dancing. "The main worry of first-timers is that all other dancers will be skinny blonde 18-year-olds with big breasts," Marjan says. "Needless to say: they are not. There is no age limit; all adults can join, as long as they are fit and healthy". Isla claims she has met some lovely people in the classes, "I got introduced into the pole community and there is no bitchiness, everyone is really supportive instead," she says.

And indeed, when I visit Marjan's beginners' class, all the girls clap spontaneously when Sophie Williams, on her fourth lesson, manages to do the 'crucifix' move for the first time. "I was recommended pole dancing by a friend," says the 26-year-old from Truro. "When I do fitness, I can't wait until the class is over, but here we all laugh so much, it makes the class great fun," she explains.

All the girls present certainly seem to enjoy swirling around the pole. Their reasons for joining the class might range from losing weight to gaining confidence and from building muscle strength to just having a social get-together while working out, but for Marjan the main reason to hang on the pole is dancing. "I don't want my students to be able to perform one trick, come down the pole and then do another," she says. "It needs flow and that's why I call it dance." **CT**

For more information, visit Marjan's website www.poledancingcornwall.co.uk

