
Not Just Early Olympic Fashion Statements: Bathing Suits, Uniforms, and Sportswear

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The recent decision by the International Volleyball Federation to enforce dress codes upon male and female players highlights the significance of clothing apparel in the social construction of modern sport. This is not a new phenomenon, however, as fashion has always played a role in determining how female athletes experience sport. Indeed, Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic Games of the early 1900s were an important medium for the expression of social and sexual mores through sport fashion and competitive costume.

Traditional Victorian ideals about how a woman should act and dress were not limited to the Victorian Era alone. Upper class white men during the late 1800s and early 1900s had a tremendous influence on societal norms and beliefs and by extension on the general population. Sport of course was a part of these spheres of influence. Distinct gender identities were constructed through medical and social ideologies with respect to work, play, and cultural activity. In 19th century Britain, the United States, and Canada, sport was a proving ground for the development of appropriate masculinities. Sport was intended to create men out of boys; physicality and competition signified some of the most important qualities of manhood and the Olympic Games were an important international avenue for the expression of these values. At the opposite end of the spectrum it was considered inappropriate for women to participate in physical activity for fear that they would develop masculine qualities or suffer physiological problems. At the turn of the century female participation in sports or physical activity was still deemed a social taboo.

Post Victorian Era fashion reinforced social mores about the position that women were to hold in society. Victorian fashion design for women restricted and controlled movement, ensuring that any sort of physical activity would be impractical and uncomfortable. Women were to give the impression of appropriate femininity with every step and gesture; with the use of the corset, the hoop skirt and the bustle, an idealistic representation of femininity was preserved.

The newly formed International Olympic Committee¹ (IOC) was headed by a traditionally Victorian aristocrat, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who personally chose the members of the committee who were generally also Princes, Barons, or very wealthy men. Coubertin's Games were intended for sporting gentlemen, a group of like-minded individuals with common interests and attitudes toward social progress and competition. Coubertin had no intention of allowing women to participate in 'his' Games, a common male attitude made clear by his statement that women's participation in sport was contrary to the "Laws of Nature."² This paper will show that the message about women's bodies and female sexuality were challenged by female participants in the Olympic Games between 1900 and 1932 and that as the Olympic Games grew in popularity and importance, female athletes began to discard traditional athletic attire for clothing that would not inhibit their athletic performance.

Pierre de Coubertin stated that "the Olympic Games must be reserved for men."³ When Coubertin began his revival of the modern Olympic Games, he had no intention of including women's events on the program, but the Paris organizing committee did include women's events and thus began female athletes' determination to prove their physical prowess despite a lack of public support. Through women's participation in the Olympic Games and other sporting events, women began to assert a new definition of femininity, contrary to the traditional Victorian ideals. Increased participation in sport helped women to modify traditional Victorian fashion and the Olympic Games became a venue for women to display more practical garments that were more suitable for athletic competition.

Until 1912, local organizing committees prepared the competitive program of the Olympic Games. As a result, a limited number of women's events were included at the second Games in Paris. Coubertin, a product of Victorian aristocracy, detested the idea of women competing in the Games stating that women's sport was "the most unaesthetic sight human eyes could contemplate."⁴

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He was eventually forced to acknowledge the fact that women's events were a part of the Olympic program, but his sentiments were clear about women's participation:

We feel that the Olympic Games must be reserved for men, As the saying goes: a door must be opened or closed. Can women be given access to *all* the Olympic events? No? Then why permit them some and bar them from others? And especially, on what basis does one establish the line between events permitted and events prohibited? There are not just tennis players and swimmers (both events already in the Olympics for women). There are also fencers, horsewomen, and in America there have also been rowers. Tomorrow, perhaps, there will be women runners or even soccer players. Would such sports practiced by women constitute an edifying sight before crowds assembled for and Olympiad? We do not think that such a claim can be made.... Such is not our idea of the Olympic Games in which we feel [that] we have tried and that we must continue to try to achieve the following definition: the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, arts for its setting, and female applause as reward.⁵

Coubertin acknowledged that women were becoming more active in sport, but he did not approve. In spite of his misgivings, female athletes' participation in the Olympic Games began to increase.

Alice Milliat, a widowed rowing enthusiast from France, was the woman who ultimately pushed the IOC to include women's track and field in the Olympic program. In 1919 Milliat, on behalf of the Fédération des Sociétés Féminines Sportives de France, proposed the inclusion of women's track and field in the 1920 and 1924 Olympic Games but was rejected by the IOC.⁶ Frustrated by the lack of organizational interest in women's track and field, Milliat formed the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI) in 1921, to govern women's track and field at an international level.⁷ In 1922 the FSFI hosted its First Women's Olympic Games in Paris, simulating the men's Olympic Games, with women from five countries competing in eleven events before 20,000 spectators.⁸ Milliat demonstrated to the IOC that people were interested in women's competitive track and field.

Eventually Milliat approached the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF), and with the help of its president, Johann Sigfreid Edstrom, women's track and field made its debut at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam on a temporary basis. At the IOC General Session 25-30 May 1930, women's track and field was accepted on a permanent basis into the Olympic Games.⁸ During this period of tentative acceptance of women's participation, there were numerous changes in fashion and sport apparel. With broader social and political changes taking place, some of the restrictive clothing styles fell by the wayside as women wore revealing swim wear. These were significant shifts from the residual Victorian values about the public display of women's bodies.

The Games and the Athletic Clothing

Women's leisure and daily wear fashion changed drastically between the late 1800s and the early 1900s. The traditional bustle of the 1870s was replaced by the corset in the 1880s. The corset was made of steel with heavy cotton or canvas inserts that laced at the rear, accentuating the bust and the behind.¹⁰ The corset was replaced in the mid 1920s by an elongated tube undergarment as fashion dictated that the long, sleek look of a woman's body was more attractive.

Women's leisure wear during the 1880s differed little from everyday wear. Gymnasium dresses were cumbersome and awkward, consisting of "knee britches, short skirts, and blouses - waists with long sleeves" and long stockings.¹¹ Female tennis players wore trained dresses that tied at the back and cumbersome heeled shoes.¹² The speed and playing style of the women's game was severely inhibited due to the restrictive clothing that the women wore. Bathing costumes were intended for beach wear, not swim wear. The knee length flannel dresses buttoned at the front, had long sleeves, a wide, braid collar, were belted at the waist, and were adorned with long stockings.¹³ This entire outfit made movement in the water very difficult.

With cycling increasing in popularity in the late 1880s and into the 1890s, women began to realize that their traditional dresses needed to be altered for riding purposes. The original bicycle had a high mounted seat that required a ladder or another step aid to reach and Victorian style dresses inhibited reaching the seat, sitting on it, and eventually peddling. With the introduction of Bloomers, female cyclists easily rode their bicycles with a previously unknown freedom.¹⁴ However, the image of women in pants severely threatened the established binary distinctions between the sexes and therefore it was rather unpopular among members of the upper class.¹⁵ This radical departure from fashionable dress worried some and they "scolded women for their lack of taste and unfeminine demeanor."¹⁶ Schreier notes that "the bicycle helped to smooth the way for future clothing chang[es] and dramatically advanced the position of women in sports."¹⁷

Victorian clothing was designed to conceal a woman's body and middle to upper class women had embraced these fashion trends and covered themselves from head to foot with heavy, bulky clothing that inhibited natural movement. Kathleen E. McCrone points out in *Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women*, that "rapid motion, ample waists and the raising of arms above the head were considered unfeminine, so sleeves were cut to inhibit the latter, corsets became tighter and petticoats got

more voluminous.”¹⁸ Women wore long pleated bloomers covered by a long skin, with long sleeves and a collared neck for both leisure and everyday wear.¹⁹ Women were discouraged from exercising, but on the heels of the bicycle movement and shifting medical attitudes, light physical activity was permitted if intended to improve domestic capabilities.

By the turn of the century, the traditional corset was replaced by an “S-shaped silhouette” corset that produced an over-hanging bust, flat waist, and a projecting behind.²⁰ Gymnasium wear consisted of “a bloomer outfit that was loose, cut low at the neck, with sleeves to the elbows... long black stockings and thin flat shoes without heels.”²¹ Tight corsets and uncomfortable clothes were being abandoned for more practical clothing. Swim wear was a “below-knee serge dress worn over matching bloomers and often accompanied by stocking and bathing shoes.”²² It is important to note that at this time women began to increase their involvement in physical activity, but leisure time was limited to middle and upper class women who could afford to participate in clubs that offered women’s activities.

At the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris, women’s golf, lawn-tennis, and yachting were included on the program, a decision of the Paris organizing committee, with eleven women competing in these three events. The first Olympic medal awarded to a woman was awarded in lawn-tennis to Charlotte Cooper of Great Britain.²³ Cooper, along with the other female lawn-tennis participants, wore an ankle length, high collared tennis dress with long sleeves, belted at the waist. Her shoes had a slight heel and were pointed at the toe.²⁴ Hélène Prévost of France, wore a similar outfit to Cooper’s but added a hat and a bow around her neck.²⁵ As tennis was considered an elite sport, only for the rich, fashion varied little from country to country. Women and men who played tennis were of high society and, therefore, they dressed in clothing acceptable to the upper class. Little regard was given to athletic excellence, whereas maintaining femininity was essential. The expectation that a woman’s beauty in appearance and form was more important than an efficient performance was commonly held among the upper class. Women’s clothing for tennis changed little between 1900 and 1908. The women still wore long skirts, a high collared long sleeved blouse, with or without a tie, but did change to flat soled shoes.²⁶

Six women from the United States competed in the first Olympic archery competition at the 1904 Games in St. Louis. Female archers did not discard their full, bulky everyday dresses, but rather, added their archery equipment to extant fashionable clothing. In David Wallenchinsky’s *The Complete Book of the Olympics*, a picture of Sybil “Queenie” Newall, the winner of the 1908 women’s archery competition at the Games in London displays the excessive amount of clothing that female archers wore during competition.²⁷ Newall wore an ankle length dress, belted at the waist, with a long sleeved blouse, and a hat. To this she added a pouch that hung around her waist to hold her arrows.

Figure skating made its debut at the 1908 Games in London. Female competitors had the option of competing in the women’s event, or the pairs event. Anna Hübler of Germany, champion in the pairs event, dressed in a traditional Victorian outfit for the competition. Hübler wore a long, ankle length wool skirt, a white collared blouse, and a hat.²⁸ Hübler’s opponent, Madge Syers of Great Britain, winner of the women’s event and bronze medalist in the pairs event, wore an outfit similar to Hübler.²⁹

By 1920, the “New Woman” of fashion emerged.³⁰ Women were wearing tailored suits that increased mobility and freedom. Many women were seeking job opportunities outside of the home, attaining higher levels of education, and becoming more physically fit. The impractical S-shaped corset was abandoned and replaced by a longer, fitted undergarment that was both more comfortable and more practical for movement. Schools were implementing mandatory physical activity components, calisthenics and marching drills, for all girls.³¹ Yet, perspiration and overexertion were still prohibited, and fatigued girls were encouraged to sit down under trees to rest. With the uniforms that young women wore during physical activity classes, it is no wonder that they became fatigued and perspired. These long, loose, heavy outfits would have been difficult to walk in, let alone run in.

Although women’s gymnastics was not officially included on the Olympic program until 1952, demonstrations in women’s gymnastics were provided by Danish women at the 1906 Games in Greece, and Swedish female gymnasts at the 1912 Games in Stockholm. The Danish women shocked the crowd with their “short-skirted and neat-legged” demonstration, by 1906 standards.³² (IOC president Lord Killanan in 1976, described the pageantry of the 1912 Games, stating that these early female gymnasts appeared to display a “glorious national spirit of the free and democratic nations of the North” and when these women performed their routines in their “colourful and lovely costumes,” they displayed a “collective movement which had the beauty of the ballet.”³³) The women wore long, stockings and rubber soled shoes without a heel.³⁴

Women in the tennis event at the Stockholm Games displayed a traditional upper class attire on the court. Marguerite Broquedis of France, the Olympic champion in the women’s singles event, abandoned the long sleeved, high collared blouse for a short sleeved blouse with a scooped collar.³⁵ Broquedis’ opponents, Sigrid Fick of Sweden, Dora Köring of Germany, and Molla Bjurstedt of Norway, all maintained their traditional attire of high-necked, long-sleeved blouses.³⁶

Women’s swimming was first introduced at the 1912 Games in Stockholm. The suits that the women wore for competition were quite risqué for their time. Olympic champion in the women’s 100 metres, Fanny Durack of Australia, wore a two-piece sleeveless suit that reached the waist and short bottoms that reached the upper thigh.³⁷ Durack’s teammate, Wilhelmina Wylie, silver medalist in the 100 metres, wore a one-piece suit that was short sleeved, mid-thigh length, and transparent. The fashion trend for swimsuits during the 1910s was a one-piece knitted suit that was long and loose.³⁸ Common beach attire was a “short sleeved,

scoop neck top with an attached waistband and a narrow, knee-length skirt trimmed with three layers of ruffles.³⁸ Competitive female swimmers around the world wore one-piece suits that fit tighter than traditional bathing wear, but it was Durack who moved to the shorter length suit. The female divers at the 1912 Games wore suits that covered more surface area of the body. Greta Johanson of Sweden won the women's diving event in a short-sleeved suit that had a neckline just above the clavicles, tight fitted, thicker material, and mid-thigh length.⁴⁰

It was after the Games in 1912 that female competitive swimmers began to modify their suits for more efficient performances. Olga Dorfner of the United States began to wear a lower cut, sleeveless suit for her races in the mid 1910s. By 1916 she was a National champion in the 50 metre, 220, and the 440 and her suits became shorter in the leg, tighter fitted, and lower in the neck and under the arms.⁴¹ Claire Galligan of the United States also began to race in a suit that was less bulky. Although Galligan's suit was cut higher in the neck than Domer's, her suit was cut lower under the arms and high on the thigh.⁴²

The onset of the First World War impacted every aspect of life imaginable. Fighting men left vacancies in industries, which women bravely filled. Fashion and work apparel needed to change because full skirts were hazardous in the industrial workplace. Slimmer, shortened outfits were designed to fit the needs of these working women.⁴³ Women were finding new social freedoms that had previously been inaccessible. Work, school, and leisure activities became more widespread for women of every social class distinction. When the War was over, some women were reluctant to return to their previous stations in life, as wives and mothers, and looked to sustain their independence and seek emancipation by fighting for the right to vote and work outside the home.

The 1920s were deemed by many sport historians as the 'Golden Age of Sport' because of the increased accessibility and participation in sport. Women were now running, playing, and rejecting the traditional ideals of non-athletic, "lady-like" activities that had previously inhibited their physical pleasure and practical enjoyment. Gymnasium wear became more comfortable, with the introduction of knickers and comfortable shirts that allowed for increased movement.⁴⁴ Swimsuits were one-piece woolen knit, with pants attached to the hem of the skirt.⁴⁵

At 1920 Games in Antwerp, the first Olympic Games after the First World War, fourteen year old Aileen Riggan of the United States won the gold medal in plain diving.⁴⁶ This child Olympian wore a simple one-piece suit that was cut low in the front, under the arms, and was a few inches above the mid-thigh.⁴⁷ Riggan's suit varied from the 1912 diving champion, Johanson's, because of the lower neckline, lower cut under the arms, and the higher cut of the legs. Her suit was acceptable for a child, but not for an adult woman at this time. Women's 100 metre champion, Ethelda Bleibtrey of the United States, wore a suit that was cut high in the neck and under the arms, as well as having a longer cut for the legs. The suit appeared to look more like a short dress, than a swim suit.⁴⁸

Women's tennis attire began looking more like athletic wear rather than everyday wear. At the 1920 Games, Suzanne Lenglen of the United States wore a short-sleeved, scooped neck outfit that was mid-calf length.⁴⁹ Lenglen abandoned the traditional hat, as did most of her competitors, for a stylish scarf that wrapped around her head.⁵⁰ Even though Lenglen wore a shorter skirt, her opponents maintained their ankle length dresses. Throughout the 1920s, Lenglen had a fierce rivalry with fellow American Helen Wells. Wells played in a knee length skirt and a short or sleeveless top that had a V-neck. More female tennis players around the world began to imitate Wells's and Lenglen's fashion by shortening their skirts and sleeves, and lowering the neckline of their tops.

The female figure skaters' fashion differed little from earlier competitors at the 1920 Games. What had changed between 1908 and 1920 was noticeable on both Magda Julin of Sweden and Theresa Weld of the United States. Both Julin, Olympic champion in the women's event, and Weld, bronze medalist in the women's event, wore full, long-sleeved dresses that were mid-calf length, and had a scooped collar, along with a fashionable hat.⁵¹

During the 1920s women's swim suits began to resemble the swim suits of today. By the 1924 Games in Paris, the neckline and length of women's swim suits had changed dramatically from 1912. The suit itself now fit the athlete's body appropriately, decreasing the amount of excess material and drag. Sybil Bauer of the United States, Olympic champion in the 100 metre backstroke, and Martha Norelius of the United States, Olympic champion in the 400 metre freestyle, both wore suits that allowed for freer movement of the arms and legs.⁵²

The 1924 women's tennis competition revealed new, modern fashion for tennis. Kathleen McKane of Great Britain. Helen Will and Hazel Wightman of the United States, all wore short sleeved, V-necked tops and skirts that were between mid-calf and knee length.⁵³ Although the appearance of the outfits still resembled the traditional uniforms from the Games in 1900, these female tennis players had altered the idea of acceptable tennis wear. The dresses were lighter and shorter, and the tops were cut to allow for more movement of the arms.⁵⁴

Austrian figure skater Herma Plank-Szabó created a new style with her short skirts.⁵⁵ The 1924 Olympic champion wore skirts cut above the knee, thus allowing for more freedom of the legs. Andrée Brunet, gold medalist in pairs figure skating in 1924 and 1928, wore a shorter skirt, but the length was below the knee cap. The sport clothing of both women was a sharp contrast to the competitors of 1920.

By the mid 1920s women's fashion gradually became more liberal compared to the traditional Victorian fashion of the early

1900s. Skirts became shorter, below the knee to mid calf length, necklines lower, and material more comfortable. Silk and satin were used instead of traditional wool. Gymnasium wear made the transition to long shorts, reaching just above the knee and a T-shirt.⁵⁶ Bathing attire became more practical, but not for swimming. The suits became shorter, the neck-line lower, armholes larger, and the overskirt was eliminated, but the suits were still made of heavy material, wool or flannel, thus making competitive swimming difficult.⁵⁷ Even in the 'Golden Age' of women's sports, residual Victorian values still informed the codes of display of women's bodies.

Women's track and field made its debut at the 1928 Games in Amsterdam. Six Canadian women changed the face of track and field fashion when they appeared for competition wearing uniforms from which they had cut the sleeves from their shirts and had chosen a more brief style of running shorts.⁵⁸ The women had deliberately chosen this outfit to allow for more freedom and movement of their arms and legs.⁵⁹ The other competitors chose to compete in short-sleeved shirts and longer running shorts, mid-thigh length, over the Canadians' sleeveless shirts and shorter running shorts.

Conclusion

Although women's participation in the Olympic Games was not accepted by its founder, Pierre de Coubertin, local organizing committees did see the benefit of having women participate in the Games. Indeed the Games' organizing committees, the International Amateur Athletic Federation, the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale, and particularly Alice Milliat, were responsible for women's participation. Through the impassioned insistence for inclusion by Milliat, the IOC and IAAF were forced to concede to women's sport, lest they should lose control over a growing popular movement. Female athletes ignored conventional boundaries and continued to resist and make adaptations to values surrounding women's participation in competitive sport.

Whether the competitiveness of the Olympic Games inspired female athletes to abandon traditional athletic wear for more liberal uniforms, or if female sport in general forced the progression of athletic wear, is difficult to argue due to the lack of literature based on women's athletic fashion. What is certain is that women's athletic fashion progress beyond daily fashion thus allowing women to achieve a type of freedom within sport they had never before experienced. The cult of winning, so popular among male participants at the Olympic Games, became a focal point for female athletes who dared to appear publicly with clothing that tested commonly held values about sexuality and physical expression. As the Olympic Games increased in popularity, the Games themselves became a venue for women to express and announce the newly empowered female athlete, one who cared less about the boundaries imposed by the early leaders of international sport.

Endnotes

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3. 109-111 quoted in *Olympic Competition*, 137.
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33. Killanan, 42.
34. Ibid.
35. Gillmeister, 45.
36. Ibid., 41, 45, and 46.
37. Martin Tyler ed., *The History of the Olympics* (London: Marshall Cavendish, 1975), 23.
38. Ewing, 79.
39. Mucklow, 57.
40. Buck Dawson, *Weissmuller to Spitz: The First 21 Years of the International Swimming Hall of Fame* (Fort Lauderdale. Florida:

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41. Dawson, 113.
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 43. Peacock, 30.
 44. Cole, 68-69.
 45. Claudia B. Kidwell, *Women' Bathing and Swimming Costume in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968), 28.
 46. Killanan, 46.
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 48. Dawson, 74.
 49. Gillmeister, 64.
 50. Ibid.
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