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Out of the enduring interest in gymnastics and sports came the inevitable need for leaner, more sensible clothing for women who wanted to participate. While the Dio Lewis costume described in chapter 8 remained a staple for over a quarter of a century, it bowed to greater pressure when “boring” calisthenics finally gave way to challenging and competitive team sports, mainly in women’s colleges in the 1890s. The first indoor team sport for women, basketball, devised by Senda Berenson at Smith College and based on the men’s game, demanded a newer kind of clothing, a uniform style of dress that became known as the gym suit. This gym suit revolutionized women’s clothing and set the stage for the easy clothing of the twentieth century that became known as sportswear.

There is scarcely a woman over the age of forty who does not remember with aching clarity just what her gym suit was like. My own, typical for its time and place in 1950s southern Ontario, was a shapeless blue cotton bag with a camp shirt top buttoned down the front with white plastic buttons and drawn in at the waist with an overlapping belt anchored by two more white buttons side by side. In my high school, athletic girls (the tomboys) demonstrated their independence by doubling the belt around at the back through the belt keepers and buttoning it there. The suit looked even worse this way than with the belt defining the waist. White, splotchy winter legs emerged from the romper legs, whose elastic got looser as the years wore
on. Until we warmed up, goose-bump arms, with each hair standing straight on end in the cold gym at the beginning of every class, dangled from depressing, styleless short sleeves. (In fairness, I confess I do recall two girls in all my high school years who managed, with their long slender legs, slim, shapely bodies, and golden skin, to make even these look good.)

Each limp, dull, unironed suit was adorned with the wearer’s name, painstakingly embroidered in white on the back. It was a task we were all assigned as we entered high school. If we were handy with a needle, we did it ourselves; if not, our mothers came to the rescue. Not only did this hone our needlework skills, but it also instantly identified each one of us for our teacher to single out should we fail to perform to her satisfaction. In the changing room after each class, we’d roll up the grungy, sweaty blue mass, wrap it around our gym shoes and socks, then stuff them into the bottom of our hallway locker, to forget about until the next gym class. Only the initial odoriferous gust on opening the locker between times reminded us of its existence. Rarely did we take it home for washing unless we were scheduled for inspection. Then the whole unsavory mess would go into the washing machine together.

Interestingly, although we girls all wore this same regulation gym suit, our teachers had nifty little sleeveless skirted tunics that gently skimmed their bodies, worn over crisp white shirts that perfectly matched the V-cut of the tunic neckline. Their gym shoes were spotless white, a bright extension of the trim ankle socks above them. Never did we question the unfairness of this.¹

High school girls from the middle years of the twentieth century also remember their gym suit’s particular color. Mine is forever imprinted on my mind as “gym suit blue,” but other women from other parts of North America have reported green, gold, and even lavender. Some have actually insisted that they liked their version of the suit. Most of us, though, remember its style, its smell, and the mortification we suffered if the boys saw us in it because it made even the best of us look so awful. Whatever our reactions, the gym suit for North American women remains indelibly etched in our group memory. We all wore it, many of us hated it, and the rest, at a distance of some thirty to fifty years, still confess to a certain ambivalence. But oddly, in my experience over the past twenty years, more women today laugh and reminisce about this particular item of apparel.
than any other. It is a common bond we all, as educated women, share. And it represented a huge leap forward for women and their clothing. It was the first outfit designed for use within a socially accepted setting which allowed freedom of movement, comfort, and practicality. And, though limited to the confines of physical education, it was designed for sport.

The development of a regulation gymnastic dress began, as we have seen, with Dio Lewis, who not only generated an enthusiastic new interest in exercise but dictated the guidelines for suitable clothing for it as well. And as Mabel Lee, a leading educator in women’s physical education in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, noted: “It was the private woman’s college that led the way in the establishment of physical education for girls and women in America. Physical activity class work had been offered at Mount Holyoke as early as 1837, at Rockford College by 1849, at Vassar by 1868, and at Smith and Wellesley College by 1875.” Certainly the impetus had grown out of the seminary movement, as we saw in chapter 8, but with the increasing interest in and awareness of the need to educate women equally to men, the visibility of the new institutions and their pioneering founders, teachers, and students grew too. So it is to the schools of higher education for women in the second half of the nineteenth century that we turn now to find the origins of the loose, practical, afashionable dress that eventually became known as the gym suit.

A few schools in particular give a fairly clear picture of the original approaches of the women’s colleges to physical education. Mount Holyoke is foremost because it is the oldest continuously operating institution of higher education for women, and because Mary Lyon, as we have seen, insisted on exercise from the beginning. It also became the model that many other schools emulated as they opened throughout the country. Smith College, younger than Mount Holyoke, is unique for introducing women’s basketball. Others, such as Vassar and Wellesley, had their own personalities and their own solutions, so are invaluable as well.

To show just how far from the norm the women’s colleges were in their approach, however, it is helpful to take a brief look at a large coeducational institution in North America: the University of Toronto, which opened in 1827 and accepted its first women in 1884. Its yearbook, *Torontonensis*, was first published in 1898. Two years later a photograph captioned “The Gym-
“Gymnasium” showed a man in exercise garb, wearing tights and a form-fitting, short-sleeved pullover, rather like a leotard of today. Throughout the next few years, men were photographed in team uniforms or, as with the “Gymnasium” man, in exercise clothes. Women, though, were consistently depicted in street wear plus academic gowns in all the yearbook photos. Not once was a women’s athletics-related group shown in any kind of athletic dress, even though these were the years when the rigid rules of gender-driven propriety were beginning to slacken. In fact, the absence of any pictures of women participants would lead one to believe that women simply never indulged in any kind of sports. This was not the case. A piece in the 1903 *Torontonensis* on the women’s athletics program of Victoria College gives some insight into the true state of affairs: “Physical culture, too, is not neglected but is a department well patronized and much appreciated. Undoubtedly the most popular sport, however, is skating, which every girl seems to look upon as a daily physical necessity.” A note in the same article mentions that the girls’ hockey club (in Canada, hockey is, without further definition, ice hockey) had been formed the year before. Another note, in subdued tones, this one from the University College Women’s Athletics program, perhaps reveals the reasons why the girls enjoyed skating so much, for in all likelihood, no other option had existed up to that time: “In 1901, a small and unassuming gymnasium was granted by the Senate [for women].” One questions whether the men’s gymnasiums would have been thus described, or, in fact, if the women’s gym was even constructed after it was “granted.”

It is possible that what drove the style of presentation in the yearbook photographs was the same set of conventions we observed in Part One: what was acceptable for women when accompanied by men was quite different from what was acceptable for women alone. And after all, the university world was part of the fashionable world since it was coeducational. Even so, it is clear that by the turn of the century, some attention was being given to women’s athletics. The women’s colleges, however, provide a very different picture. Let us return, then, to Mount Holyoke Seminary, and to Dio Lewis’s influence there.

As noted earlier, Mary Lyon’s calisthenics disappeared in the wave of Lewis’s “new gymnastics” in 1862. Hers had been regarded as too much like dance by the pious evangelicals of the time, who shunned all such fri-
volities. Accordingly, wands, dumbbells, and Indian clubs swung in patterns took the place of the old-fashioned calisthenics, and helped the rhythm of new exercises. The outfit for the new exercises followed Lewis’s suggestion—“a very short skirt with ‘zouave’ trousers drawn up just below the knee and falling over nearly to the ankle.”8 This was the first accepted outfit for women’s gymnastic activity in a collegiate setting. It established the model for the future, with subtle changes that echoed the evolution of fashion over the next couple of decades. The style was not uniform, and as late as the 1890s, it is clear that the dresses were home-made.

Mount Holyoke’s catalogue from 1864–65 warned students that they must provide “suitable clothing for the season and the climate, such as flannels, woollen hose, thick shoes, overshoes and an umbrella, also a dress suitable for gymnastic practice.” The choice of style lay with the wearer. Over a decade later, in 1878–79, the only change in this directive was the addition of “leggins . . . and a dress for gymnastic exercises.” The first catalogue to specify what this dress should look like appeared in 1882–83, when the description read, “The gymnastic dress may be of flannel (dark blue is preferred), made with a blouse-waist, sleeves full, belt loose, and the hem of the skirt seven inches from the floor.”9 That same year, 1883, gymnastics instructor Cornelia Clapp (who was also the zoology instructor)10 wrote a *Manual of Gymnastics*, in which she finally gave clear directions to any dressmaker for creating the appropriate gymnasium dress:

The dress may be of wool flannel (dark blue is preferred), made with blouse-waist, loose belt, sleeves moderately full, good length and closed at the wrist.

It requires about 8 yards of flannel, single width, or four and a half double width, for the dress, including drawers, which may be pieced at the top with cambric.

The dress should not be trimmed heavily; a flounce about six inches deep should be stitched on to the lower edge of the skirt, not put on the skirt, and a band of trimming to match collar and cuffs, or rows of braid, may be placed above the flounce.

Width of skirt about two and one fourths yards, and seven inches from the floor.
The waist should be made long enough under the arms to allow the arms to be stretched upward to their utmost extent without drawing upon the belt at all. Shoulder seam should be short, and arm-holes large.

Her final directive was: “Corsets and high-heeled boots are out of place in the gymnasium.” Clapp’s description of the gymnastic dress comes to life in a photograph of students climbing Mount Tom in the 1880s, and in the crew uniforms at Wellesley at the same time. Interestingly, Clapp specifically mentions drawers as part of the outfit (even if “pieced at the top with cambric,” a cotton), but never, in any of the photographs from either Wellesley or Mount Holyoke, do these show.

The adoption of Dio Lewis’s gymnastic system in the 1860s proved a critical impetus behind building a gymnasium at Mount Holyoke—no small feat in wartime. After a fund drive led by the governor of Massachusetts, who visited the school and was impressed by the gymnastic display put on by the students, it opened in 1865.

Vassar College took a slightly different approach, as it did to much else in the establishment of private degree-granting women’s institutions in the
United States. Its first catalogue (1865–66) pointed out that the building housing the riding hall and gymnasium was still being built, but that “classes for Physical Training were organized and instructed in the corridors of the college by Elizabeth M. Powell.” These corridors were “beautifully lighted, aired and warmed . . . [to] afford ample means of indoor exercise in inclement weather.” Other “feminine sports and games” would “diversify the physical exercises,” including “boating in the summer and skating in the winter, without danger of outside intrusion . . . archery, croquet (or Ladies’ cricket), graces, shuttlecock, etc.” A suitable dress was deemed “indispensable.” Accordingly, “a uniform [was] adopted for the calisthenic classes in the College, the material for which can be procured and made up on arrival. . . . Every student will be required to provide herself with a light and easy-fitting dress, to be worn during these athletic exercises. It will be left optional with her, whether to wear it or not at other times.”13 The suit was referred to as a “simple uniform of gray and red sash.” To judge from the illustrations, it too was based on Dio Lewis’s gymnastic dress. But because it was mandated that all students wear the same dress, in the same material, this was the first uniform for women in a collegiate setting, or almost certainly any other, for athletic activity in the United States. Incidentally, Vassar is unique in even suggesting that students might wear their gym dresses anywhere outside of physical training. Generally, such freedom was prohibited. Perhaps the physical isolation of the college and its buildings from the town of Poughkeepsie had something to do with the leniency.

It is doubtful that the Vassar suit lasted long. Dr. Eliza M. Moser, who went to Vassar as resident physician in 1883, recalled in an after-dinner speech in 1920 that she had presented a request that same year on behalf of the director of the gymnasium to replace “the monotonous calisthenic exercises in very proper ankle-length skirts [clearly not the gray and red Turkish trouser outfits of the 1860s] by the newly developed Sargent system of gymnastics, physical measurements and divided skirts.” She further reported that “an old faculty member” declared, “The girls will not stand for it,” while another flatly stated, “They will not wear divided skirts.”14 Both proved to be wrong; the girls did, and willingly.

Although the women’s colleges led the way in advocating exercise for women, the entire health and exercise movement was at its peak in these
years. So strong was the demand for gymnastic dresses generally that popular magazines such as *Godey’s, Peterson’s*, and *The Delineator* all published articles on them, with pictures, telling how to make them, from the 1860s into the 1880s.

By the late 1880s, outfits consisting of full Turkish trousers and a “blouse” had taken precedence over skirted gymnastic dresses. One writer referred to “the fluffy little skirt” that “turned out to be no skirt at all. It is two skirts, a divided skirt, it clothes each leg separately. It makes a pretty drapery while the gymnast is motionless, but it does not interfere with the perfect freedom of the limbs. She is wearing Turkish trousers, after a model of the gymnasts’ own.”\(^{15}\) In 1888 the dress reformer, Annie Jenness Miller recommended in an article, “Exercise for Women,” “a regular costume . . . which will not impede or interfere with the free movements of any member of the body.” It should “properly consist of a pair of full Turkish trousers with a jersey underwaist or blouse, which can be worn with an abbreviated tunic drapery [hard to visualize from a twenty-first-century perspective], if one be supersensitive to appearing in the simple trousers and blouse, which are now worn as the regulation costume in all of the popular gymnasiums patronized by both sexes.”\(^{16}\) Finally, in 1893 Butterick came out with a pattern for the gymnasium bloomer.\(^{17}\) This coincided with the earliest manufacture of the garments by commercial companies, which heralded a new uniformity.

The question arises, then: Why was there a need for uniformity?

With the single exception of Vassar College, the gym bloomer as a uniform emerged because women began to participate in team sports, indoors, in the gymnasium.\(^{18}\) Basketball was the first. It had been devised as a game for men by Canadian-born James Naismith at Springfield (Massachusetts) Training School (later College), in 1891. The next year, after its rules had been published in the *Journal of Physical Education*, Senda Berenson, who taught gymnastics just a few miles north at Smith College in Northampton, adapted it for women. She too published the rules of her game. Up until this time, exercise had meant calisthenics: swinging Indian clubs, waving wands, even Dio Lewis’s “new gymnastics,” which were a form of calisthenics. It was frankly boring. By contrast, this new, energetic game put vigor into the physical education program. It was snapped up by schools...
Calisthenics class, clutching dumbbells at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, 1876. The dresses, no two alike, follow an updated 1870s version of Dio Lewis’s preferred outfit. Only one girl, second on the far right, gives any hint of trousers under her skirt. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Special Collections and Archive.

everywhere in an amazingly brief period of time: by 1894 or 1895, most schools that had women students had basketball for women. In many cases it was not part of any regular physical education curriculum; often it was introduced through women’s athletic associations or the efforts of the girls themselves. Under whatever auspices, this game spelled the end of the old skirted gymnastic dress. It was simply too bulky. With the skirt finally banished from the gymnasium, the bloomers shortened and widened to give the appearance of a short skirt, and the blouse was buttoned onto the bloomer waistband. That much women gained. What they sacrificed was the ability to wear this new garment out-of-doors, where someone—specifically men—might see them.

At first, we see variety in the styles of the outfit, even on the same team. They all seem to be based on the gymnastic dress pattern that The Delin-eator offered as early as September 1891 or the variations on the sailor
blouse that began turning up in the 1880s for sports and yachting. The sailor collar seems to have been preferred, but even with variations in style, all of the blouses were paired with baggy bloomers of the Zouave type that hung past the knee. By the mid-1890s, uniformity in design began emerging, and by the early years of the new century, a uniform as we think of it had taken shape. This suit, with slight variations, was worn by all girls participating in all athletic endeavors indoors. In outdoor activity, only when the field was remote and hidden from the public could the girls wear their gym suits, and even then, they had to cover their legs with skirts while going to and from the playing fields. Trousered legs for women simply were not accepted—not even when the trousers looked like skirts.

A notable, and for the time shocking, exception was in California. (California’s reputation for leading innovations in education certainly applies to the area of women’s clothing for physical education, as we shall see again later.) In his history of Stanford University, Orrin Leslie Elliott wrote, “Basketball, a very recent sport, was taken up with enthusiasm and in 1894 an off-campus game was played with the Castilleja School in Palo Alto, Stanford losing 13 to 14.” This event stretched the mores of the time as far as they could go. “This is the initiation of public athletics for the girls here,” one of the juniors wrote. “They played in their gym suits on the grounds by Castilleja Hall. They rode to the game in a bus in their suits just as the men do. While some are quite opposed to such doings, there seems to be very little said in the matter. I don’t feel in the least like entering into any such thing, nor do I feel like criticizing the girls who do, if they keep on their own ground or play with the prep school girls.”

Two years later, however, girls from Stanford and the University of California played a sensational game in the San Francisco Armory. (Interestingly, basketball at this time was only a women’s sport in the West.) At California’s insistence, and much to Stanford’s scorn, only women were permitted in as spectators. In this, the girls from Berkeley followed the tradition of modesty already established at Smith College in Massachusetts. Not only were men banned from seeing women striving to win, but they were prevented as well from seeing them in public wearing trousers. Stanford won, by a score of 2 to 1. With a ball that did not bounce but was passed from player to player, the game was slower than it became later, and scores were lower. These two games were the very first interscholastic ath-
“Ladies’ Gymnastic Costume”: “may consist of the blouse and skirt or of the blouse and trousers, as preferred; but it should be understood that the trousers and skirt are not to be worn together.” The Delineator, September 1891.

“Misses’ Sailor Blouses and Tennis Shirt.” Butterick & Co., Catalogue for Autumn, 1889, 16.

“Ladies’ Sailor Collars.” The Delineator, April 1892, 333.
letic contests for women. The eastern schools categorically refused any such recognition of competitive spirit on the grounds that it was unladylike.

Basketball was not the only team sport women played. Within eight years of basketball’s appearance, the game of field hockey was imported from England by Constance Applebee, a visiting scholar at a Harvard Summer School program in athletic training, first opened to women in 1896. She came to the wilds of New England in the summer of 1901 bearing her hockey sticks, eager to teach the new game to collegiate women.24 Obviously, this was a game that had to be played outdoors, so what to wear? The *Boston Sunday Herald* later reported:

> When hockey was first introduced to Smith . . . the question of the proper costume immediately arose. Many of the girls thought they must wear bloomers, instead of skirts, in order to play well, but Miss Berenson said:

> “Well, girls, since we have to do all our running after we leave college in skirts, isn’t it wise to learn to do it gracefully?”

> That settled it, and now the girls think that skirts are best, after all, because they often catch the ball when it would otherwise go out of bounds. Besides, they do not want to ape their brothers, or to be athletic in any sense such as men give the word.25

Whatever Miss Berenson’s reasons, the truth behind the choice lay more in the conventions of the day: the sport was played out-of-doors, so skirts had to be worn. It was as simple as that. The players all wore roughly the same long skirts and tops but differentiated their teams through hats: one side wore tams, the other sailors. The one concession to all the running the game required was that the skirts were “short,” that is, some four to six inches off the ground. It is interesting to note that this tradition was maintained when the game was revived as an intercollegiate sport for women in the late 1970s. The correct uniform remains the skirt in the form of a short kilt, still worn today. But the seeds of that kilt lie in the mores of turn-of-the-century America.

From the beginning, then, outdoor team sports for women, whether crew at Wellesley from the 1870s, baseball at Mount Holyoke in the 1880s,
or field hockey at Smith, devised different styles of uniforms—skirted ones—from those trousered styles worn indoors, in the gymnasium. This dichotomy persisted until the 1970s.

The gym suit that emerged with basketball was a two-piece, inky blue-black serge, a tightly woven, rather harsh and hard-wearing wool, not too thick, but dense and scratchy. The entire suit was made out of this material. The bloomers were really almost two full skirts, pleated to confine the bulk of material, and gathered at the knee. The crotch rested at knee height, often cut in a single large gusset, up to eighteen inches square, and set in on a diamond pattern. These were usually called “divided skirts,” but as we have seen, the terms “bloomers” and “Zouaves” were acceptable too. The “blouse,” or “waist,” was similar to the one described earlier, dating from some ten or fifteen years before, which allowed the arms to move freely in all directions and which buttoned onto the bloomer’s waistband. The women wore long black cotton stockings, held in place under the bloomer with garters, and flat rubber-soled shoes. The whole outfit in the mid-1890s cost under six dollars including the shoes.

Interestingly, almost everyone, no matter where she lived, wore this same outfit, even in the humid, warm South. No regional differences in climate had any bearing on the approved—and hot—garment. I believe that the reasons for this were twofold. First, all the early instructors of gymnastics were trained in only a handful of schools, mainly in Massachusetts and New York. These women carried their programs far and wide throughout the country, but primarily into the Midwest and the South, even into Canada, and as they went, they took their regulation gym costume with them. Second, as industry production took over, supplying first universities and colleges, then high schools, with the garments for physical education programs, a limited number of choices existed. And the companies seem to have been located in the Boston area. Only California schools (the University of California, Stanford) used suppliers located in the West.

A few gymnastic directors attempted to design different gymnasium costumes, notably at the University of Michigan and Stanford. Dr. Eliza M. Moser, a medical doctor (Michigan, 1875), returned to Michigan in 1896 as dean of women and professor of hygiene (not an unusual combination of credentials at that time). She had also graduated from the Anderson Nor-
Senda Berenson wearing the new basketball uniform, about 1893. Courtesy of Smith College Archives.
Basketball player and mascot wearing the serge gym suit, about 1901. The observers in the background wear the fashion of the day, in sharp contrast to the look of the clothing for sport. Courtesy of Smith College Archives.
mal School of physical education in New Haven and had studied at the Sargent School of gymnastics in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was she who had gone to Vassar as physician in residence in 1883 and wanted to change the program and dress for gymnasium work at that school. When she came to Michigan, she designed a uniform to be used there. Called “the most novel thing about the whole programme” by the Detroit Free Press, it consisted of the typical serge bloomer, but rather than buttoning onto a blouse top, it attached instead to a low-cut bodice of the German peasant pattern with narrow bands passing over the shoulders. This bodice buttons under the left arm and fits the figure closely, giving the exact lines of the body from the arm pit to hip. It never pulls or shifts with any motion of the body, the arms and shoulders being left perfectly free. Under the bodice will be worn a sweater or jersey of peculiar design with full sleeves to the elbow leaving the forearm uncovered. This suit leaves the outlines of
the neck, shoulders and back fully revealed to the instructor who can thus catch at a glance any defects in the pupil of figure or movement. The usual gymnasium stockings and shoes complete the outfit. The skirt and bodice will be dark blue, and the sweater or jersey yellow, making the suit a veritable university uniform.29

It remained in use at Michigan for at least a decade. Photographs indicate that a new model replaced it by about 1905.

Stanford and Berkeley also attempted different designs, but neither seemed to have even the small success the Michigan suit enjoyed. The “Stanford Gymnasium Suit” appeared in photographs sometime after 1896,30 the year of the famous Stanford-Berkeley game. Possessing a feminine, dressmaker look, it featured the narrow, unpleated knicker bottoms similar to those men wore at the time, but, in a surprising departure from the gym suit norm, the waistline sat at the small of the back, dropping in front to curve beneath the belly. The top appeared to button up the front,
and probably buttoned onto the knickers as well. A high-cut funnel neck-
line set into a deep curved yoke finished the bloused bodice. Berkeley’s suit,
however—recorded in only one photograph—was perhaps the most start-
tling for the period. The young woman wearing it, her posture relaxed and
more expressive of the twenty-first century than the 1890s, appears to be
almost in a time warp, with her knicker bottom and her simple, unadorned
top that lacked the fussier details of the Stanford suit. We today can recog-
nize her as one of us. Apparently, though, it was too avant-garde for even
the daring Californians to wear; it appeared nowhere else, vanishing com-
pletely, to be superseded by standard gymnasium suits.

If the ideal gymnasium suit presented something of a problem for ath-
letic women at the time, so did the underwear to wear with it. Few sources
refer to it at all. We do get a glimmer of what was expected, however, in the
third annual catalogue (1894–95) from the State Normal and Industrial
School, later renamed the Women’s College of the University of North
Carolina, still later the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. It
stated that the “gymnasium outfit, including a pair of gymnasium shoes, a
union undersuit [my emphasis] and an over suit of blue serge, is required to
be of uniform material and make, and cannot be made at home.” 31 This
represents the only reference to underclothing in connection with gymna-
sium dress I found in any of the institutions I visited, and one of the few
directives that indicated how the emergence of uniform style in the suit
came to be.

A major exception to the norm appeared in a series of articles in 1910
and 1911 by “A Non-professional Observer, Leonhard Felix Fuld, LL. M.,
PH. D.” These three articles dealing with reform of women’s dress for
exercise were published in the American Physical Education Review. They
discussed, among other aspects of the gym suit, the underwear worn with
it (“if the student wears underwear, as should always be insisted upon
. . .”).32 It is clear that the author is addressing his remarks to teachers of
physical exercise at the high school level; nevertheless, many of his com-
ments are more universal. His caustic articles ridicule the programs as well
as the outfits girls and women wore for them. He was not alone for his time
in attacking the “physical torture of a waistband cutting into [the] abdom-
inal walls” caused by the multiple layers of cloth in the overlapping waist-
bands, but he was the most outspoken:
By actual count it has been found that this costume has nine thicknesses of material at the waist. The serge bloomers have three thicknesses of material, lining and stiffening; there is a separate belt of two thicknesses of lining to button the blouse to the bloomers; there is a belt on the blouse consisting of two thicknesses of lining and the blouse itself with its folds of material adds to the thickness of this mass of material at the waist. In addition the underclothing worn by the student may add three additional thicknesses of material to the waist line and in some cases even more. The student accordingly wears twelve thicknesses of material at the waist.33

Fuld was the only writer I found who expressed concern about the gapping of the various parts of the gymnasium suit—at the waist, where it buttoned; at the side, where the bloomers fastened; and at the knee—commenting on “the mental disquietude resulting from the fact that the wearer is “always coming apart at the belt” when engaged in vigorous exercise. “No refined woman,” he warned, “can enjoy herself in the gymnasium when this nagging consciousness is constantly present.”34 He also was the only one who addressed “mental discomforts” and the injurious effects of round elastic garters—little bands of torture worn around the knee as bracelets worn around the wrist—they permit their pupils to wear them in the gymnasium because they are the most convenient. It is true that when removed at the end of the gymnasium lesson they leave deep-cut furrows, but it is claimed that when they are worn the stockings present a prettier because more taut appearance.

The mental torture which the student suffers from the existing conditions at her knee results from the fact that with the activity in the gymnasium there seems to be constant danger of exposure at the knee. Much of this danger is fancied rather than real. Yet to a sensitive girl or woman this consciousness is a perfectly real discomfort. Ordinary thrift and tidiness on the part of the student would seem to be able to remedy this condition by the renewal of the elastic band at
the knee of the bloomers as frequently as may be necessary . . . [oth-
erwise] there is always a likelihood that during exercise the leg of the
bloomers will ride upwards and leave a portion of the leg exposed.

He recommended instead of the round garters (“an instrument of torture
worthy of the Middle Ages”) “a stocking or garter girdle with garters at the
sides which do not exert any pressure over the bladder,” one that crosses “the
sacrum in the back and slants down just on top of the trochanter, buckling
over the pubic bones.” He warned that the novice might at first fear that the
girdle would slip down, but assured his readers that this would not be the
case, and that they would be “delighted” with its lack of interference.

In addition, Fuld blasted the “present day gymnastic costume for women”
as “outrageously unhygienic,” adding: “In explanation of this statement it
should be borne in mind that gymnasium costumes are almost invariably
made of non-washable material,—usually of coarse, scratchy serge, or
heating, moisture-absorbing flannel. Furthermore, the students seldom
wear any underwear while exercising. In this way all of the perspiration
and other skin exudations from the surface of the body are absorbed by
the gymnasium suit which itself is never washed.” By “underwear” one
assumes that he was speaking of a union suit, rather than a chemise and/or
drawers—but perhaps not.

The general unwashability of the gym suit, and the problems that led to,
seem to have been universal. By the time Fuld was writing his diatribes, a
movement was under way to find a solution to those and other difficulties
identified by wearers. Florence Bolton, director of the women’s gymna-
sium at Stanford, had previously complained that a suit might be worn for
“years without cleansing; the blouse especially is charged with oil and per-
spiration. Where a sweater replaces the blouse, its name is fully suggestive
of its condition.” She too criticized the existing suit for its mass of cloth
binding the waist—up to four bands—but unlike Fuld, she lay the blame
in a startlingly feminist fashion:

It produces what someone has spoken of as the “over-sexed” figure
with abnormal protuberances above and below. These belts, usually
fairly snug to begin with, are actually tight in many positions. . . . Men
are undoubtedly somewhat responsible, directly or indirectly, for
many of the absurdities in women’s dress. Necessarily without experience in the matters upon which they pass judgment, often without any physiological, economic, artistic or other basis, their dictates are entirely arbitrary, but they dictate nonetheless. They love a certain tailor-made conformity. They allowed women to go into gymnastics with the understanding that they should not make themselves look too dreadful and unfeminine.  

Her solution was to design a suit that had no waist at all. Based on the English gymnasium slip, a knee-length, sleeveless, square-necked tunic with a straight yoke holding box pleats front and back, hers incorporated the English top with the American bottom, or bloomer. It fell loose from the high yoke, and was lightly “girdled” rather than belted. Underneath, the gymnast wore a “washable guimpe,” or shirt, adding to its hygienic appeal. Fuld sang the praises of this new outfit:

Her costume consists of a one-piece slip which has no belt and no waist. A girdle loose enough to rise and fall and to return to place in the various positions assumed by the student in the gymnasium, is fastened firmly across the back and drops low in front, fastening with a snap. There is no pressure and as the suit is in one piece there is no danger of exposure or of coming apart at the waist. There is no sailor collar to flap in a most disconcerting manner about the head and ears of the student while she is in an inverted or semi-inverted position. The gymnasium suit is a one-piece slip which comes over the shoulders with two shoulder straps. At the neck a guimpe of some thin, soft, washable material is worn in place of the heating and irritating flannel, or the hard, scratchy serge.

The only problem with this suit, as he saw it, was the reluctance of students to wear an outfit with no waistline in that very waist-conscious period. For whatever reason, this outfit too found little outside acceptance, although it was adopted by the University of Wisconsin and possibly others, and was used to some extent into the 1920s. It remained in use at Stan-
ford throughout the 1920s. For costume historians, however, it is remarkable in that it was a very early harbinger of the waistless fashions that were to sweep the world a decade or more later.

Possibly the major reason why the Bolton suit failed to capture a greater audience was the introduction, perhaps as early as 1908, of the middy. As we have seen, the sailor blouse and its variants had been commonplace for exercise since the 1880s, and sailor collars were the norm for the wool serge gym suits. Whereas the sailor style had been a true blouse, with its baggy waist drooping over the skirt or bloomer waistband, the new middy hung straight from shoulder to hip. Best of all, not only did it have cleaner lines, but it also was made of cotton duck. For the first time, then, the sailor blouse or middy had the benefit of being not just cooler but washable. Fuld wrote in 1910 that it had “come into use and into great popular favor” during the previous year; indeed, when there were no facilities for changing clothes, girls were encouraged to wear the top and a skirt over their bloomers so they might remove the skirt and be ready for exercise in little time. Since the same voluminous serge bloomer was worn with it, one wonders at the bulk it must have produced under the skirts. Sometimes, for outdoor sports (where the players might be seen in public), it was worn with a “shortened” skirt. Another variation appearing at about the turn of
Middy blouses paired with baggy bloomers, about 1910–15. Compare the middy-wearers’ silhouettes with the high-waisted fashionable dress in the background. Collection of author.

Champion tennis players wear the middy paired with a “short” skirt. Women’s College of North Carolina, 1911. Courtesy of Photograph Collection, University Archives, Jackson Library, University of N.C. at Greensboro.
the century was a turtleneck pullover, borrowed from the men’s schools, worn with the bloomer. But basically, the middy-and-bloomer combination was the gym suit used in high schools and colleges for the next twenty-five years, until it was finally abandoned about 1950.

Even the middy was not without its drawbacks. Once again, the critical eye of L. F. Fuld draws them to our attention. Ever alert to the “sensitive” nature of female students, he pointed to the low V neckline as a possible source of chill, although he admitted that “the danger of catching cold because of the low-cut neck [was] more apparent than real.” His solution was to insist that a “chest guard provided with the blouse be worn.” In addition: “When engaged in work on the heavy apparatus, the blouse frequently becomes disarranged [at the neckline] so as to expose the student’s chest and breasts. This objection is also not entitled to much weight, since such exposure is not considered improper at a ball, or at the opera, and furthermore men are very seldom present in a gymnasium class.” Far worse was what happened when “the student is in an inverted or semi-inverted position.” This not only caused the “sailor collar to flap in a most disconcerting manner about the head and ears of the student,” but brought even greater misery to the wearer because the blouse, “which has no waist, frequently rides up and in such cases exposes the trunk of the student in a manner which is likely to cause serious embarrassment to the student and places her in a condition in which she lacks that mental quietude so much to be desired in gymnasium work.”42

Nevertheless, it was worn universally. A few minor changes were made by the 1920s: the bloomer might be a slimmer knicker, and the sleeves of the middy were sometimes short. This was the outfit our grandmothers or mothers wore in high school and in college. In fact, it became synonymous with “schoolgirl” in those decades. And it permitted girls to do things they had never been able to do before. They could run, play, leap, dive, hurdle, exert themselves. It cannot be stated too strongly that before gymnasium suits were devised, women were not permitted any of this activity, in large part because they were not permitted to wear the clothing that made it possible.

To cast a different light on the gym suit at this time, we should look at the clothing that male athletes were wearing. The late-nineteenth-century male gymnast wore an outfit not terribly unlike the figure-revealing tights
and tops that American women wear today, only usually all black. Annette Kellerman, the famous Australian swimmer who in 1910 “designed her own swimming suit” (giving no credit to her inspiration), creating a scandal in the process, directly borrowed the outfit men had been wearing for gymnastics for at least a quarter of a century. It consisted of a form-fitting body covering with very short sleeves and a scooped neckline, and black tights.43 While girls were modestly encased in yards of navy serge, boys were wearing knickers and short-sleeved pullover shirts. Even before the middy blouse was introduced, as early as the 1890s, men were wearing primitive versions of tank tops and shorts, all brief, all washable.

Much of the twentieth-century development of gym suits had to do with clothing design generally. It is not coincidental that street wear took on the waistless line of the middy after 1910. In fact, college athletic wear was as much as fifteen years in advance of fashion. The outdoor basketball uniform from Mount Holyoke College, with its knee-skimming pleated skirt, dates to 1910, and the waistless suit experiment and Fuld’s despised round rubber garters eventually became symbols of the flapper in the 1920s. The gymnastic outfit had heralded an unconstraining kind of clothing for women long before the leading designers of the time, including Paul Poiret, who boasted of “abandoning the corset,” and Coco Chanel, who “introduced” the idea of sporting sweaters based on English menswear. One might not have thought that the lowly gym suit, worn in the United States by what amounted to a handful of privileged young women, would ever make any kind of impact on fashion—indeed, would ever be seen at all in those circles. Gymnastics and sports, however, and the accompanying clothing became fashionable in their own right, and were written up in every major magazine for women, and even in general interest magazines such as Harper’s Weekly. And these articles were illustrated. The proliferating image of the athletic American girl, so popular in the Gibson version, was a phenomenon of the period, a sort of pin-up of the time. Popular illustrators such as Harrison Fisher projected her as an ideal, and often portrayed her wearing, if not a gym suit per se, then a variation of it, with the turtleneck sweater and daring knee-length skirt that were worn for outdoor sports during the 1910s, long before short skirts were seen anywhere else. The correlation of athleticism and American beauty, tied to the new ideal
of the college girl, had a distinct influence on the fashions of the day—if not immediately, then subtly and over time.

By the 1920s, the gym suit seemed to flounder, as it sought a new form. The Stanford bloomer-jumper, of very lightweight wool, worn with a cotton blouse underneath, was one variation. Team uniforms took other directions: short tunics worn over shirts with knickers were one; shirts and shorts were another, appearing as early as 1929 at Rockford College. But the jumper idea seemed sensible, and in 1931 the accompanying bloomer shrunk into a romper, with baggy elasticized legs that fell low on the thigh, generally just above the knee. It was worn either with or without a blouse. Unbelievable as it seems, this was the first completely washable gym suit ever designed.\(^4^4\) It prevailed in many schools throughout the 1930s.

In 1933, however, Mildred Howard at Mount Holyoke College, working with the sporting goods company Wright & Ditson, started on the path to the design of the gym suit most of us remember with something between affection and horror. Her first attempt was a shirt and box-pleated shorts combination. The shorts hung straight, looking like a short skirt, and were
flattering to most figures. These were soon discarded at Mount Holyoke, however, when Miss Howard realized that the girls preferred wearing the outfit with the shirttail out, hanging so low that the shorts vanished entirely. Her final design was based on the tennis dress. It had a romper as the base and a removable skirt that girls could wear over it if they wished. For certain activities such as gymnastics, the skirt generally remained off; for sports it generally stayed on.

In a letter written to Mildred Howard in 1947, Eleanor Edwards of Wright & Ditson, who had worked closely with Howard in creating the new style, credited her with the innovation.

You were definitely responsible for the adaptation for gymnasium costumes, of the tennis dress which we are now using for the majority of the colleges we outfit. . . . And there is no reason in the world why you shouldn’t claim that distinction!

And Mount Holyoke was the first college in the East to adopt, for Physical Education classes, the cotton wash suit which is now so universally worn for gymnastic activities. And certainly no one can deny that for this purpose cotton is a great improvement over the wool materials! It was an important step forward—not only from the point of view of hygiene, but also from the standpoint of style—the bright colors of the cotton are so much more attractive than the drab navy and black of the wool materials.

It is our sincere belief that these changes in gymnasium outfits must have done a great deal for Physical Education as a whole. Certainly they were bound to increase its popularity with the students, since they meant a girl could wear an attractive outfit that she liked—instead of a dreary (and often dirty!) suit she loathed, and hated to wear.⁴⁵

With certain modifications, this gym suit became the symbol of physical education for girls from the 1940s through the 1960s, even as the middy and bloomer had been during the early part of the century. My own high school gym suit, with its camp shirt top, elastic-legged short bloomer bottom, and belt with two buttons at the front, was an ugly variation in a sharp blue that can only be described as unforgettable. Another variation used
elsewhere was the skirted jumper with matching bloomers underneath. Although the move was slowly and inexorably toward a solely bifurcated garment, it took a long time to get rid of the skirt altogether.

Even as the romper-style tennis suit provided the basic model in mid-century America, one must note the exceptions. Schools in at least two states, California and Texas, chose to dress high school physical education classes in shirts and shorts as early as the 1940s. The shorts were navy blue cotton twill, the shirts either camp style or T-shirts. Once again, the wearer’s name had to be embroidered (in navy) on the shirt pocket and down the white stripe of the shorts.46

One other new feature accepted by around 1930 or 1931 was short socks. Up until this time in America, women’s bare legs simply were never seen in public, not even, up until the mid-1920s, for swimming and bathing. Women did not dare to venture onto a public beach without stockings. Indeed, in many cities they risked arrest for indecent exposure.47 So the ankle socks worn with the romper-and-shirt gym suit of the 1930s completed the revolutionary look and allowed even greater freedom of movement and comfort.

The tennis-style gym suit came in many colors, blue being a popular choice, but others were an odd sort of sage green, yellow, lavender, and even red. Often, especially in the private schools, different colors signified the different classes, freshmen, sophs, and so on, recalling a tradition that harkened back to the crew uniforms at Wellesley and to the earliest days of team sports at Smith and elsewhere, when the numbers and trim on the navy serge collars and cuffs were in class colors.48

Eleanor Edwards’s comments about attractiveness notwithstanding, the question of modesty had been an issue since the very beginning, as in the furor over wearing gym suits in public. Even the skirted gym suits of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s presented modesty problems. Although the bloomers matched, or were attached in some cases, women felt that letting them show was not respectable. After all, if they were under the skirt, they were underwear. This problem led to some interesting solutions. Girls tucked the skirts up into the legs of the bloomers to create, in effect, a second layer of bloomer. It has been suggested that this was to keep the skirts from falling in their faces as they did acrobatics. Possibly so. But having
undergarments show in those years, in any form at all, was simply no more acceptable than bare legs had been a generation earlier.

The gym suit persevered into the 1960s and even the 1970s in some areas of the country, especially in parochial and private schools, but finally died of natural causes sometime toward the end of that period. In colleges, they vanished entirely, to be taken over by non-regulation shorts and T-shirts. But interestingly, in those years of turmoil, when women were beginning to come into their own in so many ways, women’s athletics virtually vanished from college and university campuses. The decline had begun earlier, but it took hold in the 1960s. Over a ten-year period, in Big Ten yearbooks the only reported women’s activity even remotely resembling sports was cheerleading. Of course, the big business of college sports for men really took off at that same time.

But beginning in 1975, a short while after the passage of Title IX, ensuring female students equal access to athletics, the yearbooks began to report
on new intercollegiate teams for women: basketball, soccer, field hockey. And each sport had its own uniform. Basketball adapted the T-shirt and shorts, soccer much the same, and field hockey used the kilt, usually tartan. No one style of gym suit remains; uniforms for various activities have taken over. Specialization has found its way even into the gym. But the gym suit remains bound in memory, hated and loved, and little understood as to its significant role in twentieth-century America.