Playing Sports in a Skirt: A Historical Analysis

Back in the early 1900s, women’s sports outfits had a drastically different appearance than those today. Rather than comfy pants or a sleeveless-top like one would expect, these outfits consisted of a shirt, regular shorts, and a skirt. These were called “three-piece sports outfits.” During this time period, society valued femininity in women over all else, and did not care if these uniforms restricted the players in some way. Designers of women’s sports outfits became more focused on making fashionable uniforms. They placed more value on how someone looked in an outfit and focused less on whether or not that person was actually good at a sport. These designers also appealed to consumers by claiming that their product was superior to others or by claiming that it was up-to-date, while the other designs were out of style. Examples of women’s sports-wear that were designed around these perceptions are evident in photos and advertisements all throughout the early 20th century. I have taken four artifacts from this time period and analyzed them. This collection demonstrates how society valued femininity and appearance rather than skill when dealing with women’s sports outfits in the early 1900s.

During the early 1900s, society wanted women to look feminine no matter what. Even if the outfits restricted them from playing sports or affected their performance, it was still a necessity that the uniforms they wore included a skirt. This is noticeable in all the artifacts, A, B, C, and D. Artifact A depicts tennis player Florence Sutton playing tennis in the typical attire of female athletes. Her position and expression shown implies that she is struggling to run and hit
the ball. This also implies that the outfit she is wearing is affecting her performance. All of the other artifacts are advertisements for a special sports outfit that most women wore in the early 1900s. These outfits were more fashionable than the average attire Sutton wore, but still included skirts as part of them. The fact that these outfits included a skirt ties back into the idea of valuing femininity over all else while disregarding the possibility of restriction. During this time period the standards for women when it came to wearing clothes were much stricter than they are today. Women were expected to only wear skirts, not pants. Those who did wear pants were frowned upon. Many of these standards were due to male concerns over superiority. These men seemed to see their position in athletics as proof of masculinity, and were fearful that women would dominate sports if given the same regulations as they were. Despite this, the usual standards were noticeably changing in the early 20th century, albeit very slowly. Apparently, “Athletic clothing for women in the first decades of the century has been described by one observer as ‘masculinized’, at least in some sports, possibly because the women ‘were entering the male domain – the sports world’” (Mangan and Roberta J. Park, eds. 292). However, the period in which these outfits were made, namely, from 1910 to 1941, was a period of war and depression. That being said, there was little room for change on the standards of clothing due to the US having to deal with even bigger problems. Despite this, the design changes are still apparent. Artifact A has Sutton in an outfit in which the skirt is the main focus of the design. Artifact B does not include a picture, but describes outfits that contain a skirt that is not necessarily the main focus of the design. Artifacts C and D use pictures of an outfit which is partly a dress and partly a coat. Thus, despite the standards for women’s clothing remaining consistent through 1941, the design change is still apparent, as the skirt is no longer the only focus of the uniform.
Many designers of women’s sports outfits back in the early 1900s did not seem to care whether the person buying the outfit was actually skilled at a sport. Advertisers only appealed to consumers by talking about how fashionable their uniform was. This was not apparent back in the 1910s, as shown by Artifact A, which shows a woman in a plain tennis uniform. However, Artifacts B, C, and D are all advertisements which go into great detail about how great their outfits look. They demonstrate that designers of women’s sports uniforms became more and more focused on making their outfits more fashionable than comfortable. An example from Artifact B is their description of one of their outfits. According to them, “The frock is most attractive, made after the latest straight silhouette style, able collar, which is narrow and up-standing, somewhat after the “turtle” design” (“SPORTS OUTFIT” 8). An example of the way that Artifact C describes their outfit is the statement, “The front is a rever type of collar, below which a slider fastener is called into service” (“Indispensable Sports Outfit” 19). As for Artifact D, the advertiser claims that “The blouse has soft lines held trim by waist darts and shoulder yoking, and a choice of short or long, full sleeves” (Mae 14). None of these artifacts claim that wearing the outfit would actually boost someone’s athletic career.

Artifacts B, C, and D all reveal that advertisers of women’s sports outfits tried to support their products by presenting the one they are trying to sell as superior to other brands. This ties back into the idea of valuing appearance over skill, as the producers of these outfits are more interested in making sure that the consumers of their product look “up-to-date” than whether they are actually skilled at a sport. Artifact B claims that one of their outfits is “in every way up-to-date and complete” (“SPORTS OUTFIT” 8). This implies that all of the other designs are incomplete and out of style. Artifact C, on the other hand, out rightly states that their outfit is
better. The advertiser does this by saying, “Play clothes are an old story, but this ensemble is a new treatment of the time honored plot” ("Indispensable Sports Outfit." 19). Artifact D uses a different approach. Rather than claiming that their outfit is superior in the description, they present two women in the background of their image who look unhappy while the woman wearing the outfit they designed looks pleased. These women are designed to look unhappy not because they lost a sports game, but because the outfit that they are wearing is inferior to the one the artifact is advertising. This might be a more effective approach to advertising a sports uniform for women, as it convinces consumers that when playing sports, they must be wearing the outfit advertised if they want to be happy. Looking at the artifacts as a whole, B, C, and D all put pressure on women to wear outfits that are up-to-date in every way.

In addition to this, Artifacts C and D both appeal to the consumers by talking about how essential their outfit is to playing sports. This may not seem like it ties into the values of femininity and appearance, but the fact that said items are stated as being “essential” goes back to the idea of narrowing focus on the wearer’s actual skill. Artifact C claims that “an outfit like the one illustrated is indispensable” ("Indispensable Sports Outfit." 19). They do not actually state that there is no alternative to buying the outfit, but they claim that ignoring an opportunity to buy an outfit such as the one they sell is unacceptable. Artifact D, on the other hand, claims that “wherever you roam, you’ll need a classic three-piece sports outfit” (Mae 14). In other words, they think that the outfit is essential to sports and that there is no alternative to buying it. Artifact B does not actually claim that the outfit is essential, but rather, the advertiser appeals to their audience by presenting facts about the design and comfortability of the sports-ware. An example of this is the description of one of their uniforms. According to them, “The long coat is
made to match or to harmonize with the dress, being, in one attractive example, of castor whipcord” (“SPORTS OUTFIT” 8). This is a less efficient approach in persuading consumers to buy their product, as while the consumers know the details of the uniform ahead of time, they are not informed of the necessity of buying the outfit and thus know that there are alternatives. On the other hand, Artifact B has a more friendly approach to the audience, as the writer comes off as someone trying to inform the public about great sports-ware for women during winter seasons and not just someone who is trying to make their sports outfit look like the best one there is.

Artifacts C and D both use pictures to appeal to the audience, whereas Artifact B does not. Using images to appeal to an audience goes back to the idea of valuing femininity and appearance over skill. Not only do the women in the images look happy with themselves, but simply using images implies that the advertisers of C and D believe that no one will buy their product unless they know what it looks like. This further shows that they only think people buy their outfits based on the design, not because they want to be better at a sport. Artifact B may not include an image due to the expenses of putting images in a newspaper advertisement during the 1920s, which were likely made worse by the Great Depression. However, this may also suggest that, to the producer of Artifact B, explaining their products in detail is more important than actually showing it off. This demonstrates a transition between appealing to consumers through writing and then illustrations. To Artifacts C and D, details are important, but giving the consumer a view of what the product actually looks like is a better appeal than describing the product in extensive detail. Of course, this depends on how accurate the picture is presented, but they know that most citizens would not think twice about that. In addition, viewers of an article are more likely to be turned away if the article is long and cluttered with text. Because of this,
Artifacts C and D make sure to give important details of their products, but leave out any unnecessary tidbits. However, Artifacts B and C focus on more than just uniforms. Artifact C briefly focuses on hats that are sold with the uniform, but keeps the main focus on the outfit itself. Artifact B, in addition to describing uniforms, also describes footwear, scarfs, hats, and gloves. That being said, the advertiser for B may be trying to take the same approach when describing the products as C and D describe the uniforms, but for each individual type of product instead of just the outfits.

Another interesting aspect that all the artifacts bring up is that the ideal image the outfits are aimed at is a thin, attractive, young woman. Having an ideal image goes back to the idea of valuing femininity and appearance over skill, since Advertisers C and D seem to care more about marketing their products to thin, attractive, young women and not people who are actually skilled at sports. Artifact A may not be an advertisement, but it still illustrates a woman who fits this ideal image, implying that this is what most female athletes looked like during the early 1900s. In spite of the different sizes mentioned in both artifacts, C and D present the image of women who are thin, young, and attractive for their advertisements, implying that this is who their intended audience mainly is. Artifact B does not use pictures, nor does it mention anything about sizes, so that could imply that the writer is more focused on informing the reader about the sports-ware rather than worrying about if it is actually the right size for them. This is an important detail that the writer missed, as the audience would be more interested in buying the sports-ware if they knew ahead of time that it would actually fit them.

The women of the early 1900s were constantly expected to wear outfits that looked feminine and up-to-date. Although there was a noticeable change in design and advertisement
appeal, the standards for making the uniforms mostly stayed in-tact. While women were beginning to challenge these standards, the World Wars and the Great Depression left little time for change; the world had bigger problems to deal with than the standards of making clothes. As time went on, the focus on fashion over comfortability became more and more apparent. Sports uniforms went from having little detail to being a constant fashion statement. The four artifacts I have analyzed show the values that were important in making women’s sports outfits in the early 1900s, even though they all have different approaches. The fact that the time period these artifacts were produced in was only 30 or so years (from 1910 to 1941) explains why there is so little difference in the values. If there was a bigger time frame, the transition from women’s outfits including a skirt to just having pants might be noticeable. This set of artifacts might not seem important, but it shows that the style of women’s outfits was often used for discrimination back in the early 20th century. Had the typical female athlete attire not changed by the mid-1900s, advertisers of women’s sports outfits would still be using the value of femininity over all else to sell their products. These artifacts also reveal that some of the values of sports-outfit advertisers are still the same today as they were back in the early 20th century. Many uniform advertisers today also care more about how someone looks in a uniform and do not actually say that wearing it will boost someone’s athletic career. As long as the value of appearance in making sports outfits still exists, advertisers will continue to use it to convince consumers to buy their product.
Artifact A: Florence Sutton (LOC), 1910-1915 (estimated time period)

This is a photo of tennis player Florence Sutton from the 1910s. She is wearing the typical sports attire for women back during the early 1900s. Her expression in this picture seems to suggest that she is struggling during a match, though this may just be nervousness. Her pose suggests that the skirt in the outfit may restrict her, and that she might have an easier time if the skirt was not a part of the uniform. This sports outfit does not look as detailed as the outfits in the advertisements, suggesting that society may have not cared much about how fashionable sports outfits were in the 1910s. But even though this is not what might be considered a fashionable outfit, a skirt is still part of the uniform. This once again adds to the theory that society wanted women to look feminine back in the early 1900s. Even if the outfit may restrict them in some way, society still wants women to look feminine, which may tie back into advertisements caring more about how someone looks in an outfit rather than how skilled someone actually is at a sport. In addition, this once again suggests that society had much stricter standards for women back then than they do now.
Artifact B: Sports Outfit: Sweaters and Ensemble for Holiday Wear (1925)

This artifact is an article talking about sports-ware for women in the winter in 1925. The article does not actually have pictures, suggesting that the company is more interested in describing the product than showing it in action. However, pictures cost a lot of money back then. This, plus the fact that the article talks about several different products instead of just one, could be why they chose not to include a picture. They claim one outfit is “up to date” and “complete,” implying that the rest of the sports outfits made (or at least most of them) during that time are out of style and unfinished. The way the article describes each of the pieces of sports-ware in great detail and in a positive light would suggest that people value how the sports outfit looks. Bright colors are often brought up, again implying that appearance is important to the consumers of this product.

Again, the fact that skirts are a part of the sports outfit show that femininity was valued in women back in the early 1900s. This goes back to the idea that standards for women were much stricter in the early 20th century than they are today. Like the rest of the artifacts, the article seems to focus more on how someone looks while playing sports rather than how good they actually are at a sport.
Artifact C: Indispensable Sports Outfit

This artifact is an advertisement detailing a special type of sports outfit from 1938. The advertisers attempt to give different pictures of the uniform, presumably to demonstrate how it can be effective on multiple people. Despite this, the women they feature are rather thin, implying that the outfit is only aimed at skinnier women. The producers also mention that the outfit is “indispensable,” implying that the other types of this outfit are not. They also mention that “play clothes are an old story” (“Indispensable Sports Outfit” 19), which seems to be trying to convince the consumers that what they are currently wearing to participate in sports is old news. This statement is followed by, “this ensemble is a new treatment of the time honored plot” (“Indispensable Sports Outfit” 19), making it clear that the advertisers view their product as superior to current sports attire. They mention that the outfit is designed so that the shoulder straps will not fall off, which could imply that this happened in the past with other styles. Once again, skirts are a part of the outfit, reinforcing the idea that femininity was valued in women back during this time period. This ties back into the idea that society had much stricter standards for women back in the early 1900s than they do now. Just like the other advertisements, they mostly talk about how fashionable the outfit is. This only further suggest that the advertisers only care about how someone looks while playing a sport rather than how good they actually are at it.
Artifact D: Sports Outfit is Ideal for Summer Fun (1941)

This artifact is an advertisement from 1941. The advertisement shows a thin woman wearing what is known as a three-piece sports outfit. The fact that this outfit comes with a skirt implies that society valued women looking feminine back during the early 1900s. This also suggests that society had much stricter standards for women in early 1900s than they do now. Even though the description claims the outfit comes in several sizes, the advertisement shows a thin woman, implying that the outfit is aimed at women who are more fit or thinner. The advertisement claims that the buyer will need a three-piece sports outfit, implying that it is a necessity for women back during this time and there is no alternative. There are other women in the background who look unhappy with the outfit that they are wearing, implying that the company is trying to make their sports outfit look better than any of the competing outfits. The advertisers seem to be focused on the supposed beauty of the outfit, but never consider whether or not wearing it will actually boost someone’s athletic career. To the advertisers, it is more important how someone looks when playing a sport rather than how good they are at it.
Works Cited


