

A History of Athletic Apparel

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An historical analysis of athletic wear was conducted in terms of textile developments. Diverse activities such as baseball, bicycling, or skiing all require fabrics that permit certain movements under specific conditions. These needs were addressed through improvements in fibers and fabrics.

To investigate changes in sports clothing, several research methods were employed. Fiber samples from uniforms at the Baseball Hall of Fame, the Basketball Hall of Fame, the Tennis Hall of Fame, the Olympic Hall of Fame, and from a traveling display of the Football Hall of Fame were identified through microscopical analysis. The literature was searched for textile information. Manufacturers were contacted for the latest information concerning fabrics used in athletic apparel including several suppliers of the 1984 Olympic team uniforms,

Findings from this research illustrate that athletic performance has been enhanced through the introduction of new textile materials. For example, the only fabrics available for early swimmers were made by highly absorbent fibers. These fabrics became heavier as the individuals swam. The invention of synthetic fibers, which are not highly absorbent, was a great improvement for competitive swimmers.

The information was organized into a slide presentation of past and present athletes. One example compares Johnny Weissmuller at the 1924 Paris Olympics to Steve Lundquist at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. The fabrics of their competition suits are quite different with the newer fabric engineered for the needs of the world class swimmer. Some of the other athletes included in the study are Willie Mays, Wilt Chamberlain, Merlin Olsen, Carl Lewis, Mary Lou Retton, Bill Johnson, Carol Heiss, and Hayes Jenkins. The apparel of each athlete is discussed in terms of the historical development of fibers and fabrics. Research in the area is continuing and a videotape presentation is currently in the initial production stage.