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Climbing the pole to fitness, business success



Women take part in a pole dancing class Friday at the Pole Expo at the Palms hotel-casino in Las Vegas.

JOHN LOCHER/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

By ALAN SNEL

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Ashley Fox recalled opening her pole fitness business in midtown Manhattan a year and a half ago. It cost her and her business partner \$25,000 to launch the new venture and she faced the task of educating prospective customers that she used a 10-foot-tall pole for fitness purposes, not stripping.

"It was nerve-racking," Fox said during this week's Pole Expo at the Palms in Las Vegas. "It was a challenge finding a market because people thought it was about stripping. A lot of people stereotype a pole as something for stripping, but we focus on the athletic and artistic side of the pole, the fitness side."

Fox, owner of Foxy Fitness, is among the 800 pole fitness instructors, studio owners and enthusiasts — and former strippers — attending the second Pole Expo this week. Last year, 400 attended, so expo organizer Fawnia Dietrich welcomed the doubling of attendance and interpreted the increase as em-

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Business wants to slide into mainstream

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blematic of a growing, young industry. "People are realizing that pole dancing is more fun than a conventional gym," said Dietrich, who owns Pole Fitness Studio in Las Vegas and is considered the Godmother of the pole fitness movement.

From the looks of Friday's attendees, most were women in their 20s and 30s, wearing tight-fitting outfits you might see in hot yoga classes. They're not learning to use the pole to shed their clothing. Instead, they're looking at the pole as a workout tool to tone their bodies, lose weight, increase flexibility, build muscle and enhance their cardio capacity.

"We're trying to break through the stripper stigma," said Angel Stromley, a pole fitness instructor from Fort Smith, Ark. "People will call and ask, 'Do you take your clothing off?' I answer, 'No, it's a fitness studio.'"

Stromley said her studio's motto is, "Get fit, feel sexy, have fun."

Everyone at the expo — from pole and clothing vendors to studio owners — agreed that pole fitness is a growing segment in the health and workout industry. But nobody could offer definitive numbers. For example, Dietrich estimated there were 1,000 pole fitness studios in the U.S. But Annemarie Davis, who runs a pole fitness web site called, www.unitedpoleartists.com, said the number was 500, with 2,000 in the world.

It costs \$25,000 to \$60,000 to open a pole fitness studio. Customer rates vary. Dietrich, who opened her studio eight years ago, charges \$99 for a month of classes. Fox, the Manhattan studio owner, said her classes cost \$35 each or \$180 for 10 classes.

Paige Warthen, a former pole dancer and publisher of a Las Vegas-based pole magazine called Vertical Art & Fitness,



Participants in a class on motion stretch into their moves at the Pole Expo.

JOHN LOCHER/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

said the pole fitness industry is still in its infancy with a goal of trying to be accepted as mainstream. She spends \$15,000 twice a year to publish her biannual magazine.

"It's like a toddler ready to go outside and explode. It's not mainstream yet," Warthen said. She noted her magazine is "trying to show that it's lifestyle-based and show that it's tasteful to draw every demographic."

Expo vendors who sell ancillary gear such as poles and clothing reported sales are increasing.

Ty Knutson, owner of North Hollywood, Calif.-based X-Pole, said his pole dance equipment company sells 5,000 poles per

month, with sales trending upward by 20 percent to 30 percent a year. His poles sell for \$250-\$430 each, with 70 percent of sales related to the home market.

Victoria Harding, who handles sales for a fitness clothing company called Onzie in Venice, Calif., said her company has experienced a "significant increase in sales" in the past two years from the pole fitness community.

Other vendors were peddling hand lotion, including "Mighty Grip" and "Dirty-Girl Poletic." After all, expo organizer Dietrich said, "It's very important to have dry hands."

The Pole Expo lasts until 5 p.m. Sunday.