

## Female sportswear: function, form and fashion

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#WomenWinning

Sports clearly cannot exist without rules and regulations, but we typically think of these as fundamental to govern conduct, safety, equipment and the basic principles of the game in question. As long as the health and safety of athletes is not at risk, the clothing worn should surely be a secondary consideration. That said, in this highly commercialised industry, achieving a particular look or brand identity is going to be a factor. Some rules governing player dress code therefore exist, with certain associations taking a more rigid approach than others. Do we find these are applied consistently across different genders and can they disproportionately affect women?

### Health and safety

One of the most recent high profile debates on the subject surrounded Serena Williams at Roland Garros last year. Her catsuit, designed by Nike no less, led the president of the French Tennis Federation to protest she had “gone too far”. Although we have yet to see a male athlete don a catsuit in quite the same way, eyebrows were raised at the FTF’s stance as it may appear that this was another example of sports executives telling women what they can and cannot wear. Years of unique clothing choices, including denim shorts worn by Andre Agassi, sprung to mind. It is also relevant that Williams’ full body compression suit was partly for function, not fashion, to help her avoid blood clots forming. Williams did find an alternative, fishnet compression tights, but there is food for thought here.

Whatever the dress code rules, if there is an item of clothing that a player prefers to wear due to a health benefit then there should be a need for a good reason to refuse this. For example – in a sport with a very conventional dress code such as snooker, we have seen Stephen Maguire be allowed to play without wearing the traditional bow tie due to a neck condition. The Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) have understood this distinction and subsequently modernised its rules to allow leggings and mid-length compression shorts to be worn without a skirt or dress during matches, but the Grand Slams continue to be under the jurisdiction of their national federations and the International Tennis Federation (ITF).

### Religious clothing

Female athletes competing in hijabs have long faced dress code restrictions which can exclude them from participation. The Iranian national football team were left heartbroken after being banned from a qualifying match for the 2012 Olympics due to their hijabs. FIFA teetered between justifying the ban as necessary to prohibit religious messages in player uniform, and then justifying it as a health and safety precaution. We are, however, seeing more leniency. FIFA announced that from 2014 onwards, religious head coverings would be permitted.

After a similarly hard-fought battle, the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) followed suit in 2017. At the same time we saw Nike release its Pro Hijab in 2017, considered a watershed moment as a major global sporting and fashion brand promoted inclusivity and the participation of Muslim women in sport. Some athletes however face tighter restrictions – Paralympians, for example. Miftahul Jannah was banned last year from participating in the Asian Para Games wearing her hijab; the rationale here being that a more unique set of rules are required in blind judo to ensure athlete safety.

Although these issues predominantly appear to affect women, there are male athletes who are affected by restrictions on their appearance. While high profile lobbying from Amiaya Zafar and Zeina Nassar helped prompt USA Boxing and the International Boxing Association (AIBA) to amend their rules on hijabs, there remain strict guidelines around the facial hair of male boxers. England Boxing has written to the AIBA seeking changes to the current rules, but until then said rule ultimately prohibits participation from athletes from sects of Sikh, Muslim and Jewish faiths unless they are prepared to shave their facial hair.

### Personal choice

We then have sports like beach volleyball, known on an international stage for strict rules on the size of clothing worn. From 1996-2012 female beach volleyball players in the Olympics had to choose between bikinis – with a maximum side width of 7cm, specifically – or full length bodysuits to compete. Such a position naturally runs the risk of alienating players who do not feel comfortable in such clothing. The International Volleyball Federation did revise their position in 2012; sleeved tops and shorts up to 1.18 inches in length are now permitted, a welcome change for many in light of cultural and societal shifts. Interestingly, many professionals still favour wearing bikinis for comfort and to best perform in hot, sandy conditions, but giving players more choice is something to be welcomed.

### Aesthetics over athletics

Research conducted by Cambridge University Press shows that even the language surrounding women in sport is more likely to centre on appearance, clothing and personal lives than when discussing men. This focus on 'aesthetics over athletics' extends beyond the players themselves. Female broadcasters and presenters find their appearance disproportionately scrutinised, as Helen Skelton discovered at the 2016 Olympics when the length of her skirt caused a Twitterstorm. It did not matter that she was broadcasting from the heat of Rio, nor that her fellow (male) co-host was wearing shorts above the knee himself.

It is against this context that rules on clothing for female athletes are now beginning to be evaluated and revised. There is a danger that unnecessarily rigid clothing rules lead to women being under the spotlight for how they appear, or made to feel uncomfortable because they are not allowed to wear what they would ideally like. This unhelpful narrative surrounding the appearance and attire of female athletes can shift the focus away from their performances and achievements, and can introduce a further barrier to women in sport.


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