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*When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth
of American Sportswear*

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THE MERGING OF *Public and Private*

Sportswear and the American Style

THE WOMEN BIOLOGISTS AT WOODS HOLE CANNOT HAVE BEEN ALONE IN taking the physical education clothing they had worn as students out of the gymnasium and wearing it for activities that demanded more common sense than fashion in dress. The impetus that inspired them to adopt it for their collecting was likely the same one that made the middy-bloomer combination the uniform of schoolgirls everywhere by the late teens and 1920s: it was tough, hard-wearing, easy and comfortable, even if somewhat bulky. Further, it signified a certain youthful air, and a casual but reasonable rejection of the social proprieties that were still very much in operation at the time. It was entirely American, the first clothing for women that could be so identified since the American or bloomer costume of the 1850s. Unlike that short-lived attempt at reform, this one stuck: by the 1920s, the new outfit was entirely accepted. Although many presume that World War I provided a catalyst for change in women's dress at this time, in actuality the changes had been well under way years before the war began. The new outfits for exercise predated by over a decade the lean, pared-down fashion wear Chanel and Patou claimed to have introduced for sport. Whatever the timing, what is important to realize is that the inspiration behind the new clothing came, as we have seen, from American women's higher education, an area far removed from Paris fashion houses.

Clearly, the time had come to abandon the rigid patterns of the past and to look towards a new, modern approach to women's dress. The change was slow, and it depended on many converging factors in order to reeducate the taste and judgment of society. Participation in outdoor sports was the prime mover. If sport captured the imagination of America in the nineteenth century, it caught fire in the twentieth. The modern Olympic Games had a great deal to do with that, but so did the team sports of colleges and universities. For example, the football rivalry in the eastern schools, most notably in its beginnings between Princeton and Rutgers in 1867, then with "the Game" between Harvard and Yale, dating from 1875, grabbed the attention of the popular press. From then on, the press embraced its role as purveyor of sports heroics—and is still going strong in the twenty-first century.¹ These newspapers and magazines, illustrated with images of the players wearing their uniforms, introduced a new hero to the world. And once girls began to play, they too appeared in their appealing sports outfits. The burgeoning interest in sports of all kinds and the allure of life at elite schools as reported in the illustrated papers, brought it all to the public's eye, and provided the atmosphere needed to accept the new attitudes evident in the clothing designed for various sporting activities. Sports, then, almost unwittingly, accomplished what no amount of dress reform had been able to achieve in the previous century.

Hand in hand with the need for new types of clothing came innovations in textile and clothing manufacturing. It is often difficult to figure out which was the chicken and which the egg. However, alongside the introduction of football and other outdoor sports in the late nineteenth century, companies began to produce the knitted shirts, sweaters, and underwear that the players needed. One such company was Munsingwear, which opened in Minneapolis in 1886 and incorporated as the Northwest Knitting Company the following year to manufacture knit underwear for both men and women. Over the course of the next decades, the company provided knitwear for sports, and claimed to originate the classic collared cotton knit golf shirt.² Another sportswear company, Wright & Ditson, was founded in 1871 in Boston by George Wright and Henry A. Ditson, who had both owned sporting goods companies prior to their merger. Wright played baseball for the Boston Red Stockings National League team along with Alfred

G. Spalding, who also, with his brother, had founded a sporting goods company, in Chicago in the 1870s. The Spalding brothers' enterprise thrived, eventually buying out Wright & Ditson in 1891. The name continued into the 1940s, however, providing apparel and sporting goods to schools such as Mount Holyoke College and many others during the development of the gym suit.

Another early company, still in operation at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is Jantzen, founded in Portland, Oregon, in 1910. Begun as the Portland Knitting Company to produce heavy wool sweaters, socks, and gloves, it turned to the product it is still known for, bathing suits, after the Portland Rowing Club approached the owners to request a new kind of swimsuit that would keep the rowers warm in their early morning workouts on the water. The result, in 1913, was a striped one-piece wool ribbed knit suit, warm and stretchy, adapted from the hand-operated knitting machine for making ribbed cuffs, which the company was already using. Carl C. Jantzen, one of the original founders of the company in 1910, designed the suit, following, it would seem, the styles seen at the 1912 Olympics. The suit, which was the same for men and women, weighed eight pounds when wet. It was patented in 1921, the same year the red diving girl, first used as a catalogue logo, was adopted as the company's official trademark.³

These companies, all appearing in the years around the turn of the twentieth century, answered the needs of a sport-oriented public. All began small but by the 1920s were mass-producing their garments. It was mass production as much as anything else that led to an overall simplification in dress. Without the labor-intensive hand-cutting and sophisticated fitting of women's clothing that characterized fashion into the second decade of the twentieth century, manufacturers were freed from the expensive details that had defined their products. This move away from intricate draping and fitting and towards mass production allowed the manufacturers to make women's clothing that was simple, straight-cut, and loose on the body. Mass manufacturing, then, allowed cheaper, less contrived clothing for the masses, ushering in a whole new concept in dress. The companies that began to manufacture sports apparel during these years represented the wave of the future in American society, linking designers, manufacturers, and the retailers who happily sold the mass-produced goods to the public, and in doing so helped to create the rampant consumer culture of today.

In the years immediately prior to World War I, other forces that affected clothing were coming to the fore as well. America was not the only part of the world smitten by sports and their accompanying new look. Europe, too, was enthralled. In France, new and untried designers were playing with ideas borrowed from sport. Of them all, Coco Chanel would have the greatest long-term impact (though she was not, perhaps, the most popular in the early days of her career). Chanel created not only her own style of clothes but her own history as well. She was the mistress of an English nobleman, Boy Cappel, who, true to his upbringing and status, was a sportsman. During the years of their liaison, Chanel borrowed his sweaters and knit shirts and created new clothes for herself based on their simple lines. These knits, based strictly on sport apparel, called *tricots* in French, became the staple of her line, which blossomed after World War I. They were trim and unadorned, comfortable and easy, simple in style but expensive and elite. Other French designers responded to the sporting image as well, most notably Jean Patou, who created the innovative tennis dress first worn by Suzanne Lenglen in 1919. Patou got more coverage in the fashion magazines than Chanel did, but he had the misfortune to die young, whereas Chanel lived into energetic old age, reinventing herself once again in the 1950s.⁴

All the ingredients were in place: sports, new clothing from several different sources, and the publicity provided by the print media. But one last factor, more than any other, sold the ideas gleaned from sports to the public. That factor was the movies. Interestingly, the movies and women's competitive sports debuted on the scene within a few years of each other. The earliest movie appeared in 1896, three years after the introduction of basketball for women. By 1903 the first successful sustained movie, *The Great Train Robbery*, had grabbed the imagination of America, simultaneously giving birth to the Hollywood western and a moviegoing public whose avidity grew as the years went by. The invented world of the movies rapidly began to transform the tastes and attitudes of audiences everywhere.⁵

Around 1910 the fledgling movie industry relocated from New York and New Jersey to California to take advantage of a climate that allowed virtually nonstop production. By 1915 filmmakers were making movies of all kinds, and had helped to establish the center of the American film industry on the West Coast. Young directors chose young, beautiful women to tell

their stories, creating as an unexpected by-product the cult of the movie star. This became obvious as early as the 1910s, when audiences started demanding to know the names of their favorite players, who had previously gone admired but unidentified. By the 1920s, all the world had embraced the productions and the stars, the young and the beautiful who wore wonderful clothes and moved in elegant surroundings. They even read about their favorite stars in the myriad movie magazines that mushroomed to accompany the film industry.⁶ Many showed illustrations of the popular actors of the day in their own clothes or their own settings. The clothes, of course, were those worn in warm and sunny Los Angeles. They were often the casual clothing of the leisured well-to-do. But the movie magazine-buying public saw the stars as icons to be adored and copied, so the casual clothing of California and its movie colony became the dress of choice.

A good example of how Hollywood helped modernize clothing can be seen in the movies of Mack Sennett, who founded his film company, Keystone, in 1912. Keystone, best known today for its slapstick comedy embodied by the Keystone Kops, also delighted its audience with its youthful “Bathing Beauties,” who figured prominently in Keystone films. At first they wore the “heavy skirty kind” of bathing dress, complete with bloomers, stockings and skirt, but soon the more daring appeared in modifications of the body-fitting men’s swimsuits that had first been seen in the 1912 Olympics.⁷ Jantzen was introducing its new one-piece knit suits in these same years. It seems clear that the movies helped delighted audiences accept the newer, barer, and more daring bathing suits long before they were more generally seen on the beaches of America.

Other clothing the “Beauties” wore, usually of their own choice at this time and ranging from homemade to designer-crafted, was equally influential. Audiences were already tuning in to the “looks” of their favorites. The movie magazines followed up with articles on the stars, their lives, and their clothing choices. By the late 1920s, young, slim, and beautiful actresses such as Clara Bow in *It* (1927) and Joan Crawford in *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928) insisted on costumes that would show off their slender, trim bodies. The clothes they chose to showcase their youthful perfection were slim-fitted patterned sweaters, pert pleated skirts, now short enough to barely cover the knee, even men’s dress shirts and jodhpurs, tailored blazers and skirts—clothes for sport. Suddenly, following their lead, the baggy, waistless dresses of

the 1920s gave way to the svelte, fitted outfits of the 1930s. And the category of sportswear was born. Even the gym suit was transformed from the bulky middy and bloomers into an attractive tennis-dress style in imitation of the fashionable tennis dresses that were so popular on the courts at the time.

In addition, trousers for women finally found a place in the world of public clothing. Although it would take another half century, into the 1980s, before pants-wearing women were accepted anywhere, everywhere, without censure, knickerbockers and beach pajamas, which had developed from the bloomers of the previous decades, opened the door in the 1920s.⁸ They were never worn in public and even into the 1930s, only in private or non-urban leisure settings. Wearing tailored trousers in public was the daring choice of the unconventional few: Marlene Dietrich wore them to shock, to blur the boundaries of sexuality and gender. Katharine Hepburn wore them as an unquestioned expression of her upper-class, sport-oriented upbringing. She was criticized for it.⁹ By the end of the 1930s, though, Hepburn occasionally wore trousers in her movies, and looked completely at ease—and acceptable—in them. Her unconventional and unconcerned approach to style had helped to convince the public that trousers on women were not unthinkable after all—predating the defense-worker pants of World War II by several years.

Thus, the merging of public and private was finally complete. It had taken almost a century for this to happen. The comfortable, practical, fashionable clothing that emerged in the 1930s is now regarded as American Style. Its antecedents were many. But once it appeared—with its individual items based on men's clothing, and the clothing for sports—shirts, sweaters, jackets, and skirts, and finally trousers as well—it never went away. In a fashion world that revolves around frenetic change, one that promotes new fads and fashions every year, even every season, this stability is almost unbelievable. Yet the easy and elegant look of a young Katharine Hepburn in her trousers, boat shoes, and tailored shirts, waiting on set for her call, is the look of today. Now the entire world wears American sportswear. It is the final legacy of those intrepid young women in the early nineteenth century who came outdoors to play.

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