OFF BRAND

Bye-Bye Bikinis? Athletes at the Olympics and Beyond Fight Sexist Uniforms

For the Tokyo Olympics, the German gymnastics team chose unitards over leotards, while Norwegian beach handball players recently rejected bikini bottoms in favor of shorts. Will female athletes change the status quo?

The Norwegian women's beach handball team, pictured here this summer in their chosen shorts, has taken a stand against the sport's typical bikini bottoms.

PHOTO: NORWEGIAN HANDBALL FEDERATION

By

Rory Satran

July 31, 2021 8:00 am ET

Off Brand is a column that delves into trends in fashion and beauty.

IN 2004, then-FIFA president Sepp Blatter had an idea for making women's soccer more exciting for spectators: tighter shorts. His comments to the Swiss newspaper SonntagsBlick suggested that soccer might follow the lead of volleyball, where the women's uniforms are more revealing than the men's. (Mr. Blatter, who has been banned

from soccer by FIFA for ethical violations including illegal bonus payments, did not respond to requests for comment)

Mr. Blatter's opinion, while clearly retrograde, was unshocking to those—like me—who've played women's sports at any level. As a high- school field hockey and lacrosse player, I received more "feedback" about the length and style of my game-day kilt from fellow students and passersby than any other aspect of the sports. Even on lacrosse match days, when I had to drag a 6-foot-long antiquated wooden stick to every class, the comments were still about the skimpy outfit. Although I happened to like the old-fashioned charm of the traditional skirt, most of the time my teammates and I would have preferred the option to wear shorts. It struck me then as now that the short skirt enforced a sense of objectification around the sports. The focus was in the wrong place.

In recent weeks, several elite athletes have expressed similar concerns as conversations about women's athletic uniforms surfaced yet again. The German women's gymnastics team wore full-body unitards to compete in the Olympics in Tokyo this past Sunday instead of the more common bikini-cut leotard. In April, when the team first wore this covered-up look (which, though permitted by the sport's governing bodies, is rare), the German Gymnastics Federation tweeted that it was a statement against "sexualization in gymnastics." It does not seem coincidental that this is the first summer Olympic games to take place following the 2018 sentencing of Larry Nassar for widespread sexual abuse within the sport.

German gymnastics team member Pauline Schaefer-Betz competes in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics wearing a unitard, which the team has said is a statement against sexualization in the sport.

PHOTO: LIONEL BONAVENTURE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The previous week, the Norwegian women's beach handball team was fined 1500 euros (equivalent to $1783) by the European Handball Federation for its insistence on wearing shorts instead of the mandated bikini bottoms at the European Beach Handball Championships in Bulgaria. Following an international uproar—the singer Pink even offered to pay the team's fine—the EHF donated the fine to an organization promoting equality in sports. Michael Wiederer, president of the EHF, said his organization "will do all it can to ensure that a change in athlete uniform regulations can be implemented."

Talitha Stone, a 32-year-old Aussie living in Norway, started a petition immediately after the controversial beach handball match to support the Norwegian team. It has amassed over 50,000 signatures. "It's on a pretty huge platform that we're seeing these kinds of changes being pushed by women's teams," said Ms. Stone of the one-two-punch moves taken by the Norwegian handball team and the German gymnastics team. "So it can't be ignored anymore. And I think this is going to start a chain reaction and more women are going to start doing the same thing."

Paralympian Olivia Breen, shown here at the British Athletics Championships in June, said she was called out at the competition for her shorts being too short.

PHOTO: ASHLEY ALLEN/GETTY IMAGES

While both of these highly publicized examples involve women agitating against revealing uniforms, athletes are also policed in the opposite direction. Welsh Paralympian Olivia Breen, who competes in sprints and long jump, said she was called out by a female official at this month's English Championships for wearing shorts deemed too short. After the incident, Ms. Breen tweeted a statement which read in part, "I recognise that there needs to be regulations and guidelines in regards to competition kit but women should not be made to feel self-conscious about what they are wearing when competing but should feel comfortable and at ease." An England Athletics spokesperson said, "We are aware of the post and will be investigating as a matter of urgency. The wellbeing of all participants in

athletics is of the utmost importance and everyone should feel comfortable to compete and participate in the sport."

Jaime Schultz, the author of "Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women's Sport" and a professor at Penn State, said that all three of these recent instances are connected. "It is always about controlling what women wear through the lens of what people think of as appropriate femininity and appropriate sexuality. You can't be too sexy, but you can't be too feminine and you can't be too masculine. It's a 'you can't win for losing' kind of thing."

The history of women's sports is rife with examples of attempts to control women's uniforms, generally focused on whether to make them more or less modest. Women began participating in the Olympics in small numbers starting around the turn of the last century, but for the most part, were only permitted to play sports that allowed them to wear long skirts: tennis, sailing, croquet, equestrianism and golf. Photos of British tennis player Charlotte Cooper, who won the gold medal in Paris in 1900, show her in a long-sleeved blouse, tie, ankle-length skirt and, seemingly, a corset. It cannot have been conducive to athleticism. In 1955, officials barred Billie Jean King from a group photo of fellow tennis players because she was wearing shorts instead of a skirt. In 2011 as women's boxing ramped up, the Amateur International Boxing Association encouraged women to wear skirts so they could be differentiated from men (shorts soon prevailed).

Today, the message from many female athletes is that they want more choice around what they wear, so that they can feel at ease and focus on their work. Susanne Pettersen, one of the players on the Norwegian beach handball team, explained to me that she found the bikini bottoms unsuitable for the sport because it involves acrobatic movements such as 360-degree pirouettes and jumps. She and her teammates also felt deeply uncomfortable when they discovered the existence of videos and pictures focusing on their bodies circulating online. (These have since been removed to her knowledge, although close-ups of women's bodies are still common in sports coverage.) As she put it, "We have to shift the focus to the sport and our performance, and not how we look."

Australian beach handball player Rose Boyd at left, photographed with her children, husband (also a beach handball player) and sister-in-law. The contrast in women's and men's uniforms is apparent here.

PHOTO: ROSE BOYD

What's more, Ms. Pettersen said, changing dress codes in sports such as beach handball might encourage more girls and women to participate. Rose Boyd, an Australian beach handball player in Queensland, voiced similar hopes when we spoke. She remembers that when she returned to the sport after having her second child, "my focus was more about how I was going to look in the bikini than how I was going to perform." She said the uniform has deterred people she knows from undertaking the pursuit: "A lot of friends that I tried to encourage to play the sport weren't keen to give it a shot at all because they didn't want to wear the bikini."

Athletic uniforms are typically dictated by the individual sport's governing body. Some considerations, of course, go beyond pure preference. In many sports, for example, the members of a team must dress identically to be differentiated from their rivals on the

field. In swimming, the length of one's swimsuit is directly correlated to hydrodynamics and thus performance, so all swimmers' suits must conform to a standard. But barring such examples, athletes are increasingly questioning accepted wisdom around outfits. The Women's Sports Foundation, an advocacy group founded in 1974 for women athletes, currently has a position paper on uniforms which states that, "Athletes should be afforded maximum flexibility in the choice of uniform fabrics and styles."

Dr. Schultz, the Penn State professor, compared this movement to the campaign women have long waged to wear what they wish at a more traditional workplace like an office. "This is [the athletes'] workplace and they're there to do a job," she explained. "If they're dressing in a way that makes them feel more comfortable or gives them some sort of psychological edge, who's to argue against that?"

Beach handball player Rose Boyd is able to wear shorts at a 2020 local tournament in Australia, where the federation relaxes the rules for domestic play.

PHOTO: CHRIS SEEN

Write to Rory Satran at rory.satran@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications

The length of swimsuits is correlated to hydrodynamics. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said it was correlated to aerodynamics. (Corrected on Aug. 3.)

MORE IN OFF BRAND

- Gwyneth Paltrow's '90s Style Is Back. That's Good for Goop.
- Getting Botox Used to Be a Secret. Now It's Not.
- The Latest Maternity Wear Trend? Crop Tops
- The New Tween Status Look: LoveShackFancy Dresses and Golden Goose Sneakers
- Skinny Jeans Make You Look Old? These Women Don't Care