

## The "Sportification" of Women

***"We want to move freely": Bathing and Swimming Costumes, Fencing Suits, Lawn Tennis Dress, Sportswear for Team Sports – Clothing for Aeronautics – From Grace to Power***



Around 1900, women who practised sport, a barely noticeable minority around 1870, had grown into a publicly visible group that began to test itself in all areas and to compete with male performance. Activities that had previously been simply unthinkable for the female sex were initially socially tolerated as so-called "ladies' sports", i. e. a variant in which grace and beauty were in the foreground and any effort was to be avoided, until finally female competitive sport became established, in which the competitors dominated. Parallel to this, women's sportswear developed, whereby astonishing divergences can be observed in the various sports disciplines.

For the reconstruction of the change in women's sportswear from recreational pleasure to competitive sport, the following areas are subjected to closer examination in the book:

- Swimming
- Fencing
- Lawn Tennis
- Team Games
- Aeronautics

**Note:** In my contribution "Sensationelle Sportkostüme. Die Kleidung der Flugpionierinnen / Sensational Sportswear. The Clothing of the Female Aviation Pioneers" (see exhibition catalogue "Die Schwestern des Ikarus. Frau und Flug", Zeppelin Museum Friedrichshafen 2004, pp. 210 - 237), this study was again significantly expanded by archive material made available.

The history of women's sports trousers was an important aspect in the history of women's sports, and the development of women's sports was the most obvious reflection of the change in the role of women in society in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The decisive question as to whether and in which way women were allowed to engage in sports was of a moral nature - "What is appropriate for women? - or constitutionally or medically based: "What can women

physically be expected to do? The sociological aspect of "what role does society envisage for women?" exerted a decisive influence on the answer to the question of both the limits of decency and those of the female physique. There is a close connection between the setting of goals and the drawing of boundaries. If the objective changed, the boundary shifted - the expanded boundaries in turn made new experiences possible, which in turn again called traditional role assignments into question.

The process of establishing women's sports trousers in the various disciplines was by no means simultaneous. A sports dress that was already established for one sports discipline could provoke a scandal on another occasion, or even seem out of place because of its inappropriateness. National disparities should also be considered in this context. Countries in which sport was given a high status and the process of equality between men and women was comparatively far advanced, were also more open-minded in questions of adequate women's sportswear. These included the United States, where women could participate more in public life than their European counterparts, followed by England, the nation of sports. Germany and France remained rather hesitant. Examples from Anglo-Saxon countries, which seemed exemplary for German women to some, were a warning to others. In the end, however, all women's sports fashions were adopted in Germany sooner or later.

If one compares the history of the development of the various sports disciplines, one finds that women stuck to conventional clothing for an excessively long time in sports with a long tradition, e. g. horse riding, tennis or ice skating, while women who were enthusiastic about new kinds of sports, team games or even aviation tended to favour unconventional solutions. However, if the will to perform and the fighting spirit dominated, this accelerated the adoption of sports trousers. Competitive sportswomen of all disciplines often opted for trousers decades earlier than recreational sportswomen. Women who played team games also belonged to the avant-garde of sports trousers wearers.

The harder and more vital the game, the more likely female players were to adopt male sportswear. The most innovative clothing behaviour, however, was displayed by those who devoted themselves to newly introduced sensational sports. For example, while the decision to get on a bike was sensational in itself, female cyclists attracted more than the usual attention when they rode in bloomers or divided skirts. Nevertheless, it was the women cyclists who in the 1880s launched wearing trousers in public, and who were often attacked and mobbed for it. The fascination with the possibility of fast, independent movement, for which long skirts were extremely obstructive, even dangerous, led a considerable number of women to wear special cycling costumes consisting of bloomers or divided skirts.

The small group of female aviators in the early days of powered flight from 1910 to 1914 presented themselves in a completely uncompromising manner. In tight-fitting leather suits made to individual designs, they not only boarded their adventurous flying machines, but also showed themselves in them at the airfields, the pilots' meetings, for photo opportunities. With their decision to enter the male domain of aviation and to compete with men for new records, these women had already made themselves the centre of public interest. Celebrated, marvelled at, admired - the female aviation pioneers moved outside the usual conventions. Their unconventional clothing was not sanctioned negatively but was seen as a fascinating expression of their individuality.

There is no doubt that women's sport, with its inherent demands, forced a break with western dress traditions. With the acceptance of women's sports trousers, an important obstacle on the way to the equal coexistence of men and women was removed, and a further step was taken towards the elimination of gender-based discrimination through the exaggerated emphasis of gender characteristics. In the 20th century, women's sport was no longer primarily aimed at increasing female grace, but at increasing strength, because, according to the motto of the *Deutschen Turnzeitung für Frauen* in 1914: "Life is movement, movement is strength, strength is health.

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