



Pole Up

Story and photos by Rachel Ferguson

Tashie rubs her hands together and shifts uneasily from one foot to the other.

“I am so nervous,” she says—to me or herself, I’m not sure. “I am so nervous.”

It’s 9am on a Saturday and Tashie is one of eight girls gathered in the mirrored activity room at Pole-Up, a women’s fitness studio. But Pole-Up is no ordinary gym. Rather than Pilates or Yoga, Pole-Up offers classes in dance and gymnastics-inspired disciplines like chair dancing, aerial silks and, this morning’s draw: pole dancing.

Tashie watches the other girls in the mirror, a group of five twenty-somethings here for a bachelor-ette party. They flip their long hair into ponytails and chatter, peel off sweatshirts to reveal spaghetti-strap tops and thin, tan arms. One of the girls, a slim blonde who looks like she just stepped out of a Noxzema commercial, grabs a pole and does a sort of bump-and-grind with it, waving her hips seductively and throwing

a hand in the air. Her friends giggle.

Tashie wraps a hand around her pole and leans her bodyweight against it, as if to test it.

“Man,” she says, examining her post-baby body, still soft and plump under her baggy sweatshirt. “I shoulda lost, like, 40 pounds before I tried this.”

From the outside, Pole-Up is inconspicuous, nestled in a strip mall on 96th street between a hotdog joint and a used furniture store. But stepping into Pole-Up’s small lobby is like entering a time machine to a 1920’s boudoir. Sunlight filters softly through silver and black zebra-printed curtains in the front windows. A black-shaded floor lamp, dripping with chandelier crystals, casts a soft light on dark gray walls and a plush black throw rug. In the corner, an oversized leather sofa begs for lounging and, behind it, through a paned glass door, I can see the activity room—a wall of floor-to-ceiling mirrors and eight gleaming chrome

Pictured above: Pole-Up Fitness and Dance Studio’s bright pink sign at their 96th Street location. Pole-Up is one of several studios in the Indianapolis area offering pole dancing fitness classes.



Animal print and crystals adorn Pole-Up's glamorous lobby.

poles reflecting blue light from wall sconces. It's all so glamorous, I half expect someone to offer me a cocktail.

There's no bar here, though. This is, after all, a fitness club, complete with yoga mats and a rack of rainbow-colored hand weights in one corner. In fact, pole dancing, once relegated to seedy venues with tinted windows, is one of the newest fitness trends sweeping the nation. In early 2013, the *L.A. Times* estimated that there were around 500 pole studios in the U.S., and that number is growing. Even Indianapolis, a place that's hardly known for its risqué nature, boasts three pole dancing fitness studios in its metropolitan area, all offering, in various terms, fitness, empowerment and confidence through the art of pole dancing.

Tashie is attending *Intro to Pole*, a 60-minute session designed to entice women into Pole-Up's series classes—eight-week courses that teach a variety of pole skills, including spins, climbs, holds and even “floor work”—the struts, shimmies and crawls that fill in the gaps between the more athletic moves.

Today, Tashie's instructor is Marcy Kerr, one of four pole instructors at Pole-Up. Marcy teaches all levels of pole at the studio, even though she herself has only been poling for a little over two and a half years. She is a sweet-faced blonde with a broad smile and an ambiguously aged face that makes her appear to be anywhere between 12 and 28.

But when Marcy calls the class to order, she is all

adult. She exudes authority. She instructs the girls to lie on the floor for what she calls “spin-up”—a term that elicits giggles from around the room.

Marcy's spin-up involves a number of what she calls “basic” floor skills, mostly back-arching, slow, sensual movements. “This,” she says to the class, “is a sexy sit-up.” And they watch, enthralled, as she arches her back, thrusts her chest forward, and lowers herself seductively to the floor, then back up again in one smooth movement.

“Now you try it.”

Tashie leans her head back, pushes out her chest and begins the descent, but stops halfway and rubs her lower back.

“Ow,” she says. “That hurts.”

“What hurts?” Marcy asks

“The back arching,” says Tashie.

Marcy tells her to try it without arching her back so much, and Tashie obliges, but when she returns to her upright position, she sighs. “That didn't feel so sexy,” she says.

I'm not sure what I was expecting from Marcy's advanced class—maybe some pillowy-lipped supermodel types, with impossibly long legs and enormous breasts. Instead, as the women begin streaming into Pole-Up's lobby a little before eight on Monday evening, I am struck by how normal they all look. These are no strippers. They are mostly middle-aged moms and career women dressed in sweats or work clothes, coach bags and sweatshirts slung over their arms. After class, you can picture them helping their kids with homework in tidy suburban homes, or watching their favorite TV shows with a bag of chips.

To Marcy, this is one of the fun things about teaching pole to everyday women. “We look the same as women who don't pole,” she says. “But inside we know all the cool things we can do. We can hold ourselves upside down, out to the side. We can climb anything. It's like you feel like you are invincible, superwoman.”

There are seven women in the advanced class, but only five have shown up tonight. When the last woman arrives, she casts a questioning look at me.

“Oh P.J., you were the only one I didn't get ahold

of,” Marcy says, cringing a little. She explains that I’m writing a story, and will be sitting in on the class. “If that’s ok,” she adds.

P.J. puts a hand on her hip in mock exasperation. “No, that’s not ok,” she huffs, but then she breaks into a grin and flops down on the sofa next to me.

P.J. has been doing pole for four years, and she’s not only an advanced student, she also teaches beginner classes at Pole-Up. She’s a self-described “Rocker chick meets middle-aged mom” and she looks every inch the part. Late 40’s, she has lines around her mouth and eyes from sun and smiling, her long brown hair hints at perms of days gone by. She’s dressed in a gray Pole-Up t-shirt and sweats, but has the air of a woman who would be equally comfortable in boots and motorcycle leathers.

“Before I started pole I was obese,” she tells me as we wait for the remnant of a Zumba class to clear out. I can’t contain my surprise. She is slim now, hard and athletic-looking. I raise my eyebrows at her.

“Seriously,” she says. “I lost 50 pounds. I went to my doctor and he was like, ‘listen—you’re obese. What are you going to do about it?’ He showed me a list of three diets and told me to pick one, and said I had to start exercising. So I picked South Beach and I started walking.”

But the walking didn’t stick. As P.J. describes it, it was far too boring. “I just got to the point where I couldn’t take one more step on the treadmill,” she says.

Pole dancing, though, seemed like an obvious fit. She loved music, she loved dance, and she had done gymnastics as a kid, so she found a pole studio and tried an intro class.

“I just loved it,” she says. “With pole, you’re not trying to be better than anyone else, it’s just you competing against you... to see how far you can go.”

“So what do you really love?” I ask her. “What keeps you coming back?”

P.J. doesn’t even pause for thought. “There’s always a new move,” she says. “It might be a big thing or a little thing, but there’s always something new to learn. People have asked me before if I thought pole should be an Olympic sport and I always say ‘no way.’”

“Why is that?” I ask. “Because there would be competition then?”

“Oh no,” she says, waving a hand at me “I love

competition. It’s that there would be rules then. People telling you how things should be done and what you can and can’t do, and that would suck. With pole, you can do anything. You can be totally free and creative.”

There is certainly no shortage of creativity in the pole community. Google “pole dancing moves” and you’ll find hundreds of amateur videos featuring spins, holds, climbs, and floor work—from the pedestrian to the downright mind-boggling. One popular video shows a dancer suspended upside-down from her pole, feet on the ceiling, holding on with nothing, apparently, but one leg and the crook of her hip. Inside the poling community maneuvers like this (which the women call “tricks”) can earn you a little piece of fame. P.J. tells me, her eyes lighting up, that if your trick catches on, they might even name it after you.



Pole-Up instructor Marcy Kerr demonstrates an advanced pole technique. Pole dancing has become increasingly popular in recent years for fitness and targeted strength training.

When the Zumba students have all left, the women file into the pole room and toss their belongings on the chairs in the corner. Unlike Marcy's intro class, the advanced students don't need any direction for spin-up. They strip down to their pole attire—booty shorts and midriff-baring tops—and fall in with yoga mats and resistance bands as if they've done this routine a hundred times. As they stretch, it becomes obvious that these women are friends. They chat and laugh comfortably with each other.

"You in town this weekend? Booty camp this Saturday!"

"I can't do it. I gotta go to the Farmer's Market."

"Oh, have you tried buffalo chili?"

"Naw, I just started trying eggplant."

There's a brief quiet as the women concentrate on a downward-dog position, but then P.J. breaks the silence with a groan. "Oh god," she says. "I ate too much tonight." A couple of the women laugh so hard they collapse on their mats.

There's an amazing sense of camaraderie in this class. The women call each other "Pole Sisters." They help each other with tough moves, and applaud one another's accomplishments.

"I could say something nice about every one of these girls," P.J. had told me before class, and she does. Katrina, she says, a slim African American woman with enviable curves, has the sexiest legs. Lucia, a petite, quiet Hispanic lady, "just floats" when she does holds and spins. Sam, the baby of the groups at 25 years old, is analytical and always works hard to master difficult moves. "You can just see her brain working," P.J. says. Marisa, a bookish-looking girl in her thirties who wears her thick-rimmed glasses even during class, is graceful and has the "power of grip."

I wonder if this type of support and warmth is an anomaly, if it's unique to Pole-Up, but P.J. assures me it's not—that acceptance and kindness are common in the female-dominated poling community. "When you take testosterone out of the equation," she says, "women are really good to each other."

When spin-up is finished, Marcy turns down the lights, turns up the music—a thumping Maroon 5 tune—and gives the women ten minutes to warm up with the moves of their choice. Lucia climbs her pole

as easily as walking down a sidewalk, grips the metal tightly between her legs, then releases her hands and flips upside-down. Katrina does a one-handed spin, her body extended from the pole, knees bent, as if she's sitting easily in a revolving chair. All around the room, women are climbing, spinning, hanging from the crooks of knees or armpits, doing graceful slides as if their bodies were liquid, dissolving into puddles at the base of their poles. I feel as if I'm sitting on the stage at a Cirque de Soleil performance. There's so much movement, so much extraordinary grace and strength, I hardly know where to look.

Tashie is looking at herself in the mirror, strutting toward it on tiptoes and swinging her hips to the music. Marcy has taught the class a short routine that includes this sexy walk up to the mirror, a turn, and a sultry slide down the wall, one hand in the air.

Tashie is owning it. She has her game face on: lips in a pout, looking up through her long eyelashes. Marcy calls out instructions—"walk up" "turn," "slide"—and Tashie executes them perfectly. With the lights down low and the music blaring, she is a vixen, a seductress.

Marcy turns the music down and brings the lights up to teach the next move. The girls return to their poles. Tashie is walking gingerly on her bare feet.

"Ooooo," she says, sucking air through her teeth. "That burns the bottoms of your feet, doesn't it?"

Marcy has an idea for the advanced class: they're going to design a pole routine, with each woman taking turns adding on moves. Marcy goes first, leaning against her pole and lifting one arm elegantly, then stepping forward, toe extended, like a ballerina. In the mirror, everyone copies her moves.

"Ok, now bend down," she says, collapsing at the hips and sweeping her arm in front of her.

"Crap," says Marisa. "I'm gonna have to hold my glasses." She secures them with one hand and does a sexy hair-flip.

Marcy straightens, leans back against her pole and lowers herself into a split. The other women groan, but follow her lead, sliding slowly to the floor, legs extended.

P.J. takes over the routine next, leg-kicking into a somersault. Katrina watches her and sighs, then

attempts the move, which looks a little more than a flop than a somersault. She frowns. “There’s got to be a sexy way for me to do that,” she says.

She tries again, and then again, until her flip is smooth and she lands pointing the toe of one of her long legs. She seems satisfied with the result. P.J. does a sort of wavy-legged crab walk to get closer to her pole, a move affectionately known as the “vagina crawl.” No one can keep a straight face, but they do it anyway.

When Sam, the gymnast in the group, takes over the routine, she wastes no time getting her feet off the floor. She calls out her moves as she makes them: “Reverse grab into a backbend,” “First grab into a lay-up.” Her maneuvers are gravity defying, her form flawless. The other women cheer her on, complement her technique, then try the moves themselves. Marisa’s glasses fall to the floor with a clatter.

Katrina laughs. “Girl, you better hold onto those glasses.”

The advanced class knows dozens, maybe hundreds of moves. As each woman takes over the routine, she calls out her favorites, names like, *Sexy Get-up*, *Bad Kitty*, *Naughty Flamingo*, and *Daddy’s Girl*. Every once in a while, someone calls out a move and adds, “Now sex it up!” and the women arch their backs, stick out their chests, or flex their calves.

Fitness routine or not, the sexy side of pole dancing, the side that echoes its bawdier roots, may be inextricable from the activity—a fact some women find to be challenging.

When Sam started doing pole two years ago, her boyfriend was dubious. He didn’t understand how something like pole dancing—so closely tied in his mind to stripping and clubs—could be an innocent workout. “I told him if he could do it, he could call it stripping,” Sam says. “As the tricks got harder, he started understanding.”

To Sam, pole is an art form, a way to show her strength and discipline. Even so, she admits, “people are always going to call it a stripper pole.” Last year she had a pole installed in her living room so she could work on new techniques. One conservative girlfriend was shocked until Sam taught her a couple spins. “She got it then,” Sam says. “It’s easier to explain to girls than guys.”

Even if it’s not the part she focuses on, Sam insists



A pair of sparkly platform heels displayed in Pole-Up’s lobby. The “sexy” aspect of pole dancing for fitness is often controversial.

that the sexual side of pole is still an important aspect for many women. “Women’s bodies change,” she says. “Maybe because of college or kids. They gain weight. They don’t feel as sexy. They don’t feel as pretty. Pole helps them empower their new bodies.”

For some people, the idea that a pole—often seen as a symbol of female objectification—could be a tool for empowerment seems a little dichotomous. Since pole dancing has emerged as a popular fitness activity, it (and the women who do it) has been subject to intense criticism. One article, published in the *Guardian* in 2010, described pole, even in the context of fitness classes, as innately degrading and “grim.” In her book, *The Great Feminist Denial*, author Monica Dux even described pole dancing as the “latest way to bash feminism.”

But many people—even feminists—disagree. Feminist blogger and pole dancer Kira Jane describes pole as being about “freedom, about movement... About celebrating being a woman.” Besides, she adds, “When the apocalypse hits: I’ll be hanging out safely at the top of a telephone pole.”

In the dimly lit haven of Pole-Up’s studio, the arguments that rage online mean very little to Marcy’s students. An hour and a half into their class, after countless climbs and difficult tricks, exhausted to the core, the music is still playing, and the women are still

dancing, every one of them wearing an huge, rapturous smile.

Marcy only teaches one spin in the Intro to Pole class. It's a simple move: grasp the pole, wrap one leg around, then swing your outer leg out and around into a spin. It takes a couple tries, but Tashie masters it, and soon she's swinging like a pro—one hand extended in a graceful arc. She grins wildly every time she comes to a stop, then swings her leg out into another perfect spin. For a moment, I think, she's forgotten about her sore feet, her achy back, and the extra baby weight.

When the class ends, Tashie is the first person in Pole-Up's small office, signing up for the eight-week beginner course.

The second Monday I visit the advanced class, I can tell something is wrong right away. Pole-Up's office staff, usually sweet and outgoing, seems somber. They greet me with a half-hearted 'hello' and then disappear back into the office. There are little pink tags on the floor lamp and the furniture with names written on them in sharpie. When P.J. arrives, she looks sad and a little tired.

"Did anyone talk to you?" she asks me.

I shake my head.

"Pole-Up is closing," she says. "This is our last night."

The news is a shock to everyone. Pole-Up's lease is expiring and the owner, Laura, had been working to secure a new space in Castleton. Apparently, the deal has fallen through, but P.J. is reluctant to share details.

Everyone in the advanced class has gotten the message before they arrive. As they file into the pole room to prepare for spin-up, they hug each other tightly.

"This is so sad," says Marisa, lifting her glasses to wipe her moist eyes. Then she looks at me. "We're... sad. We're just...sad." She says, as if it's very important that I write it down.

I ask the women what they're going to do—if they'll look for a new studio or not. Nobody wants to answer me. It's not that they can't imagine changing gyms. They can't imagine changing family. As they work through their spin-up exercises, they talk about a going-away party on Saturday. "Something with

alcohol," someone suggests.

When spin-up is over, Marcy turns the lights down, leaving just the LED strips at the bottom of the mirrors to blink from blue to green, yellow, purple. "Let's take 15 minutes to work on moves we want to work on," she says, and turns the music up until the room throbs with bass.

The women seem reluctant, like their hearts aren't quite in it tonight; but the music soon persuades them. Katrina closes her eyes and shimmies her hips to the music until she's feeling it, then grabs the pole in an effortless reverse spin. Lucia flips upside-down and holds the pole, extending her legs into a partial split. P.J. applauds, then rushes across the room to give her a hug. Marcy drags a thick, round mat out of the back room and places it at the base of Marisa's pole to help her with a new trick. 15 minutes turns into 30, and when Marcy finally turns the music down, nobody seems interested in getting into the meat of the class just yet. Instead, they linger, talking about how to clean their poles, how much sticky balm they should use for tough holds, as if conversation might delay the inevitable end. Marisa and Katrina wander into the lobby to sit on the plush leather sofa one last time.

"I wish we could keep this place open," Marisa says after a while.

Katrina is perched on the sofa next to her. She nods slowly. "If I had a million dollars to keep it open, I'd do it." She says. "I wouldn't even ask for it back. Just, you know, to bless somebody else."

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