A Call to Action:

A Rightful Place of Pole Sports in Sport Social Work

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"Wow, she's like an athlete or something, right? I could never do that." You say to the friend sitting next to you. He cannot hear you, sorry. He is mesmerized. You just left a professional football game and went to that world famous full nude strip club one mile from the stadium where moments earlier 50,000 fans were cheering for their team. On the lit-up octagonal stage, a young woman is casually risking her life doing an inverted crucifix on spin, a skill she picked up over the years. A skill that poses significant head trauma risks to pole dancers (Naczk et al., 2023).

You and your friend do not know this, but this dancer always works when there is a home game. That is when the money is best. A mix of home fans and visitors from all over the country are here either celebrating their team's success or finding ways to make the most out of a loss. Some of the dancers interact with each other, while others seem to be strangers to one another, and they want to keep it that way. The flat screen television behind the dancers on stage plays the highlights from the game you and your friend were just at. Other televisions are showing highlights from across all sports.

Unlike the athletes being celebrated on the various televisions, nobody seems to think about the athletic skills needed to be successful on the performance stage. Amidst the body objectification, patrons of the venue manifest their own narratives about the dancers – narratives that likely do not include the hours of training that goes into performing the art of pole dancing.

Background of Pole Dancing

Poling, as a form of sport and performance, has existed across continents for thousands of years, emerging from diverse and intersecting cultural traditions. Historical examples illustrate the breadth of its practice: Chinese pole acrobatics, which dates to at least the 12th century, and *mallakhamba*, a pole-based sport from the Indian subcontinent that integrates physical training with spiritual discipline (Alter, 2007). These traditions demonstrate the longstanding use of the pole as both equipment and symbolic apparatus in athletic and performative contexts.

In the United States, pole dancing was uniquely shaped and proliferated as both a sport and an art form through strip club culture. Its development reflects a complex enmeshment of earlier pole sports, circus arts, burlesque, and sex work. By the mid-20th century, poles were common features of strip clubs, with antecedents in early cabaret performances of the early 1900s. The contemporary global phenomenon of pole fitness is traceable to the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of individualistic fitness culture (Martschukat, 2019). In this context, dancers from the club scene began to establish independent studios, introducing pole-based fitness training to wider audiences. By the 1990s, pole classes appeared in commercial gyms such as Crunch Fitness (Singleton, 2023), which later partnered with XPert Fitness, one of the world's leading providers of professional certifications in pole and aerial instruction.

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Today, poling is codified as a globally recognized sport, exemplified by the establishment of the International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF), the regulatory body coordinating national federations and advancing efforts toward Olympic recognition. Yet, while the sport's gains in institutionalization highlight its legitimacy, it also raises critical questions for the specialty of sport social work. Specifically, what is the role of sport social work in engaging with pole sports, fitness, and culture? How might practitioners attend to the intersections of performance, labor, gender, and health within a sport whose origins are deeply intertwined with stigmatized forms of work and expression?

The Club: Athletes from the Margins of Society

One cannot accurately discuss the popularization of poling as a sport and fitness activity without recognizing that its very emergence as a global sport was driven by the athletic labor, creativity, and cultural contributions of strippers. Strippers popularized the pole both aesthetically and athletically, and it was dancers seeking ownership of their art and athleticism outside of the club environment who expanded poling into the internationally recognized sport it is today. The economic opportunities that stripping has historically provided, particularly for marginalized women, constitute the foundation upon which pole as a sport rests. Yet, this foundational truth also helps explain why poling continues to be excluded from mainstream athletic associations, higher education institutions, scholarly journals, sports research, and collegiate athletics. Its persistent association with the "adult" or "taboo" has rendered the sport stigmatized and has limited accessibility to athletic resources, including those offered by sport social work.

From a sports social work perspective, this exclusion has significant implications. Sport social work is concerned not only with advancing equity, inclusion, and wellbeing in athletic environments, but also with addressing the systemic barriers that athletes from marginalized communities face (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). The systematic exclusion of poling from athletic education, professional development pipelines, sports medicine, and sport psychology mirrors and amplifies the broader marginalization of sex workers. The absence of recognition within sport social work practice and research further entrenches inequalities for those who both work in and engage with pole sports. This erasure denies athletes access to the same range of supportive resources, such as trauma-informed care, injury prevention, or career development, that are increasingly emphasized in other athletic contexts (Moore, 2016).

Given its origins and cultural positioning, many polers come from communities that already face structural disadvantage and stigma: women, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, current and former sex workers, and survivors of sex trafficking. Here, sport social work has a unique responsibility to parse critical distinctions while acknowledging shared spaces. It is essential to differentiate between consenting sex workers and strippers who exercise agency over their labor, and those who are victims of trafficking and exploitation. Both may occupy the same clubs, stages, and environments, but their lived experiences diverge in profound ways. While strip clubs are technically regulated as legitimate businesses in most jurisdictions, they are not immune to serving as sites of trafficking, sometimes with the complicity of club owners and management, and other times without.

These realities underscore the urgency for sport social work to engage more deeply with pole sports and their affiliated industries. Doing so requires developing practice frameworks that attend to the intersections of stigma, labor, health, and athletic identity. It also demands expanding the scope of sport social work research to include pole athletes, ensuring that questions of legitimacy, access, and wellbeing are not dismissed because of the sport's connection to sex work. By ignoring poling, the profession inadvertently reinforces the very stigmas it seeks to dismantle and misses an opportunity to advocate for one of the most marginalized yet athletically rigorous sporting communities in the world.

Sexual Ethics, Pole Dance, and Sport Social Work

The intersection of sport and sex trafficking is a documented and legitimate phenomenon (Moore et al., 2022). Yet, despite extensive overlap among sport, sport entertainment, pole dancing, sex work, and sexual exploitation, little research has examined these intersections in a systematic or sustained way. Pole dancing, positioned simultaneously within sports entertainment, adult entertainment, and performance art, is inextricably tied to broader concerns of labor exploitation in both sport and the adult entertainment industry. Few social spaces more starkly illuminate these overlaps than strip clubs, where athletic performance, commodification, and vulnerability to trafficking converge. Consequently, pole sport represents a unique site of athletic practice marked by both empowerment and exploitation, making it an important yet overlooked arena for inquiry within sport

social work.

A pressing ethical question arises: what resources and protections are available to working pole dancers who face risks of sexual exploitation? At present, the answer is strikingly limited. Pole athletes have few professional allies. Recognition from sport service providers, including social workers, athletic trainers, and health professionals, is largely absent. This absence represents not only a research gap but also a systemic ethical failure (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Sport social work, as a sub-specialty dedicated to advancing athlete well-being, equity, and justice, must explicitly acknowledge and address the exclusion of pole dancers, sex workers, and trafficking victims from both scholarship and practice.

Addressing sexual exploitation in sport requires evidence and evidence-based practice. For sport social workers, this necessitates a deliberate effort to generate research, expand theoretical frameworks, and develop practice models that include pole dancers and athletes working in adult entertainment contexts. Without such engagement, the sub-specialty risks reinforcing stigma and perpetuating systemic neglect. Moreover, the continued avoidance of pole sport within sport social work undermines the profession's stated purpose: to mitigate the unique forms of exploitation, marginalization, and harm that athletes encounter (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2025).

Addressing the Professional Discrepancy

To begin, sport social workers must proactively cultivate knowledge of pole sports, including their regulatory bodies, training certifications, safety practices, and equipment (e.g., grip products, footwear, pole apparatus). Equally essential is a commitment to understanding the complex sociologies and lived realities of strippers and working pole dancers across diverse contexts. Such preparation can translate into practice by designing prevention and intervention strategies that address sexual abuse and exploitation in pole dancing spaces (both clubs and studios), supporting labor organization and unionization efforts for strippers seeking workplace protections, providing mental health services to pole athletes navigating injury, harassment, or trauma, and collaborating with dancers to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts.

There is also a need to recognize and support social workers who themselves have lived experience with pole dancing. Many have entered the profession after working in strip clubs to finance their education, or through engagement with pole sport in studio settings. Yet, structural supports for these practitioners, who hold unique positional knowledge and advocacy potential, are minimal. Their skills, insights, and embodied expertise are invaluable to strengthening athletic services and developing culturally responsive interventions. Consulting with athletes who directly navigate sexual exploitation in their sport is not only pragmatic but also ethically necessary if social work seeks to advance equity within sports practice.

Despite pole dancing's long history and cultural significance, scholarly engagement with its historical, cultural, and biopsychosocial complexities remains sparse. This gap contributes to ongoing stigmatization and the systematic neglect of pole athletes within professional practice. Impacted pole dancing populations deserve informed and committed allies across social work, mental health, and sport-based professions. Sport social work, in particular, is uniquely positioned to fill this void by producing research, cultivating practice expertise, and building advocacy frameworks that recognize and legitimize pole sport as both a site of athleticism and a locus of vulnerability.

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