

Changing Clothes in Women's Sports: 1895-1940

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The purpose of the study was to focus on the development of women's sports clothes illustrating the changes with selected slides. A second consideration was to identify those female athletes whose athletic skill and leadership played a role in the acceptance of practical, appropriate, and attractive sports costumes for women. The study was limited to the period from 1895 (late Victorian) until the 1940's when functional sports clothes began to emerge for different sports. English and American sources were studied and the sports of golf, tennis, swimming, basketball, and hockey given special attention.

Recommended changes in women's dress (not sport clothes) were a point of controversy in the early 1800's. Medical doctors and others were urging looser fitting garments with more practical design for health, sanitary, and safety reasons. The bloomer developed about 1830 as a possible solution to these problems and later became the established "gym" costume. Its form changed considerably over the ensuing period of about 100 years. Designed to free women to move more easily, the bloomer became a hated costume with negative implications for sport participation.

1895-1920

The ladies, who were intrigued by the recreational pursuits of the day and dared to participate, led the way for the modern sports women. Wearing the conventional dress of the day, not the bloomer, they played croquet, rode bicycles, went roller skating and ice skating, and even skied. As sports costumes began to develop, first for horseback riding, the clothes were somewhat masculinized. Ladies wore man-tailored jackets and men's style of hats with long full skirts and continued to ride side saddle. Mannish shirts, neckties, and hats were worn with long skirts for tennis, golf, and hockey. Perhaps it was because the women were entering the male domain – the sports world – that masculinized attire was *de rigueur*. Dresses for bathing in this period were Victorian in style and worn with bloomers, black stockings, and high top shoes, making swimming virtually impossible. More functional one piece suits began to appear as women like Adeline Trapp and Annette Kellermann promoted swimming. The very full, knee length bloomer became the required costume for indoors. Despite the heavy, hot bloomer, basketball became very popular in college programs.

1920-1940's

In the 1920's Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills wore shortened skirts to play tennis at Wimbledon while Alice Marble and Helen Jacobs appeared in shorts in the 1930's. Golfers began to shorten their skirts and lengths varied from just below the knee to the calf. American golf champion, Glenna Collett, popularized the tweed skirt and sweater. By 1930 a classic, one piece, swimmable suit had gained some acceptance. Real swimmers, like Gertrude Ederle, wore this type of suit which became the prototype of today's racing suit and maillot. On the athletic field in

England and America, women wore tunics usually with bloomers underneath. As a possible derivative from the Greek *chiton*, the tunic had classical respectability and acceptable femininity. It also provided freedom of movement. College women continued to play basketball in the appropriate indoor costume -bloomers with middy blouses, black ties, black stockings, and high top tennis shoes. The bloomer was tolerated by girls at the turn of the century first trying out their athletic skills. It later became a hated "gym" costume for several generations of school girls and college women. Yet it was the bloomer, abbreviated into ruffled panties, which shocked the establishment at Wimbledon when worn by Gussie Moran in 1949. Those very ruffles perhaps began the fashion explosion in women's sports clothes which is with us today.

Improvements in fabrics, marketing efforts to attract women to sport, and more variations in design have contributed to the development of attractive and practical sports clothes for women. In turn, these clothes which have freed women to move have stimulated them to join in.



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