

## Chapter Five

### Clothing for Sport: Home Sewing as a Laboratory for New Standards

At 53, Frances Willard, leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, learned to ride a bicycle. When she rode her two-wheeler 8211; which she named Gladys – she wore a tweed suit, the skirt hem three inches from the ground, and walking-shoes. In her 1895 book, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*, Willard questioned women who claimed their conventional dress was comfortable and wrote that "reason will gain upon precedent, and ere long the comfortable, sensible, and artistic wardrobe of the rider will make the conventional style of woman's dress absurd to the eye and unendurable to the understanding."<sup>1</sup>

Women who crafted sleeveless dresses and shorter skirts often tested the boundaries of accepted taste. There were, however, circumstances which warranted unusual clothing and which therefore accustomed people to new designs. The clothing made and worn for sports such as cycling, swimming, and gymnasium exercise shows how home sewing interacted with new behaviors, changes in sewing-related businesses, and transforming cultural patterns. These garments offered women the chance to determine the parameters of acceptable appearance and dress. The physicality of newly popular sports demanded a genre of costume that challenged prevailing ideas of decorum and women's fragility. Through the process of inventing and adapting clothing to suit new activities, both women and the fashion industry helped to produce a new conception of what it meant to be feminine.

This chapter explores the role of invention and negotiation in the development of a new category of clothing. It argues that the novelty and marginality of clothing for sport provided a space in which women contested notions of modesty and appropriate bodies, behavior, and appearance. An interactive relationship between producers and consumers emerged in which the choices women made helped reinvent twentieth century femininity. Moreover, while affluent and middle-class women had the most

time for sports, this athleticism was accessible to working-class women as well. As these new activities redefined notions of propriety, some of the distinctions between white, middle-class women and the working women against whom they had defined their respectability were challenged as well.

While sports outfits became available ready-made, many women sewed their own. Schools and other institutions that supported women's sports often expected participants to make their own gym suits, and women who wanted to make bicycling or bathing ensembles had the approval and support of pattern producers and magazine editors. With fewer rules to follow, home dressmakers could take risks with the designs for clothing for bicycling or swimming that they might not have taken with their other garments. By sewing their own outfits, women had the most control over design, how they could move while playing their sport, and how they would be perceived.

### **Changing Views of Women and Sport**

Among the changes in gendered behaviors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a growing acceptance of women's participation in athletics and physical culture and a gradual re-thinking of the meanings attached to the female body. A new understanding of health and leisure, tempered with caution, informed ideas of proper female behavior. It was increasingly common to see women at beaches, in single-sex gymnasiums, on the recently invented bicycle, playing tennis and golf, fencing, and walking in the woods. Once discouraged, girls now were encouraged to be "athletic" and seized opportunities to play and exercise at schools, playgrounds, and settlement houses. This new physical culture infused and informed the emerging concept of the "New Woman."<sup>2</sup>

Even as sport and "physical culture" became increasingly accepted, they remained problematic.<sup>3</sup> Although some experts encouraged women to exercise, others warned of its dangers. Well into the twentieth century, magazine articles which praised healthy "modern girls" would in the same breath ask, "Are athletics a menace to motherhood?" Too much exercise,

especially unsupervised, could threaten a girl's future health and fertility; the "free out-of-door life, so priceless when properly conducted, may prove to be the path to pain and weakness, if not to permanent invalidism."<sup>4</sup>

At the very least, writers argued, too much sport could leave women with masculinized bodies. Contemporary fiction and magazine articles expressed a fear that sport would toughen women, either in specific physical ways or by behavioral changes. In Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, set in the 1870s, a society matron complains that a younger woman's hand was too large due to "these modern sports that spread the joints."<sup>5</sup> Either because they were invested in the same values or in self-defense, exercise proponents eagerly assured readers that athletic women would not develop hard muscles or other "masculine" traits. An 1890 article promoting fencing warned against the dangers of too much tennis, claiming that among aficionados "big, knotty biceps are found to have become all too prominent in a white, rounded arm, and gloves for the left hand refuse to fit over the broadened palm."<sup>6</sup> Another article glowingly praised a new women's health club but assured readers that the club's gymnastics instructor was not at all the typical athlete, with specimen biceps and iron integuments, according to the popular notion, but a thoroughly womanly and refined personality," thereby implying that she would not threaten the femininity of her pupils.<sup>7</sup>

Still, the concern for health could also serve as an argument for greater acceptance of women's participation in sports. In 1850, the *Massachusetts Teacher* warned that girls would not be "fit" mothers if they did not exercise.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of calisthenics such as Catharine Beecher claimed that gentle stretches and push-ups against a table would render women healthier for childbirth and housework. Etiquette books proposed that mild exercise was good for women's health. One manual from the 1860s claimed that "calisthenics, and the Indian sceptre, as taught on the improved scale by our present professors, are also highly beneficial as exercises," and that "ladies of every age" who participated "gained increased strength and stature, improved in the state of their health, and added grace, ease, and firmness to their motions."<sup>9</sup> Exercise was therefore acceptable as long as it

promoted health and preserved feminine qualities such as grace and posture. It might even encourage a "rosy glow" which would make young women more attractive to appropriate men.

During the 1870s and 1880s, schools and colleges began to teach physical education, and seaside and mountain vacations became more affordable. By the 1890s, innovations such as the bicycle became wildly popular. A day trip to the beach was accessible to people of all income levels. Contemporary articles about Coney Island described how both rich and poor enjoyed the beaches although they did note a "descending scale of fashion" among the beach resorts. Meanwhile, private gyms and colleges were oriented more toward the middle and upper classes.<sup>10</sup> Organizations such as settlement houses created to address the needs of working people offered sports activities as well. The ideas of femininity and respectability central to white, middle-class ideology therefore affected any woman who joined in the discussion over clothing for sport.

Sports became increasingly associated with ideas of modernity. Athletics offered new sources of personal gratification and social interaction, based more on consumption and entertainment than production and traditional class and family ties. Charles Dana Gibson created the famous "Gibson Girl" images that epitomized for many Americans the "New Woman." He often critiqued Victorian control of women in his illustrations and portrayed women involved in sport. It was just one example of how the "New Woman" was becoming heavily intertwined with the new physical culture.

### **What to Wear?**

As sports and leisure became increasingly common, women began to ask what could be worn which would preserve modesty and femininity yet allow for ease of movement and comfort. While mainstream clothing changed relatively slowly, clothing for sport, in its specificity and novelty, was open for debate. Moreover, given its marginality, it was considerably less threatening. Starting around the 1870s and accelerating through the turn of the century, cultural vehicles such as magazines and etiquette books recognized that sports required a re-thinking of clothing

design. Articles in mainstream publications asked what women should wear for specific activities and fashion magazines offered suggestions and images. Meanwhile, schools and clubs proposed their own uniforms, and etiquette writers, dress reformers, fiction writers, and sports enthusiasts joined the discussion.

Many women found that their clothing did not accommodate new physical activities, and so embraced a series of innovations that defined a new form of clothing that was appropriate yet practical.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the dress reform movement, marginalized since its beginnings in the 1840s and '50s, clothing for sport engaged a wide variety of women in a discussion about their relationships with their garments. At a time when mainstream women rarely challenged fashion's dictates, the novelty of sport offered an opportunity to rethink women's clothing. Meanwhile, the idea that some clothes were worn only for play made them less of a threat to anyone who perceived them as challenging traditional women's styles. Embodied in the new activities and the clothing worn for them was a changing and problematic concept of femininity, one that allowed women's bodies new freedoms while not offending prevailing ideas of modesty. As women considered what they thought was appropriate, useful, and comfortable; as they read magazines describing sports clothing; as they chose patterns and sewed garments; and as they wore the garments to participate in leisure activities, they both questioned and embraced inherited ideas of appropriate dress and behavior.

Clothing for calisthenics embodied this process of innovation. Early calisthenics manuals show women in ordinary clothing, but later, a specific "gymnasium costume" emerged. Female students wore the earliest gym suits at colleges and schools that issued instructions to incoming students (and their mothers) for making a suit. The designs for such suits were hardly uniform; some specified a dress with separate bloomers, some attached bloomers to a blouse with a separate skirt, and some required no skirt at all. In 1883, the gymnastics instructor at Mount Holyoke College issued written directions for a suitable "Gymnastic Dress" (a dress worn over bloomers) complete with a specified length of seven inches above the floor. Many years later, in 1908, Mount

Holyoke was still offering detailed instructions. By then, they were for a suit with a divided skirt, including the exact dimensions of the split and the crotch. The seamstress was to first make the more familiar skirt and then turn it into two gusseted legs.<sup>12</sup>

A variety of businesses entered this debate. Magazine articles asked what made a good sports outfit, offered a variety of options, and acknowledged the potentially conflicting issues of comfort, aesthetics, and modesty. Pattern companies sold designs intended to be interpreted in different ways, allowing readers to create their own definitions of what was appropriate and feminine. In addition to everyday styles such as skirts, blouses, coats, and undergarments, the *Delineator* marketed patterns for gymnasium suits, walking and biking skirts, and knickers to wear under skirts for "all outdoor sports."<sup>13</sup> An entire spread on "New Styles for Bicycling," introduced one outfit as "a new three-piece cycling skirt...combined with a perfectly adjusted jacket in a most pleasing and up-to-date cycling costume that is equally appropriate for golfing and general outing wear."<sup>14</sup> The magazine and the pattern company behind it sought to convince women that such clothes and activities were socially acceptable. It was, after all, in the interest of business for these companies to promote sports and sports clothing as desirable.



The patterns described in the *Delineator* allowed for a great deal of personal interpretation, each offering numerous options for the final garment. A "Misses and Girls' Bathing Costume," made using pattern # 6894, could have long or short sleeves, a high or scoop neckline, an optional Bertha, and loose or gathered leg openings, with "the pattern providing for each of the styles."<sup>15</sup> A similar suit came with eleven separate pieces of printed tissue paper so that an individual could make the top and attached bloomers with her choice of long or short sleeves, high or scoop or v-neck, Bertha, skirt, and peplum.<sup>16</sup> Pattern #1727, for a "Ladies' Gymnastic Costume," could be made "high-necked with a standing collar or open-necked with a sailor collar and with elbow or full-length sleeves." A "practical and becoming gymnastic costume," it was shown in



"navy-blue serge and trimmed with black braid" but could be made in numerous other combinations of color, trim, and fabric. No matter what fabric and style the reader chose, Butterick promised it would be "exceedingly comfortable for wear while engaged in gymnastic exercises."<sup>17</sup>



The pattern industry recognized that women would have a variety of requirements for their sport clothing and produced designs with a great deal of room for personal interpretation.<sup>18</sup> But what choices did women make as they sewed these garments? One example is an actual suit in the collection of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Home-made of navy blue wool, the one-piece gymnastics costume bears a striking resemblance to the Butterick pattern #1727 described above. The person who made it chose a sailor collar and long sleeves.<sup>19</sup> The Costume Institute recognized the similarity to the Butterick pattern and referred to the magazine in the collections record. It is very possible that the costume was sewn according to the *Delineator* pattern or one like it. The person who made this suit may have preferred long sleeves to short, and the low neck to a high one, or those design elements may have been required by her school or club. She used the corresponding tissue pieces to cut her fabric and sewed her suit accordingly.



The blue suit is woolen, but women chose from a range of fabrics, adding another dimension to their ability to shape their own garments. A costume at the Hermitage Museum in Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey is made of black silk with elbow-length sleeves and long bloomers.<sup>20</sup> It has a separate skirt that hooked on to the waist. While silk is lighter in weight than wool, as well as cooler and non-itching, the skirt nonetheless added more



layers of cloth around the legs. This design demonstrates a different interpretation of what was appropriate for gymnasium use.

### **Emancipation and Trepidation**

Gymnastic costumes provide valuable insight into the process of invention, negotiation, and interpretation of sports clothing at the turn of the century, but gym suits were almost always worn in private, single-sex settings. In comparison, bicycling clothing, even more than bathing costumes, was intended to be worn in public and therefore triggered especially intense discussion. The invention of the "safety bicycle" with brakes and soft rubber wheels in the mid-1890s meant that bicycling, previously a rather macho sport, was now marketed to and acceptable for women. Moreover, unlike colleges or private clubs, the bicycle was accessible to working-class women as well, who could rent a bicycle in a park for the afternoon.

Many, including Frances Willard, saw bicycles as offering new mobility and freedom to women. Willard called her bicycle an implement of power" and wrote that through bicycling, she "found a whole philosophy of life."<sup>21</sup> In addition to being worn in public, the designs for bicycling clothing were also rather daring. While bathing and gym costumes included bloomers, they were often hidden under a skirt. Now, some women wore bloomers or knickers, without the skirt on top, in plain view. The new clothing, like the activity itself, was associated with modernity and independence.

Advertisers took advantage of these associations and used rhetoric of liberation to sell their merchandise. Magazines teemed with advertisements for bicycles, bicycle cloth, cycling corsets, skirts, and knickerbocker suits. Knickers or knickerbockers were pants that extended below the knee, were worn with stockings, and were narrower than bloomers. Magazines like the *Delineator* offered numerous skirt designs as well as knickerbocker suits, and women were left to make their own decision as to which style to choose.



Manufacturers and merchandisers explicitly connected bicycling to modernity and freedom. An advertisement for Victor bicycles in the May 1895 *Ladies' Home Journal* compared images of a woman sitting at a spinning wheel to a happy cyclist and offered the following verse: "The Spinning Wheels of days gone by / Give way to Spinning Wheels that fly / And damsels fair to lightly tread / The graceful Victor now, instead."<sup>22</sup> Another ad claimed "Physicians recommend bicycling. Dame Fashion says it is 'good form.'" This overruled two common objections to women's athleticism: perceived threats to feminine health and appearance. Furthermore, the ad promoted daring costume styles when it offered a women's bike with a high bar that was "especially designed for the many ladies who prefer to wear knicker-bockers rather than cumbersome skirts."<sup>23</sup> A third advertiser associated its products with the dress reform movement. A Sterling Cycle Works ad read, "For Bloomers: Ladies who cycle in bloomers will find The Sterling the ideal Bicycle. Very light; very strong; very easy running."<sup>24</sup> One can interpret these advertisements as co-opting and cheapening the language of independence, but nevertheless, they promoted athleticism as a modern activity.

This association of sports clothing with freedom was not just a retail strategy. Dress reformers were vocal about the opportunities offered by sport or "outdoor" costume. What they had failed to popularize with arguments of health and gender politics now gained adherents through sports. Willard was certain that the costume worn for bicycling would serve as the test case for dress reform ideas and finally "convince the world that has brushed aside the theories, no matter how well constructed, and the arguments, no matter how logical, of dress-reformers."<sup>25</sup> Another woman wrote excitedly that liberating dress was preferable to economic or political independence and influence:

Talk about the emancipated woman! The right to earn her own living on terms of equality with man, to vie with him in work, sport or politics, to vote, to hold office, to be president as well as queen and empress, would never bring the blessed sense of freedom that an outdoor costume, sans trailing skirts and entangling folds and plus a short skirt and bloomers, gives to the average woman...<sup>26</sup>

While many would have objected to her hyperbolic suggestion that freedom in dress was preferable to economic or legal independence, her words make evident how thrilling it must have felt to wear such clothing. Sports gave women the opportunity to experience and discuss the meaning, design, and feel of their clothing in a way previously left to women seen as oddballs or radicals.

### "Any Desired Length"

Still, women felt some trepidation when it came to actually wearing pants for bicycling, so the pattern companies, eager to sell the new styles, came up with discreet alternatives. With articles such as "New Styles for Bicycling," the *Delineator* offered the consumer numerous designs – skirts that had extra pleats so they acted and looked divided; divided skirts that were full enough to look undivided; and even divided skirts, such as pattern #2044, which had an extra flap of fabric to cover the split in front. Style #2044 was billed as a "Ladies' Divided Cycling Skirt, having deep side-plaits at the back and the division in front concealed by lapped gores (to be worn on diamond or drop-frame wheels and to be in any desired length)." It was described as "a decidedly stylish divided cycling skirt planned on simple, graceful lines..."<sup>27</sup> The design description noted that the "division" of the skirt is hidden, while the illustration showed it in two lengths. Evidently, the pattern designers sought to reach readers who were shy about wearing a divided skirt but who were less reluctant to be seen in shorter hems.

A suit that follows this basic design demonstrates how from the back, the skirt functioned like pants, allowing for easier pedaling, yet from the front, it looked like a skirt.<sup>28</sup> Other women wore knickers with a skirt over them. At least one manufacturer offered ready-made suits with a matching removable skirt for "stylish women everywhere." The bicycle costume cost \$7.50, the skirt, \$ 2.50 extra.<sup>29</sup> An article in *Outing* magazine suggested that women might consider bringing a matching skirt with them on cycling trips "for use when approaching the unappreciative and hypercritical civilized communities where its use is no great hardship and going without transgresses custom."<sup>30</sup> Two identical

examples of such a costume are in the Costume Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; custom made for two sisters, the skirts are wool while the knickerbockers are linen (perhaps they wore the warmer skirts in cooler weather).<sup>31</sup> Judging from the good condition of the skirts, it is possible that the knickerbockers were worn regularly, the skirts put aside.



However, either because of budgets or personal taste, not everybody wore the latest look in bicycle clothing when they rode. Two cyanotypes from the turn of the century show a woman, dressed in a skirt and shirtwaist, climbing onto a bike with a diamond frame (or "man's style") as a friend steadies the bike. The

second photo shows her riding confidently down the field, her skirt bunched up around the crossbar, exposing her stockings and high boots.<sup>32</sup> The magazines do not show this slice of reality; the elegant women in advertisements wear knickerbockers on a high-frame bike and skirts on a drop-frame or "ladies'" model. Contemporary etiquette writers would have fainted dead away to see her expose her stockings. Nonetheless, she had evidently decided it was acceptable to wear what she did.



*Delineator* patterns for bicycling skirts explicitly stated that the consumer could make the skirts "in any desired length."<sup>33</sup> This element of choice is very much in keeping with the idea that the unfamiliar realm of sport and sport clothing allowed, even required, a significant degree of improvisation. Even basic designs were contested and discussed. As styles were conceived and chosen as appropriate and respectable by the media and by retailers, women could make their own suits or purchase different versions.

All of these activities involved a re-thinking and an invention of basic styles of clothing and their relationship to the female body. They also involved a reconsideration of *whose* body could even be "respectable." Because they had more time for leisure and the resources to spend on special outfits, white middle-class women

were responsible for much of the re-definition of femininity due to sports and sport clothing, but working-class women, white and African American, were active participants. Just as their appearance and behavior had long served as a foil for the definition of middle-class respectability, the fact that they now participated in some of the same leisure activities, and dressed in some of the same styles to do so, demanded a re-thinking of that respectability.

While etiquette manuals and magazine writers assumed a middle-class reader, working women were eager participants in this growing sports culture during the late nineteenth century. In a study of the history of women in sports, Susan Cahn writes that "young black and white women of small or average means for the first time found significant opportunities to engage in athletic activities, from basketball and baseball to tennis and track and field."<sup>34</sup> Working-class women enjoyed recreational opportunities after the turn of the century in the form of community leagues, settlement houses, schools, and Y.W.C.A. gymnasiums, pools and summer camps.

The national Y.W.C.A. offered summer camps for working or "industrial girls" well into the teens. Photographs from the camps show happy-looking girls in swimsuits, bloomers, and middy blouses. One camp held a "Health Pageant" whose "purpose was to set forth in a symbolical [sic] way, right ideals about living, eating and clothing." The pageant included women representing allegorical goddesses called "Zeal, Knowledge, Good Taste, etc." The Y.W.C.A. newsletter wrote that of those who acted and watched

most of these girls are Industrial girls...they took keen interest in the sports, which were portrayed and in the kind of clothing which Good Taste approved for sport wear. They were enthusiastic over the sport shoes and the clothes which lent themselves to the best advantages that could be had from outdoor sport.<sup>35</sup>

Because of their financial situation, working women were more likely to make their own clothing for sports. In the Y.W.C.A. photos, the young women's blouses are not uniform, which

suggests that they were told what type to buy or make but were not given exact details. The blouses all follow a general style but vary as to sleeve length and decoration, two things that often varied according to sewing patterns. The same degree of variation is apparent in a different photograph, taken in 1915, of a basketball team at the National Training School for Women and Girls, which was a school for African Americans in Washington, DC.<sup>36</sup> Neither image guarantees that the young women pictured sewed their own outfits, but the variety in their dress suggests that at least some of the garments were made at home.

Many of the young women in those pictures probably *wanted* to buy their sports clothing. Like clothing not meant for sport, homemade sports clothing had its pitfalls and could be a sign of poverty. In fact, because it was intended to be what twenty-first century marketing would call a "performance garment," homemade sports clothing could prove especially problematic. When Mary Ellen Coleman Knapp attended high school in St. Louis in the early 1920s, she wanted to take swimming lessons because she considered swimming to be "modern." Her mother, who could not afford the \$1 regulation suit (Knapp's father was a streetcar conductor), made one of grey poplin with bloomers. The very first time Knapp got in the pool, the water was unable to drain from the densely woven fabric and she sank to the bottom. The (female) swim instructor had to rescue her and run her finger under the bloomer elastic to let the water out. Knapp was mortified, and repeated her request for a store-bought suit. Instead, her mother made buttonholes around the bottom of the bloomers to provide drainage.<sup>37</sup> It is unlikely that Knapp appreciated her mother's ingenious solution to the problem. Vividly told to her daughter-in-law years later, Knapp's story illustrates the creative and frugal dimensions of home sewing as well as the drawbacks. For some women, sewing sports clothing was an exciting way to enjoy a degree of agency in the design of their clothing, but for others, it was a painful reminder of class status.

## Changing Definitions of Modesty

While women were gradually willing to try new garments, they had hardly abandoned older ideas about propriety and modesty. Most were still wearing corsets (sometimes even to swim) and opaque tights. A constant theme in advertisements and articles is the importance of protecting feminine modesty and attractiveness. This concern often manifested itself in terms of esthetics or decoration but also extended to the actual construction of a garment. Since many of the designs for sports involved divided skirts or bloomers, which were the most shocking, manufacturers stressed their "grace" and convenience.

This anxiety over bloomers is evident in an 1889 article describing a women's athletic club. The female author, who was clearly enthusiastic about women's participation in sports, nevertheless demonstrated some ambivalence about the design of the club uniforms. The costume consisted of a dark blue blouse and divided skirt or bloomers, the "severance" of which, she noted carefully, was "scarcely perceptible." After a long and detailed description of the construction of the bloomers, she decided that "the effect obtained is extremely good, granting all the necessary freedom to the legs and presenting, at the same time, a graceful and modest garment."<sup>38</sup> It was thus important, even in a publication devoted to sport and in an article praising women's participation in athletics, to convince readers that both the activity and the clothing worn for it did not threaten ideas of feminine bodies or "graceful and modest" clothing.

In addition to articles, patterns, and advertisements, fiction provided another arena for discussing the relationship of athleticism to femininity. Ellen Gruber Garvey discusses the role of fiction in teaching women "correct" bicycling etiquette. Most of the magazine stories she describes involve a young woman returning to the home after a brief rebellion. Such stories, she contends, "contained" the threat posed by the mobility and perceived sexual nature of the bicycle. In one such story, the girl dresses as a boy to go biking, is discovered by a suitable boyfriend and switches to female clothing. Another describes a young woman who rebels against a strict father; she tells her

father that "girls ride them things...in trousers and breeches like men." The father claims such attire is not "commonly decent," but she rides off anyway.<sup>39</sup> (According to Garvey, her rebellious behavior was acceptable to readers because of the parochial attitude of the father.) In both stories, there is a degree of uncertainty about what behavior and dress is acceptable.

In addition to their concerns about the radical nature of pants, or where to wear such clothing, most women did not want to reveal the contours of their bodies. This was especially true when it came to bathing costumes. Both etiquette books and retail catalogs emphasized the modest nature of the fabric out of which bathing suits were made, and some emphasized modesty over comfort or mobility. One etiquette book instructed readers that "bathing calls for a costume of some material that will not cling to the form when wet. Flannel is appropriate, and a heavy quantity of mohair also makes a successful dress, as it resists water and has no clinging qualities."<sup>40</sup>



The 1908 Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog addressed the same concern, offering three models of women's bathing suits, all with skirts, attached bloomers, and short puffy sleeves, to be worn with dark stockings, described as "very pretty" and not "clinging to the figure."<sup>41</sup> Despite such hopeful promises, a photograph of bathers in the Maine surf shows that suits similar to those in the Sears catalog did in fact cling.<sup>42</sup> It is impossible to know whether the suits in the photograph were made at home or purchased, but homemade suits of similar design would have the same problems. It may be that this soggy reality was a secondary concern, and that both retailers and consumers presumed that it was nonetheless necessary to use yards of wool fabric to at least claim the right balance of modesty and practicality.

Articles advocating women's involvement in sports reminded readers that the new activities and clothing need not compromise their delicacy. One *Delineator* article claimed that while sports "give the body perfect freedom of action and engender a courageous spirit, they detract nothing from that womanliness which is always woman's greatest charm."<sup>43</sup> The same piece

described outfits for different sports as "trim," "graceful and comfortable," "jaunty," and "attractive." The writer was determined to reduce the perceived threat to femininity posed by athleticism while encouraging readers to buy Butterick patterns for the new designs.

Pattern designers were well aware of the anxiety surrounding sports clothing. Some addressed these concerns with decoration and cuts that followed trends from mainstream fashion. Gym suits were trimmed with silk bows, bathing costumes with nautical insignia. Some gymnasium suits had extra fullness in the bust in the blousy "pouter pigeon" style of the early 1900s.<sup>44</sup> At other times, cycling, golf, and tennis styles were more "mannish" with their straight ties and boater hats. Another, more disconcerting trend was to design garments to resemble children's clothing. The sailor collar, a design associated with children's play suits, is found repeatedly in both bathing and gymnasium costumes. Perhaps encouraging grown women to dress like little boys and girls was a way to reduce the threat of their changing behavior. Unlike the functional elements of the clothing, these stylistic choices did not engender much discussion or debate. Perhaps the feminizing details, winks at cross-dressing, and childish styles reassured both wearer and spectator that the wearer was harmless enough.

Questions of modesty continued to be part of the discussion about sports clothing, but the boundaries of modesty shifted dramatically after the First World War.<sup>45</sup> By 1916, a male author writing for *Outing* was ready to dismiss the idea of modesty altogether. He compared the relative merits of skirts, bloomers, riding breeches, and knickerbockers for walking and hiking. There was no longer any need to blush over the description of bloomers. In fact, he dismissed all options except for knickerbockers, writing, "They have all the virtues and none of the vices [of other styles]. On the woman of average build they look neat and trim, mask rather than exaggerate or display the figure...They are the thing to use for every reason."<sup>46</sup> Bifurcated garments for sport were no longer a threat but a given. At least some of that change had come about because women had sewn and worn designs that challenged previously held ideas of modest dress. They had



helped develop a standard language of what sports clothing should be and had helped to influence popular conceptions about what women should wear.

### **Conclusion**

The novelty of women's sports opened up a space in the discussion of women's clothing, and in that space, women and the fashion industry negotiated different representations of femininity. Advertisers, retailers, magazine writers, and pattern makers played a significant role in this ongoing discussion by offering opinions, playing to women's desires and insecurities, and providing multiple options. Women, however, were the ones who actually wore the styles – and made many of them – so their views were central to the process.

Because many of the contested sports outfits were sewn at home, sports clothing offered another outlet for women to use sewing skills in a creative way. Because the sports clothes were for a specific purpose – and for most people, not a terribly serious one – they allowed home dressmakers to take risks they might not have taken with their "real" clothing. Pattern designs and sewing advice gave women quite a lot of choices, an experience that consumers then sought out for other garments. Sport clothing gave home dressmakers agency in the process of negotiating ideas about women's behavior and bodies. However, as sport clothing became mainstream, it was increasingly available for purchase. Those close-fitting knit bathing suits, for example, were often made in industrial settings. As their clothing for sports became more accepted, women lost some control over how they would look at the beach or in the gym.

At a time when sport posed a challenge to notions of womanhood, clothing for sport both smoothed and exacerbated the paradox of "sporting women." Throughout this period, the clothing worn for sport displayed what can be seen as a social ambivalence over changing gender ideals. The tension between traditional female roles and bodies and modern ideas of womanhood manifested itself verbally in the rhetoric used by advertisements, articles, and patterns, and visually in the form of images and actual clothing. This is not to suggest that the new clothes themselves caused

changes in femininity, although it is arguable that the clothes helped women experience their bodies in new ways. However, the process through which the clothes were invented and popularized helped women, along with a diverse fashion industry, re-think what it was to be feminine. At a time of significant gender flux, the tension between traditional female roles and bodies and modern ideas of womanhood was created, negotiated, and at least partially resolved through the discussion and appearance of clothing.

## Notes

**Note 1:** Frances E. Willard, *A Wheel Within A Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle, With Some Reflections By The Way* (1895; Bedford, M.A., 1997), 38. back

**Note 2:** In *American Beauty* (New York, 1983), 135, Lois Banner claims that women who had access to college education, professions, or who "claimed the prerogatives of husbands and fathers" were first viewed with suspicion and labeled "advanced" during the 1880s. By the 1880s, as their numbers grew, they were seen as less of a threat and were labeled "new." Banner, 146. back

**Note 3:** A number of authors have written about the perceived health risks of sport, especially to reproduction. For example, Caroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg write of the preoccupation with women's reproductive health and the idea that the body was a "closed system" with a finite amount of energy in their article "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Women and Their Role in Nineteenth-century America," in *From 'Fair Sex' to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras*, ed. J.A. Mangan and Roberta Park (London, 1987), 13-37. It is now known that female athletes who reduce their body fat ration to extremely low proportions stop menstruating, but it is highly unlikely that Victorian-era women were exercising to that extreme. It is much more probable that poor women would have had insufficient nutrition or body weight to become pregnant or maintain a healthy pregnancy, yet these doctors and writers were predominantly concerned with middle-class women's reproductive capacity. back

**Note 4:** Annette Parry, M.D., "The Athletic Girl and Motherhood," *Harper's Bazaar* (August 1912), 380. back

**Note 5:** Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Appeltion & Company, 1920), 27. back

**Note 6:** Margaret Bisland, "Fencing for Women," *Outing* (February 1890), 342. back

**Note 7:** Eleanor Waddle, "The Berkeley Ladies' Athletic Club," *Outing* (October 1889), 58-9. back

**Note 8:** "Some Defects in Education," *Massachusetts Teacher* 3 (1850): 67& 68, cited in Roberta Park, "Health, Moral and Strong: Educational Views of Exercise and Athletics in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Fitness in American Culture: Images of Health, Sport, and the Body, 1830-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Amherst, M.A. and Rochester, N.Y., 1989), 123-168, 139. Park also notes that Darwin's theories influenced the move to support exercise for women. back

**Note 9:** Anonymous, *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen; or, The Principles of True Politeness, To which is added The Ball-Room Manual* (London: n.p., n.d. [1860]), 82-3. back

**Note 10:** "To Coney Island," *Scribner's Monthly* (July 1880): 357. back

**Note 11:** Women had been working in long skirts for centuries, but as middle class women became interested in sports, they led the search for a new style of clothing. However, working-class women were very much a part of this innovation. back

**Note 12:** Warner, "Clothing the American Woman for Sport and Physical Education, 1860 to 1940: Public and Private," 69 and 73-4. back

**Note 13:** The *Delineator* is especially interesting in that it appears to have had a diverse readership, and promotional materials for the *Delineator* claim that it reached women from a range of economic classes. It was relatively inexpensive, ran ads for sibling magazines in Spanish, German, and French, and included numerous ads for "respectable" ways for "ladies" to earn money. Souvenir of the Butterick Exhibit at the Pan-American Exposition (New York, 1901), 2, in the collection of the Hagley Museum and Library, and "Remarks on Current Fashions," *The Delineator* (May 1890): 361. back

**Note 14:** "New Styles for Bicycling," *Delineator* (October 1898): 484. back

**Note 15:** "Fashions for May," *Delineator* (May 1894), 500. back

**Note 16:** "Fashions for May," 483 & 485. Physical pattern studied at the Butterick Archives, New York. back

**Note 17:** "Up-To-Date Bicycle and Gymnastics Fashions," *Delineator* (August 1898): 165-167. back

**Note 18:** This design was in fact intended for use as a bathing costume, but strongly resembles the gymnastics costumes. Lady's Bathing Costume, Butterick Pattern Company Pattern #6838, May 1894, Butterick Company Archives, New York. back

**Note 19:** Gymnastic costume, American, 1890s, 1981.149.10, gift of the Jacqueline Loewe Fowler Costume Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art. back

**Note 20:** Gymnastic costume, American, ca 1904, 84.16.9ab, Hermitage Museum. back

**Note 21:** Willard, *A Wheel Within A Wheel*, 73 and 25. back

**Note 22:** Advertisement for Overman Wheel Co., *Ladies' Home Journal* (May 1895): 30. back

**Note 23:** Advertisement for Columbia Bicycles, *Ladies' Home Journal* (May 1895): 30. back

**Note 24:** Advertisement for Sterling Cycle Works, *Ladies' Home Journal* (May 1895): 30. back

**Note 25:** Willard, *A Wheel Within A Wheel*, 39. back

**Note 26:** Mary Sargent Hopkins, "Out of Doors," *The Ladies' World* (February 1896): 10, cited in Warner, 159. Some women did in fact wear gymnasium suits for purposes other than sport, notably for travel, see for example Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 141. back

**Note 27:** "New Styles for Bicycling," 484. back

**Note 28:** Bicycle costume, American, ca. 1908, 72.20.1ab, gift of Mr. John Noble, Museum of the City of New York. back

**Note 29:** Advertisement for Edward B. Grossman & Co., *Ladies' Home Journal* (April 1896): 29. back

**Note 30:** William J. Whiting, "Skirts or What? Should the Woman in the Woods Wear Skirt, Bloomers, Riding Breeches, or Knickerbockers?" *Outing* (October 1916): 33. back

**Note 31:** Bicycle costumes, American, ca 1900, CI.55.41.5ab, gift of Miss Mathilde E. Webber, Metropolitan Museum of Art. back

**Note 32:** Photographs of Mary Elizabeth Rosencrantz, also known as "Aunt Bess," ca 1895-1900, 2002.001.0083 and 2002.001.0084, Hermitage Museum. back

**Note 33:** "Ladies' Bathing Dresses," 43, and "New Styles for Bicycling," 484. back

**Note 34:** Susan Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (New York, 1994), 36. back

**Note 35:** "The Health Pageant," *War Work Bulletin* (25 July 1919): 2. back

**Note 36:** Photographs of camp attendees in "Laboratories of Work, Worship and Play – Summer conferences," *Blue Triangle News* (July 1920) :2-3, photograph of basketball team in Cahn, *Coming On Strong*, 86b-c. back

**Note 37:** Knapp, interview. Mary Ellen Coleman Knapp was Mary Knapp's mother-in-law. As an adult, the elder Knapp made clothing for her family and recognized that while it wasn't very stylish it was of better quality than she could purchase ready-made. back

**Note 38:** Waddle, "The Berkeley Ladies' Athletic Club," 61. back

**Note 39:** Garvey, "Reframing the Bicycle: Advertising-Supported Magazines and Scorching Women," 87. back

**Note 40:** Cooke, *Social Etiquette or Manners and Customs of Polite Society*, 425. back

**Note 41:** Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalog* (Chicago, 1908), 1112. back

**Note 42:** Bathers at Ocean Park, Maine, August 1906, photograph in private collection. back

**Note 43:** "Dress for Summer Sports," *Delineator* (June 1894): 670. back

**Note 44:** Gymnasium costume, ca 1904, 84.16.9ab, Hermitage Museum, and Gymnasium Costume, American, ca 1905, 63.186.5ab, gift of Miss Margaret D. Leverich, Museum of the City of New York. back

**Note 45:** I agree with McGovern (see note #63) that this was neither an immediate change nor caused entirely by the war. Nevertheless, many fashion historians do cite the war as at least having some effect on changing clothing styles. back

**Note 46:** Whiting, "Skirts or What?," 33. back