

A Brief History of Pole Dancing

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In this short personal paper I will be writing about the history of modern pole dance, moving in a chronological order. This paper will only cover pole dance and its origins and will not discuss the intensive topic of social, physical, and mental influences involved with pole dancing. This paper will start with Mallakhamba, which will then move to Chinese pole, then sideshows in America, and finally modern pole dance as it is known today. It should also be noted that most articles regarding the history of pole dancing are mere regurgitations of the Wikipedia article. I will do my best in order to not only re-iterate that information but to deepen it and judge its sources.

To begin, Mallakhamba is a sport which originated in India involving a pole, which can range from 550 to 350 mm in circumference from the bottom to the top^[1]. Compared to other sport origins it is relatively new, with the earliest evidence of it being on a piece of Chandraketugarh pottery from 200 BCE - 100 CE. The sport is similar to modern pole dancing in that participants (typically male wrestlers) will perform gymnastic poses and movements while climbing up and down the pole which can be showy^[2]. However, Mallakhamba was meant to be more of a display of physical strength and prowess rather than a sensual artform as many of the poses were explicitly meant to train strength. The wooden pole was oftentimes covered in oil in order for wrestlers to rely on their grip strength to make their way to the top, this again reaffirms that this was a proof of strength and not an art. There are some other crucial differences to be marked here in that the Mallakhamba pole, also called the Mallakhamba, is much thicker than a typical pole dancing pole which is typically 1.5 to 2 inches in width. In addition, the

Mallakhamba pole is made of wood whereas modern pole dancing poles can be chrome, steel, brass, or even plastic for show poles^[3]. Still, this being the first instance of sport involving a pole makes it a likely candidate for being the primary influence of pole dance despite modern pole dances similarities to Chinese pole dancing.

Though there is no explicit evidence in the origins of Chinese pole dancing, there is a chance that it originated also from Indian Mallakhamba. Sometime during the 7th century CE, a Chinese Buddhist named Xuanzhang accounts that in the city of Prayagraj, India there was a group of Hindu practitioners who climbed a tall pole within the city and watched the sunset each day^[4]. In addition, Chinese pole is typical of the 12th century when men performed acrobatic stunts and tricks utilizing a rubber coated pole 5-9 meters high^[5]. Another source says that pole sport in China can be credited to the Han Dynasty which would place its range of creation to 206 BCE - 220 CE^[6]. It should be noted that the exact dates for the origin of Chinese pole is iffy at best and there are no strong sources for a good estimate on when the sport/dance was created. Hence why we will assume for simplicity's sake that its creation occurred sometime between the 7th century and 12th century CE as that is the earliest date with tangible evidence. At this point the sport became much more entertainment focused rather than focusing purely on strength and training since performers were leaping from pole to pole^[5]. The concept of a rotating pole to perform upon also came at this point in time which was incorporated into modern pole dance. Please note that modern pole dance was not created from Mallakhamba or Chinese pole but rather could have taken influence from them.

Transitioning from the 12th century all the way to the 1890s of an early America, many Ghawazi dancers who had immigrated to America brought belly or “muscle” dancing to travelling sideshows^[7]. These dances follow the typical routine of traditional belly dancing but

women performers in these side shows would also incorporate the center pole holding up the tent into their dance^[8]. These dances, also known as “hoochie-coochie” dances, can be considered the first instances of pole dancing being used for sexual or erotic purposes as oftentimes the dancer would be nearly nude. Although the origins of the name “hoochie-coochie” are a bit muddy, it can be agreed upon that a dancer named “Little Egypt” popularized these sensual dances at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893^[7]. While she is accredited with popularizing this form of dance, there were plenty of other dancers who engaged in these dances at state fairs and carnivals going all the way into the 1970s^[9]. The attraction brought in many men, young and old, due to their sexual nature of the dancer performing poses and moves on a pole and was oftentimes these men’s first experience with sex work. During the height of these performances they became so popular that they were introduced to Europe where a majority of the dancers were white as opposed to the traditional Egyptian, Black, or Middle-Eastern dancers, hence the term “exotic dancer” was created to distance from the preferred white dancers^[10]. These Hootchie Coochie shows at carnivals, often lasting 30 minutes, transitioned towards modern strip shows at gentlemen’s clubs with the decline in carnivals.

The creation of modern pole dance can be attributed to the popularization of full nudity “strip” clubs in the 50s and 70s. During the Prohibition, the ban on alcohol also helped shift society towards more tame avenues of entertainment which dwindled burlesque and vaudeville showings, alongside pole dance. After the prohibition was a surge of clubs and bars and with it, the introduction of strip clubs in which performers would go entirely topless, a breakaway from the traditional burlesque format. In 1954, Mary’s Club opened and this is cited as the first full nude establishment in America which featured many performances but most importantly, a brass pole in the corner of the stage for pole dancing^[11]. These strip clubs grew in popularity and began

popping up all over the United States whether they had poles or not. By 1968, Belle Jangles, who is often called the first practitioner of modern pole dance, performed at a club in Oregon, USA, highlighting the rise in popularity of these clubs in the following decades^[5]. Because of pole dancing creation in strip clubs this is why the sport is also often connoted as sexual in nature since this was, at first, primarily a method to earn income by showing off one's body in a provocative manner. However, pole dance by the 80s evolved into much more as studios began opening up to teach the broader public on techniques and skills of the sport.

At this point modern pole dance has already been established but it was not until the 80s that many new techniques were being developed and taught in studios across Canada and the United States. It is said that the origins of stripping came from Canada due to its lax liquor licensing and other laws and so strippers were well treated workers who even had agents to book them shows^[10]. Although there is no concrete evidence to back the claim that modern pole dance came originally from Canada it is true that many prolific dancers came from there including Fawnia Mondey, who is noted as the first modern pole dance instructor, releasing VHS tapes and DVDs for people to learn along at home^[11]. Mondey is a Canadian dancer who moved to Vegas, further building upon the claim that modern pole dance originated in Canada and that many dancers came to America and taught the locals tricks which defined modern pole. She also opened the first pole dance studio in 1994 which is the earliest recorded date for an establishment of this kind although other sources cite this as being false. According to Crimson Misty and AM Davies, two strippers commentating on the Yes a Stripper podcast, Mondey never actually established her own pole dance studio and taught out of a shoe shop in 1998 and instead, the first dedicated space for a pole dance studio was called Pole Junkies, created by Alena Downs in Edmonton within her basement space^[10]. It should be noted that this is claimed only by this

podcast and no other source online backs it up, not to mention there is also a lack of evidence in what kind of pole dance studio or the teaching environment that Mondey had established in 1994. Regardless of who opened the first studio, Mondey definitely helped popularize and deassociate pole dance with its sexual nature which helped solidify it as a sport with many technical movements and techniques that helped develop a general sense of fitness in people across the country.

Nowadays pole dancing has become increasingly popular as both a sport for the improvement of physical health and self-empowerment and there are still tricks and styles being developed to this day. Modern pole dancing combines the physical aspect seen in Mallakhamba with the showiness of Chinese pole alongside the sexual and seductive nature which came from Hoochie Coochie and strip clubs. Different styles of dance may place more emphasis on different aspects but it is important to see where these aspects may have come from and how they transformed over the years into modern pole dance.

Citations

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