

Sport Costume for Englishwomen in the Nineteenth Century

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With the growth of Englishwomen's sport participation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there arose the problem of wearing appropriate clothing to accommodate the motion of sport coupled with the necessity of appearing "feminine." The emergence of a special costume for women's sport activities provides the opportunity to raise several questions. Has there been a connection between the status of women and their sport costume? Have sports influenced women's costumes? Have women's fashions affected women's sport participation?

In nineteenth century England, development of a specialized outfit for women's sport proceeded at a slower pace than did the evolution of men's sporting wear. Although an incipient design for women's sport raiments was evident, women tended to wear their ordinary clothing which followed the general trend of female fashion.

While women tended to wear ordinary clothing for sport, one significant pattern of women's clothes for outdoors was the increasing masculinization of apparel covering the upper half of the body. By the end of the century Englishwomen had adopted masculine jackets, stiff collars, ties, and hats. Perhaps the most important development in sportswear for women involved the appearance of a bifurcated garment. The two-legged fashion caused controversy and aroused ambivalence. The bifurcated garment, often referred to as "rational" dress, was significant in terms of its implications for freedom of movement, but it was controversial because of its symbolic association with manhood.

"Rationals" appeared in bathing costumes, in physical education classes in the form of a gym tunic, and in riding habits as a divided skirt with an apron concealing the bifurcation. With the emergence of "bloomers" in the 1850's, the issue of rational dress smoldered under the surface, but it exploded into full-fledged controversy when cycling became popular in the 1890's. Cycling was not only popular, it was public; and it provided the greatest opening yet for the sanctioning of women wearing trousers. Many Victorians expressed anxiety that the cycling costume might translate into everyday wear. Most female cyclists avoided the sensitive issue by staying in their skirts as they did for other sports. Nevertheless, the way was prepared for the adoption of trousers by women. In the twentieth century, bifurcated garments increasingly appeared in sports costumes, and everyday wear, finally meeting with full social approval in the second great wave of feminism in the late 1960's.

Clearly, women's sport and costume in nineteenth century England reflected social and gender status. Sports became a vehicle by which women might adopt the costume of their masters, but only the intrepid dared defy convention. Although it is more difficult to discern how sport influenced women's costume, it may be said that women in sport aided in the trend toward more functional, and therefore, more masculine clothing. People no doubt became accustomed to women's sport clothing, first behind the private walls of gymnasias and later by gradual public appearance. In this way women in sport helped to define and to enlarge women's gradually expanding world.

The skirt and trouser question reflected the ambivalence that involved the contradiction between ideal womanhood and sport. The ensuing compromise was expressed in restrictive clothing which suggested slow and encumbered motion; it was expressed in the design of

inefficient sports equipment, special rules and techniques, and in ideologies which attributed women's athletic shortcomings to her anatomy and nature. The affectations of women's sport, of which costume was one, made sport more socially acceptable to women — and the more attention the sportswoman paid to the requisites of ideal womanhood, the more social acceptance she found.