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**The Ball is Not in Your Court: Women's Tennis
Apparel and the Feminine Ideal, 1870-1930**

During the Victorian Era most women did not participate in sporting activities. For those who did, their experiences were bound by traditional social values that were manifestations of social class and medical doctoring, reinforced by contemporary religion. Further, sport and leisure were limited to women of means who had access to facilities and an inclination toward

resisting social restriction by gender. For women, particularly, public sport was framed by an aesthetic ideal that commanded adherence to appropriately feminine sport clothing, not necessarily commensurate with the activity the women were performing. Participation in tennis, for example, was more a matter of fashion and social graces for women, than it was an athletic exercise.

Medical opinion in the late 1800s suggested that women were incapable of participating in strenuous physical activity and that their bodies were incompatible with what was required to play the sports that men enjoyed. Supposedly, active female could damage her vital internal organs and suffer uterine displacement, rendering her useless as a wife and mother. In this era, physical activity for females was strictly supervised and regulated. Social change was slow for women who wished to be physically active. Agnes Wayman wrote as late as the 1930s that “women were allowed to . . . [play] only within limited behavioral boundaries which confirmed the separate spheres of the sexes and the superiority of men.” Inheriting the gender polarities of the 1800s sport in the twentieth century was intended to create men out of boys and women were to participate in appropriately feminine activities only. Yet, women began to stray from their domestic roles to assume a slightly more public physicality. In the beginning of the twentieth century, sport for women was becoming acceptable for leisure recreation and to improve health. Perspiration and overexertion were still prohibited, but women were encouraged to perform light exercises. The shift from complete weakness and frailty to limited physical emancipation began in the early twentieth century and tennis was one activity that was deemed socially acceptable for women.

Tennis, an activity for the elite, was deemed socially acceptable for women to participate in, because it was played with limited movement. More importantly, women could dress “appropriately” and not risk the social criticism of men and other women. Only upper-middle and upper class women could afford to play at tennis clubs and have time available for leisure activities. Tennis clubs had dress codes and, as such, reaffirmed the social standing of the ladies who played. Petticoats and corsets were not left at home to allow women the feeling of easy, graceful motions on the court, but rather were worn to display the socially accepted feminine image. McCrone writes that “rapid motion, ample waists

and the rising of arms above the head were considered unfeminine, so sleeves were cut to inhibit the latter, corsets became tighter and petticoats got more voluminous.” Women were discouraged from moving freely and clothing style tended to make movement uncomfortable.

This paper examines the historical limitations imposed by fashion and socially acceptable sportswear and also some of the freedoms offered by changes in sport fashion. Nineteenth century athletic apparel worn by women resembled everyday clothing as opposed to more appropriate attire for physical activity. As traditional Victorian mores about female participation in sport changed, women began to wear more comfortable and practical clothing. As the desire to win grew stronger among female athletes, their clothing gradually became less restrictive. Yet between 1870 and 1930, priorities of the aesthetic ideal were set on preserving a feminine public appearance. A woman’s beauty in appearance and form was both an ideal and a social expectation among peers.

The research for this paper was obtained from various primary and secondary resources. Newspaper articles from the early 1900s provide social perceptions about women competing in public tennis championships, such as Wimbledon. A content analysis of period photographs of both athletes and non-athletes will be juxtaposed with an analysis of the social values encoded in fashion and sport clothing.
