



Pole sports, pole dance, pole fitness, the differences?

As President of the Swiss federation, I am often asked this question, especially from the parents of young athletes, "does my child do "pole dance" or "pole sports" in his club? ". The question is legitimate because the rapid development of the discipline is not always accompanied by satisfying explanations. In 2020, Switzerland will be hosting the World Pole Sports¹ Championships, it is necessary to clarify the terminology.

"Pole dance", "pole sports" or "pole fitness" but what do these terms mean? Are we talking about the same thing or are they different disciplines?

First, it is interesting to note that the answer depends on four aspects: The appearance of terms over time; Recognition by global organizations; The form of practice exercised; The type of competition practiced.

Through each of these four aspects, the terms will take on different connotations.

1. The appearance of these terms in time

Without retracing the history of the discipline, it is interesting to note that the term "pole dance" appeared around 1920 in America. This term is borrowed from English, which translates into French as "dance of the bar" or "dance around the vertical bar". The fairgrounds used the bars that supported their tents as support during dance and perform performances but also sensuality or even eroticism.

The term "pole sports" appeared between 1990 and the 2000s. It is introduced by several practitioners who claim the importance of physical condition and the gymnastic part of the discipline². The appearance of competitions has led to the codification of figures who have been given names. Dance has become more and more regulated in order to make the choreographies by judges objectifiable.

Popular parlance, frequently uses the term "pole fitness" as a synonym for pole sport. Steeped in the same recognition claim, the expression appeared in the year 2000.

2. Recognition of official world organizations

The evolution of the situation is marked by the integration of the discipline within world-renowned organizations. In order to understand this well, let's combine certain dances that have followed an evolution similar to our discipline of interest. Like dance, "pole dance" is a practice that is part of the family of art and culture³. In 1992, standard dances and Latin dances were officially freed from the sphere of dance. They are presented today "sports dances" and legislated by the World Federation of Sports Dance⁴. Like dance, the history of the discipline that uses vertical bars goes along a similar path. Since October 2017, the discipline

¹ The World Pole Sports Championships (WPSC) will take place from 15 to 18 October in Lausanne.

² Siobhan Burke, « *Pole Dancing Without Nudity or G-Strings. Just Express Yourself.* », *The New York Times*, 19 avril 2019

³ It was in 2015 that the International Dance Council (IDC) recognised that pole dance "is a dance in its own right on the occasion of the 40th Congress of Dance Research". (Wikipédia, 2020)

⁴ In 1992, the World Dance Sport Federation became a member of the Global Association of International Sports Federation and in 1997 received recognition from the International Olympic Committee. (Wikipédia, 2019)



under the term “pole sports”⁵ has been recognized as a sport in its own right by the Global Association of International Sports Federation (GAISF)⁶ just as sports dances became in 1992.

3. The form of practice exercised by individuals

From the athlete's or artist's point of view, whether the terminology used is “pole sports” or “pole dance”, it doesn't matter at the initiation level. Learning the basic practice of the discipline is basically similar. For grip and safety reasons, the techniques for learning the main tool when making figures or their sequences are identical.

Nevertheless, a distinction appears early in the style practiced by the protagonists or according to the structure framing the students. It arises from the regulations or its absence in the performances of figures.

As stated above, the integration of pole sport into the world organization (GAISF) indicates that “pole sports” respects the Olympic Charter which sets out the fundamental principles and essential values of all the major sporting disciplines. Among these is the formalization of a code of points regulating the execution and realization of key figures and the construction of performances, etc.⁷ Therefore, if the training aims to obtain the execution of tricks according to this code, the athlete practices “pole sports”.

In the case of “pole dance”, for example, the practice of art may have its own objective by the presentation at artistic events. A harmonious and aesthetic execution will be needed with no other reference than individual creativity or that of a director.

Simply put, “pole sports” seeks to put artistic performance at the service of a gymnastics performance, while “pole dance” will do the opposite, to put physical performance at the service of artistic performance. Nevertheless, both include dance, transitions between two figures, and the whole imprint of a search for grace, fluidity and musicality.

However, there is a major difference. The practice of “pole sports”, as recognized by GAISF, excludes the explicit use of nudity and eroticism while “pole dance” does not exclude it!

We will add that the practice of discipline is very similar to the definition of physical activity as described by the World Health Organization (WHO).

⁵ Pole sports is a set of disciplines standardized by various strict regulations conferring one of the indispensable aspects for the recognition of a discipline as a sport. The pole sports thus brings together the disciplines Pole Sport, Artistic Pole, Para-Pole and Ultra Pole, as defined by the International Sport Pole Federation (IPSF).

⁶ <https://gaissf.sport/about/observers/>

⁷ The discipline of pole sport has a code of points of more than 180 pages.



4. The type of competition practiced

In the continuity of the style practiced during the learning period or the objectives searched for, some of the protagonists will join competitions. There are many competitions around the world.

Among them, we can count the championships and competitions organized and regulated by the International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF). The IPSF is the only international “pole sports” organization recognized by GAISF as an Observer member, since October 2017. This status imparts on the IPSF and its members, associations and national federations the enjoyment of being the only competent authorities to represent the disciplines of “pole sports” in their respective countries⁸. The competitions organized by the national federations affiliated to the IPSF bring together the disciplines of Pole Sport, Artistic Pole, Para Pole and Ultra Pole, as defined by the International Federation under the main support of “pole sports”.

However, all other competitions do not benefit from such degree of recognition or organization. In fact, any competition that is not under IPSF regulation is a pole dance competition.

In conclusion

First, we can say that the evolution of the discipline over time is represented by its name. The practice that was done between the years 1920 to 1990 is symbolized by the term “pole dance”, while since the 2000s, a more gymnastic practice embodies by the terminology of “pole sports”.

Implicitly, the practice of “pole sports” indicates the unique affiliation to the GAISF world organization which, after the Olympic Committee, is the second instance of recognition of a discipline as being a sport.

The style practiced by athletes, artists or depending on the coaching structure, arises from whether or not a code of points is followed. “Pole sports” enthusiasts aim for the perfect performance of the figures according to the reference regulation for the discipline while “pole dance” practitioners seek harmony of execution and aesthetics, without other references. The practice of “pole sports”, as recognized by GAISF, excludes the explicit use of nudity and eroticism while “pole dance” does not exclude it.

Only the championships and competitions organized by the national federations under the support of the IPSF enjoy the authority to represent the disciplines of “pole sports”. Other competitions do not benefit from such a degree of recognition or organization. They are therefore considered as “pole dance” competitions.

⁸ Other international bodies organise competitions in Europe and in the world but do not benefit from the EXCLUSIVE recognition of the GAISF.



But then, what type of practice do our children do?

We have seen that the terms have different connotations across the four aspects described. The appropriate term depends on the objective searched for and the athlete's personal affinity, or on the main orientation of the training club.

In Switzerland, for the past 3 years, the evolution of the discipline has attracted an increasing number of young people. Statistics show a 300% increase in attendance for under 16, in some training clubs as well as in IPSF-regulated championships.

This is why, from the point of view of the Swiss Pole Sports Federation, the future of the discipline is reflected in the terminology of "pole sports". On one hand, the recognition opens strong possibilities for development, and this, for all ages without any distinction and on the other, the terminology is found far from any stigma of another age.

Lausanne January 8, 2020

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