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WHEN THE GIRLS CAME OUT TO PLAY

The Birth of American Sportswear

Patricia Campbell Warner

of the University of Minnesota. Each woman, outstanding in her own field, helped me through the mine fields of graduate school. Their inspiring teaching and wonderful writing opened my mind to worlds I had only imagined before. They taught me new ways to think, surely one of the greatest gifts of all.

I wish to thank Peggy Pinkerton for suggesting the title of this book. Another who deserves deepest thanks is Margaret Ewing. She has always encouraged me to think, even in the days when I was a stay-at-home mom. She has been my best critic, editor, and friend, and our recent paper published together (combining a costume historian and an aquatic ecologist) was the surprising professional outcome of a deep personal friendship and all those years of talking together—and it was exciting for both of us. She has been at the end of a phone for thirty years, and I am deeply grateful for her constancy and support.

Finally, my two sons, Geoffrey and Peter, have lived half their lives with their mother's involvement in this work, and probably have reached a point of disbelief that "the book" would ever see the light of day. For them, then, here it is.

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Patricia Campbell Warner

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PREFACE

Over the years as I worked on the topic of women, sports, and the clothing devised for exercise in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people would ask me how I got interested in the topic. They usually assumed that I was athletic myself, and the interest sprang from that. Those who knew me well knew this was not the case. The only reason I had participated in sports or athletics in high school was—typical of teenagers everywhere—because my friends did. These were the mid-twentieth-century years, when girls wore their baggy romper-leg cotton gym suits to play basketball and volleyball, and, if they were lucky, got to wear shorts to play games such as badminton. Generally speaking, sports for girls were disregarded, though my school was better than most. We had no outdoor field, no track, no pool, but we were fortunate to have our own Girls' Gym, separated from the Boys' Gym by wide doors that scarcely kept out the deep shouts that emanated from the boys' side. And we did have two women gym teachers who created what they called a "Leaders' Group" to encourage girls to play non-curricular games such as archery and badminton and to learn how to referee basketball and volleyball in the loose athletic league of nearby schools. Only much, much later in my life did I understand how unusual this was in that era. This was not a period when girls were encouraged to love playing sports.

So how did I end up devoting years of my life to this study? The answer is simple. However unwittingly, a friend got me into it. Indeed, it could

justifiably be claimed that I followed the same passive pattern established early in my life—certainly by high school. When I was a graduate student studying design at the University of Minnesota, a fellow student, Otto Thieme, recommended me to the university art museum as a possible speaker to accompany a traveling exhibition being planned. Apparently the organizers thought that a talk centered on clothing would give a different twist, and at the time I was the student who was studying the history of dress. The exhibition was to go out a year or more hence and would travel for two years. I would fly to each of the towns on the schedule to give my talk. Since I was working three-quarter time, doing the course work for my Ph.D., was the mother of two teenage sons, and was going through a divorce, this sounded like a pleasant distraction. Not committing myself, I went to look at the prints being readied for the show. They ranged in period from 1860 to 1940 and dealt with the broad theme of leisure, of American pastimes. It was titled "America at Play."

As I looked at the prints the staff had chosen, I realized that unless I could narrow the focus (the Design Department taught us to identify variables, establish limitations, and work within them), I would be discussing the entire range of clothing for both men and women in that eighty-year period—not a good thing. I offered instead to talk about the clothing for sports. Great! they said. Whatever you like! So, pleased with myself and happy that I had a year or more to work on this, I hied myself to the university library to find all the books I could on sports clothing, and women's clothing for sports in particular. Of course, I expected a subsection devoted to the subject within the general clothing and fashion holdings, and assumed that the next year or so would be a merry round of reading light and interesting books on the subject. Instead, I found nothing. A few brief mentions peppered general histories of dress; usually they were arch and jocular, and were illustrated with a picture or two of women wearing impossible clothing—hats, hoops, bustles, corsets, long skirts—to play croquet or tennis, or to go bathing. Apart from that, nothing. The approaching months took on an entirely different aspect.

I could have gone back to the idea of a general survey of dress during the eighty years in question, but that idea left me unmoved. It became a challenge, a game almost, to find sources. My memories of that time are of sitting on the cold cement floor in the bowels of the University of Minnesota

Comstock Library, pulling out nineteenth-century magazines whose edges gently crumbled in my hands and onto my clothing as I gingerly opened and read them, searching for any references to participation in outdoor games and sports. I would lose myself in them, emerging hours later with the gems I had collected that day, tired but happy. Eventually I assembled enough for my traveling talk, which I illustrated with a collection of slides I had made.

I ventured forth in little aircraft on often bumpy flights to towns and small cities in the Upper Midwest to talk to local art groups about what women in the past had worn when they wanted to participate in vigorous sport or exercise. I was astounded at the response. After listening politely, women wanted to share their own memories, and invariably began reminiscing about the gym suits they had worn. They would end up talking to one another, more or less ignoring me, sparking memories and laughter as they animatedly described their outfits and their activities. In some of the audiences elderly ladies regaled us with tales of baggy black bloomers and stockings, middy blouses, and big hair ribbons ("Oh, look, Mabel! Do you remember that? That picture is just like what I wore!"). Others recalled the blue rompers, the green camp shorts and shirts of a later period. All this reminiscing came pouring out in spite of the fact that I had little more than mentioned the whole phenomenon of gym wear and related activities in my talk. To my mind, that was an entirely different category of clothing from what I was there to discuss—clothing for sport. But listening to those women, I was struck by the common experience, the common memory, the laughter and nostalgia that invariably accompanied their personal stories.

It took, all told, over three years before I finished my involvement with the art museum. From this vantage point, I realize that those years, perhaps more than any other aspect of my graduate education, taught me creative research techniques and gave me invaluable public speaking experience. They also gave me, through the reminiscences of my audiences, insight into a facet of my work that I might otherwise have taken far longer to come to. I loved doing it and was sorry when it was over. For one thing, it spelled the end of my excuse for not completing my degree.

Towards the end of the period when I was actively lecturing for the art museum, my adviser, Timothy Blade, a decorative arts specialist who had left me on my own for years, finally paid me a visit to find out how my dissertation was coming along. I had to confess that it wasn't. At all. I had had

a perfect topic picked out for years, but kept bumping into all sorts of problems with it. He looked at me in exasperation, then demanded, "Well, what about all this sports stuff you've been doing for the past two years? That's all original research, isn't it? Why don't you just use that?" I remember gaping at him, thunderstruck, and thinking this "sports stuff" was way too much fun to turn into a dissertation. But within about a minute after he left my office, I knew he was right. I knew that I had found my topic. Or, rather, he had identified it for me. So here, finally, officially, and very belatedly, especially since both, alas, are dead, I acknowledge the indelible influence those two men, Otto Thieme and Tim Blade, had on my life.

I mention this story because we all too often ignore passing opportunities that can, if we act on them, literally change our lives. I sense that none of the intervening years would have played out as they did had I dismissed Otto and Tim and their suggestions. As it was, I wrote the dissertation, got my degree, and moved on into academia. In the process, I came to understand one of the greatest truisms of all, that we are happiest in our work if we choose to do the things that don't feel like work to us, the things that we spend our spare time thinking about.

In a perfect world, I would have written the book based on my dissertation years ago, as I had fully intended to. But in retrospect I must confess I'm glad that circumstances prevented me from doing it earlier. I am grateful to have had twenty years to let the subject roil, settle, re-form, and eventually grow to make new connections in my head. It simply takes time for me to let myself think. And I have found that, even though I have wanted to leave the topic alone over the years, it would not let me be. It has kept nudging me with new information, with new links and ideas. Only very recently have I felt it was time to sit down and write what I know about women, sports and exercise, and clothing.

The other influence on my thinking about clothing for sport and exercise goes much deeper in my consciousness and my past. It stems from my lifelong interest in the clothing of ordinary people—people like me. As a girl growing up, I loved clothes. My mother often told me that her mother, my grandmother, was aghast and dismayed that she let me choose my own clothes from a very early age. Apparently even as a little girl I had strong likes and dislikes, and a strong sense of how I should dress. (Today, in an era of TV, magazines, malls, and the ferocious sales pitch, that behavior seems

to be more common among children than not, but in the 1940s and early 1950s it was unusual. Mothers, I think, had greater control then.) As I grew older, I loved thinking about clothes, planning them, shopping for patterns and fabric, and making them. I particularly loved imagining outfits in my mind's eye, then putting the pieces together to create them. I loved wearing combinations that nobody else had. Early on, my parents had put me on an allowance, which eventually, from about the time I was twelve, became a clothes allowance. This was one of the reasons why I learned to sew. Not only did I have a body that no ready-made clothing fit properly (who doesn't?), but I soon realized that I could have a lot more to wear if I was willing to make my clothes myself. I saved up and learned to be canny with my money. It's a habit that has lasted throughout my life. Of course, the other part—the part that says if you can get great clothes cheap, you can have a lot more of them—has kept my closets clogged for years.

I think I was in high school when I became aware of the "Best Dressed" lists. Each year, women's fashion magazines would choose the Best Dressed. They were—are—invariably rich, glossy women, groomed within an inch of their lives (especially in the 1950s). They wore designer clothes in the days when that meant something, the true haute couture. I clearly remember wondering why those women deserved the title. It seemed to me that they had found a designer who could fit them well (they all looked slim and beautiful—easy to fit), but they went with *his* look rather than their own. *They* didn't have to do a thing but go to a couturier and passively be dressed by him, in his style. Of course, this is still true, as any copy of *Vogue* will attest. So-and-so in an Oscar de la Renta, Somebody in a Ralph or a Calvin. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why, just because they were rich, these women deserved the credit and the adulation. Theirs were not the taste, the selection, the planning, the work: theirs was the money. And after all, the designers were just doing their job, giving Mrs. One-Percent-of-the-Population her suave, sophisticated elegance. In effect, she played Galatea to the designer's Pygmalion. No, it seemed to me that the women who really deserved credit were the average, ordinary women who, like me, managed on a small budget to put together wonderful, flattering outfits that cost next to nothing. One could see them every day on the city streets—smart, attractive, eye-catching women who had a knack for clothes and great personal style. Surely they were the ones deserving a Best

Dressed label. And surely I wasn't the only girl who had such thoughts. I was convinced that the Best Dressed *really were* people like me. Creative. Thrifty. In love with clothes.

As I grew older and wiser, I realized that there was more to it than that. Nevertheless, the more democratic interest in clothing the masses rather than the elite few stuck. It lasted well into middle age, during the period I was becoming a costume historian. And it is still with me. No surprise, then, that the focus of my work has always been on the clothing of ordinary people. Many writers concentrate on the designers or on the novel in dress; they write beautifully illustrated books on all aspects of high fashion. I am grateful to them because they have informed me and my teaching. But I have always been more interested in how our clothes got to be the way they are. I am interested in the struggle women have had to wear clothing that made sense. I wanted to find out where that clothing came from, what the precursors were to the comfortable clothing that the world knows today as American sportswear. This book tells that story.

When I finished writing my dissertation some twenty years ago, the study of clothing in the United States was generally held in relatively low regard by the academic community. Only now has this begun to change. A new, vital study of dress is extending beyond the traditional clothing and textiles programs of what used to be called home economics and moving into departments such as history, art history, and even economics. Scholars are beginning to look at clothing and its social implications in new ways. Costume exhibitions in major museums have had strong influence on the acceptance of costume studies; indeed, the most popular exhibitions, the ones that bring in the largest audiences, are quite often those, like the internationally successful Jacqueline Kennedy exhibition, that display clothes. Nothing, it would seem, is more evocative of time and place or can reach an audience more directly than clothing. It is something we all have in common, and we share a common memory of styles, looks, personalities. Museums have helped create an atmosphere of interest and enthusiasm for the study.

The British have been the leaders in the field of costume history since its beginning. Indeed, until recently, most of the major writers have been British, so most of the points of view in the field are also British. As a result, when Americans have written about clothing, they have incorpo-

rated into their work the English antecedents and English tone, even English examples, which may or may not reflect America and its culture. There is even a tendency to interchange one for the other. In my opinion this is a mistake, since both the histories and the clothing are very different. As Americans, we developed our own "look" in clothing, however closely it parallels a more universal fashion. Today, though, more than ever before in history, because of instant international communication through movies, television, and the Web, people everywhere are closer to becoming one huge, unified, dressed-alike mass. There are outlets of the same clothing stores in Europe and America, even in Asia. And yet the differences still linger. They may be subtle, more so all the time, as in the quality of fabrics, or the cut and attention to the body underneath, the angles of the seams or the height of the crotch, or even the way of putting clothes together. But the differences are there. Because I grew up in Canada, in close contact with the United States, these differences between people who are "the same" have always intrigued me. Today it is virtually impossible to tell Canadians and Americans apart from the clothes they wear. But because of all these factors, I am interested in American clothing—not British and American, or "Western dress," but the clothing that is expressive of American women, of American development, of American society. And no clothing is more expressive of American women than American sportswear.

Ultimately, certainly among many academics, the question arises, why bother studying clothing at all? It is almost invariably regarded as frivolous. Clothing can be a headache, a source of anxiety or self-consciousness, a cause of despair, a reason for envy, a focus of contention, a wrap of anonymity. Those of us who study it use those very reasons for justifying its consideration. In the last analysis, however, clothing is necessary. Everyone in the world uses it in some form or another. Yet if it were simply a necessity, it would not carry negative connotations. It would be accepted routinely, like tooth-brushing, and be forgotten. Instead, it is much more than that: a source of personal expression in a world that conspires increasingly to limit our individuality, a means of personal pleasure, joy, and pride. It tells others who we are, what we represent. It can hint at a mind no longer connecting cleanly, or one dominated by conservatism or delusions of grandeur, by whimsy or daring. It also represents billions of dollars a year in this country alone: women's apparel sales in 2000 reached $96.6 billion.

The clothing we wear today is the result of the accumulated clothing of our past. As society has evolved to its present state, so has clothing, borrowing from past centuries and periods, always changing, always expressing the contemporary—and always being interpreted through contemporary eyes and sensibilities. As it is in constant flux, it is an expression of fashion in whatever time, whatever place. That is the nature of fashion. But fashion is a process that affects all aspects of a changing society, not just dress but architecture, language, science, philosophy, economics, war. Fashion has become an object of scorn only because it has been almost exclusively associated with women's clothing. The common understanding seems to be that women wear fashions, fashions keep changing, therefore fashion demands a mindless, slavish following even in a period, like today, of "free choice." As with lunches, though, there is no free choice. To resist fashion is to move counter-culture, which in itself may be regarded as an expression of fashion, since in the counter-culture it is fashionable to be non-fashionable. Fashion turns all aspects of society even as society turns fashion.

Despite that—or, better, in conjunction with it—certain periods of history have reflected major change. In other words, within a relatively brief span of time, the fashion of a nation can turn from one expression to another one vastly different. The period I am interested in, mainly from the 1860s up to World War II, is one of those times. Indeed, it may represent the greatest change in the shortest time frame in the history of the world. It is well known that war acts as a natural agent of change. But other factors too are involved in the process—or, rather, the factors leading to war may well influence other areas that are less well observed, and effect sweeping changes in places far removed from the battlefields. It is here, then, away from the significant male-oriented events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that this book belongs. My interest centers on the women of the period, who, like the men, were undergoing a process of great change during these years. And their clothing reflected that change throughout.

This was the period that saw the establishment and growth of women's higher education in the United States. The United States led the way for the world in its thrust to recognize the worth of women's education, a significant but little-recognized accomplishment. Coming out of a period when women were regarded as home- and family-bound, the vision and determination of

a few resolute women such as Mary Lyon, Catharine Beecher, and Sarah Josepha Hale are truly remarkable. The Susan B. Anthonys and Elizabeth Cady Stantons are well recognized today, but the foundations of education for women were already under way by the time the women's suffrage movement was established in the late 1840s. Without that acceptance of the need to educate women, and the right of women to be educated, the support for women's rights might have been even slower than it was to gain a foothold in the society of the era.

The girls who were sent off to school to be educated like their brothers were being sent away from home, often for the first time. The women who ran the schools tried to incorporate all the activities they felt necessary to mold a fully rounded graduate. That included physical activity. But what clothing did a girl wear for this when she may never have been encouraged to do anything like it before? Indeed, what choices did she have? And how did the clothing that eventually emerged for exercise relate to the dress worn outside the educational environment, perhaps for playing one of the new games that became so popular at the same time? The links between sports, clothing, and women's higher education are profound, entwined to the point of fusion. There is no doubt that, by looking at women's lives through the medium of their clothing, we can trace the slow emergence from the close restrictiveness of the early Victorian age to the acceptance of women's participation in a broader society during the eighty years under review.

Interestingly, of the vast numbers of books on sport and its history, even in the rare ones that mention women, no serious mention is made of the clothing women wore to participate. Yet women's involvement in athletics, like men's, was shaped by the freedom of movement permitted by the clothes they wore. What was possible for them was constrained by the swathing of their fashionable dress and the equally hampering expectations of their place in society. And women embraced all these limitations wholeheartedly. It was usually women themselves who professed the greatest shock at behavior considered unsuitable for a lady. Men had simplified their dress for sports early on beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when they softened their shirt collars, donned the new rubber-soled shoes, shucked off their jackets, wore knickerbockers or other loose trousers, and played actively to their hearts' delight. They wore figure-revealing knit

swimsuits and no one cared. By the end of the century they wore cotton trousers, had cut the legs off to make shorts, had cut out the sleeves to make what we now call tank tops, and ran bare-legged and barefoot in their light running shoes. They had done this by the time of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, and they were hailed as gods. But the women? As we will see, they were permitted none of these things. They were not even considered as contestants in those first modern Games, and when they did show up for the second Olympics in Paris in 1900, they were included almost by mistake. There they wore their street clothes to play golf. It would take almost another century before women equalized the odds. And clothing has always played a significant part.

Little if anything has been written to throw light on the story of women and the clothing they devised for athletics and exercise. This book will attempt to fill that gap.

Several chapters in this book have been revised from articles published elsewhere, and I thank the editors and publishers for permission to use this material here. "The Gym Suit: Freedom at Last," in Patricia A. Cunningham, ed., *Dress in American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press); "Clothing as Barrier: American Women in the Olympics, 1900–1920," *Dress* 24 (1977): 55–68, by permission of the Costume Society of America; "The Comely Rowers: The Beginnings of Collegiate Sports Uniforms for Women Crew at Wellesley, 1876–1900," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 3 (1992): 64–75, by permission of the International Textile & Apparel Association; Patricia Campbell Warner and Margaret S. Ewing, "Wading in the Water: Women Aquatic Biologists Coping with Clothing, 1877–1945," *BioScience* 52, no. 1 (January 2002), copyright, American Institute of Biological Sciences.

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