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The Male Gaze and Women’s Sports Identity: Male Authorship of the Female Experience

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Abstract: The male gaze “construes women subjectively, according to stereotyped cognitions which harmonise with the expectations of the male reader [viewer]” (Brandt 2005, 235). This article examines how the male gaze shapes women’s participation in sport and physical activity. A brief historical retrospective provides examples of how the male voice authored ways in which women were allowed to compete and then offers contemporary examples that show how the male gaze continues to influence women’s sport clothing and behavior, rules, policies, and coaching methods. Despite the improvements in women’s sport participation, men still have the lion’s share of leadership positions with sports authorities in America, which means they can literally author how women compete. Women are still held captive by the male gaze, which creates a dangerous feedback loop forcing some women to conform to the stereotypes supported by the wider culture. In recent years, women have found a voice to talk about their unique athletic needs. Whether it is dark shorts so they can focus on competition during their menstrual cycle or wearing less revealing clothing on the handball court, women want to be seen as competent athletes and not as objectified sexual objects.

Keywords: Women’s sport’s history, feminism, sports attire

Introduction

Participation in sport and physical education is important for women and girls. It not only improves physical health; it also can alleviate stress and anxiety. Historically, women have struggled to be recognized as athletes with their own agency, and while things have undoubtedly improved for women in terms of participation and respect, there remain obstacles to women’s full recognition as elite athletes; obstacles such as sexual objectification, policing women’s bodies, gender tests, and discrimination against transgender women in sports. While connected, perhaps the biggest obstacle among them is the continued objectification of women athletes by what Laura Mulvey called “the male gaze.” To discuss the male gaze and its impact on the female sports experience, one must define a few terms.

The first term to define is scopophilia. In the groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” scopophilia is defined as “the pleasure of looking” (Mulvey 1975, 806). Freud associated scopophilia with “taking other people as objects,
subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (quoted in Mulvey 1975, p. 806). Mulvey expands on Freud’s idea of the controlling gaze to include “the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object” (806). Mulvey goes on to explain, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, the pleasure in looking has been split active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with the appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (808-9).

Because the female figure is styled according to the male fantasy, women’s self-definition is erased and replaced, metaphorically, by the authorship of the male viewer. Who gets to control the definition of concepts like “feminine” and “athlete?” In the article “The Male Gaze and Online Sports Punditry: Reactions to the Ines Sainz Controversy on the Sports Blogosphere,” Merrill et al. write, “the concept of voyeuristic pleasure enables the patriarchal construction of an exhibitionist role for women” (2012, 3). They reason that it is the continued sexual power imbalance between men and women that is ultimately responsible for the male authorship of the female sports experience.

One thread that connects contemporary female athletes with their historical sisters involves sport clothing choice. Historically, as women pushed to participate in physical education and sport, they required clothing that would allow flexibility and comfort. However, their clothing choices were defined by prevailing concepts of modesty, femininity, and socio-economic standing; and, these definitions were not always their own.

A Brief History of Women’s Sport Clothing
Women’s clothing style, material, and contextual appropriateness served as a driver for women’s participation in sports during the Progressive era. With the establishment of Normal Schools in the United States during the 1840s, physical education pedagogy became codified. Women made up most of the teachers throughout the nineteenth century, including physical education teachers. Ironically, women were still considered constitutionally unable to participate in vigorous or competitive sport, yet they were charged with creating and teaching in these programs.

As Hult notes in A Century of Women’s Basketball: From Frailty to the Final Four (1991), women in the early twentieth century still had to contend with societal attitudes around femininity, biological determinism, and appropriate behavior (3). These attitudes encompassed male judgments about the appropriateness of sportswear for participation in physical activity and whether women had the physical, emotional, and mental resilience to participate in sport activities, especially competitive sports. It is important to note that these concerns were shared by women as well as men (Hult 1991).

As cultural shifts caused by industrialization occurred at this time, and more workers were needed in factories and “lower paid and more tractable immigrant women largely replaced those women who had been factory workers” (Hult 1991, 5). This shift allowed middle-class women more leisure time. The increase in leisure time contributed to women’s ability to participate in reform movements of the era (Hult 1991, 5). Becoming a teacher was considered an appropriate profession because it fit into the well-worn middle-
class assumptions surrounding women being nurturers. Still, it represented a choice for women: did they want to marry and have children or become wage earners?

In the domain of teaching, women took physical education head on. They had “both the responsibility and the power to direct its course” (Hult 1991, 4). They participated in teacher training at innovative summer education programs. One such program was a collaboration between the State Normal School at Bridgewater and the State Normal School at Hyannis between 1941 and 1943. The program encompassed a rich curriculum that included instruction and physical activity. For an additional fee to students, it included room and board as well. When the Normal School at Hyannis closed in 1944, Bridgewater accepted the program and its students. Women taught women’s physical education and men taught the men. As more women entered higher education, they became interested in participating in sports programs, such as basketball and tennis. The physical education teachers “maintained respectable cultural trappings and ideals as they set their goals for programs of physical education and sport” (Hult 1991, 6).

Central to the question of participation was appropriate sportswear. Appropriate had a dual meaning in this case: it had to be both appropriate to women’s decorum and appropriate to participation. The sportswear had to maintain women’s modesty and allow for ease of movement. The clothing could not be so modest and conventional that it restricted movement or proper breathing.

Sportswear became a tool to empower women and allowed entrance into the domain of sport for fitness and pleasure. As their interest in different sports activities expanded, “they needed to figure out in their time what would be appropriate to wear” (Mendelsohn 2021). Gone were the boned corsets that restricted breathing. Long skirts gave way to bloomers and skirts with a shorter hem, and then just bloomers. Hats were discarded. Tops became less voluminous while still protecting modesty. Roberta Powell notes that “it was eventually exercise, not fashion, that provided the key that unlocked women from the corset prison” (1981, 21).

As clothing became less of a barrier, the increased participation in higher education and athletics helped women define and redefine what it meant to be a woman; to retain and redefine their femininity while broadening their horizons and exerting their influence on wider cultural problems. However, they were still cognizant of the male gaze. For example, President Theodore Roosevelt’s philosophy was that “sport could be used to define manliness” (Hult 1991, 4) and this put pressure on women to be the opposite. Women would “avoid a great athletic performance if it did not embrace the feminine sport behaviors” (Hult 1991, 12-13). The personification of the feminine ideal was conceptualized by the “Gibson Girl,” first articulated in the turn of the twentieth-century pen-and-ink drawings of Charles Gibson. There were two different types of Gibson girls: “The working girls’ Gibson Girl achieved beauty through make-up and artificial curls and had sensual traits, freer sexual behavior, and more latitude to engage in all sports than her middle class/college sister. The latter saw natural beauty as central, and sexual behavior restricted” (Hult 1991, 12). Gibson, quite literally, authored the concept of the idealized feminine. In doing so, he obscured what women might have conceptualized
organically based on their own needs and desires. There is tension between what women want and how far society (which also includes women) allow them to go. The further they push, the further they get, but always within the confines of the male gaze. The special collections archive at Bridgewater State University holds many fascinating items related to women in sport and physical education: scrapbooks, photographs, year books, and sports uniforms and clothing. Of interest in this article are the bloomers belonging to Alice Bowman (see figure 1). They are made of what feels like light cotton broadcloth or linen, though that is not explicitly stated. They measure 12 inches at the waist (flat), 36 inches on the outside length, 23-inch inseam, and 8 inches on the leg (flat). There are box pleats at the waist (see figure 2). They have button closures and hook and eye closures. There are internal buttons on the waist band to adjust the waistband, and they are black. There is no maker’s mark, so their origin and manufacture are unknown. There are simple gathers at the leg (see figure 3). Alice Bowman wore these between 1896 and 1898 for gym classes. The bloomers allowed more freedom of movement while still maintaining the modesty required of women and girls at the time. They were also lighter than the heavier skirts they typically wore. The ease of movement allowed women to participate in physical fitness and sports in greater numbers, especially as more women went to college.

**Figures 1-3: Bloomers Belonging to Alice Bowman**
*(Bridgewater State University Special Collections)*

Another item of interest is a sepia photograph is of four young women in 1892 wearing the same style of bloomers and is housed at the Bridgewater State University Archives (see figure 4). It was taken by A.C. Bowman in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Only one woman is identified on the front, but the back of the photo is signed “Alice Bowman.” The gym-wear had a high neckline, long sleeves, long socks, bloomers, and showed no skin. This photo is a good example of what gym clothing was like for women at the time. While still modest, wearing the bloomers can be interpreted as a political metaphor about what women wanted for their future. They wanted to wear the clothing that best accommodated their new interest in sport and fitness. More still, they wanted their choices and desires recognized as valid. The photographer’s stamp is also visible on the back. While the last name is the same, it is not know whether the photographer was related to Alice Bowman.
Bridgewater State University Archive also has some chromolithographs featuring sportswomen. These lithographs date from around 1885. These are baseball card sized “freebies” that were given out to advertise tobacco products. The first example, titled “Base Ball Scenes,” shows a woman in tight fitting, revealing clothing bending over in a suggestive manner. Her pose shows she is ready to catch a baseball, despite not having a glove (see figure 5).

The second example shows a woman ready to go fishing, in thigh high stockings and smart shoes (see figure 6). This series, called “Pretty Athletes,” again shows a sportswoman created by and catering to the male gaze, her suggestive pose and impractical fishing gear aside.

In the third example called “Scotland,” a woman is pictured in a skin-tight tartan jumpsuit playing rings (see figure 7). Here again, one can see that the picture is meant to appeal to a male viewer to sell a product. The sportswoman is drawn with traditional femininity in mind: small waist, dainty hands, and arms, and voluptuous curves.

The fourth example shows a woman, again in skin-tight clothing with a plunging neckline. She appears to be ready to throw a ball (see figure
8). Clearly, these lithographs are examples of how women’s sports bodies were used to sell products, those specifically marketed to men. As is clear in the sepia photo, realistic women’s sports clothing at the time was not revealing in any way. However, in the sepia photo, bloomers, and lithographs, the male gaze creates a tension. The idealized feminine is both sexy and revealing while being modest and appropriate.

**Figure 8. “Cut Plug.” Lithograph, c.1885**
Bridgewater State University Special Collection

The Male Gaze and Contemporary Sport Clothing for Women
The male gaze continues to shape the sports experiences of women. In 1972, the US Government’s Title IX legislation required equal funding for women’s sports in public schools, colleges, and universities. However, it “left untouched pervasive fundamental inequities in leadership, decision making authority, coaching systems, and role models for girls in all athletic situations” (Hult 1991, 243). What is more, as women’s and girls’ sports governing bodies were merged, “it has led to male governance power in all amateur sports form high school competition to college, non-school agencies, and the Olympic movement” (Hult 1991, 243). Male governance is, quite literally, rewriting the experiences of girls and women in sport by the way men make policy and rules. These rules include uniforms.

Women and girls in sport have expressed the desire for choice in their competition-wear. They want competition-wear that will highlight their athletic ability and allow them to perform at the highest level. Women want to feel comfortable and not have to worry about being subjected to the pressure of the male gaze. In the article “The Discourse of the Male Gaze: Critical Analysis of the Feature Section ‘The Beauty of Sport’ in SA Sports Illustrated,” Brandt notes that “the stereotyped images of sportswomen stand in stark contrast to the portrayal that the majority of sportswomen prefer, namely that of physically strong and emotionally balanced sporting professionals” (2005, 233). The consequences of this continued objectification of athletes can include “dropping out of sports programmes, deliberate underperformance and resorting to harmful slimming practices” (2005, 233-34). The male gaze and the response to it has become a dangerous feedback loop in which many women and girls find themselves trapped.

Even young women in youth sport want choices. In my own recent experience in Kingston, Massachusetts, one youth soccer player expressed her desire to have a women’s cut jersey instead of a unisex (men’s) cut. She felt the men’s cut erased her femaleness. She recognized, however, that two years prior, she would have preferred the men’s cut. These conversations are happening everywhere.

Female athletes are also concerned about inclusion. They want more girls and women to play
sports, and some cultural differences can make it difficult for women to participate if the “kit” is not flexible. For example, Federation Internationale de Football Association lifted the hijab ban in 2014, allowing women who are observant Muslims to play in international competition.

A quick Google search reveals many photos of women’s sports teams where some women wear more modest versions of team’s kit, allowing everyone some choice in how they choose to express their athleticism. In the Beach Handball Euro tournament in 2021, the Norwegian women’s handball team “asked permission to swap out the bikini bottoms for shorts ahead of the tournament, citing the players’ preference to wear something less revealing and more comfortable” (Elliot, 2021, para. 3). They argued that they should be allowed to wear the similar style to the men’s team. In this photo taken from the New York Times article “Women’s Handball Players are Fined for Rejecting Bikini Uniforms,” one can clearly see the difference between the men’s and women’s uniforms (see figure 9). The men’s uniform appears to be constructed for comfort, while the women’s uniform is clearly constructed for the “male gaze.”

In the world of women’s professional soccer, the Orlando Pride has updated one of their away kits to replace white shorts with black ones, so players can “feel more comfortable and confident when playing during their menstrual cycle” (Orlando Pride Communications, 2023, para. 1) (see figure 10). They are the first team in the National Women’s Soccer League to do so. But other sports organizations are following suit. Manchester City women’s football team will stop wearing white shorts, as will Ireland’s women’s rugby team. Women athletes want the choice of what to wear to compete at their best. Dark shorts, they argue, mean they can concentrate on their game.
Conclusion
Policing women’s clothing choices continues today along with all of the political implications they have. Women and girls are required to advocate for sports clothing that makes the most sense, whether that is dark shorts, so women and girls do not have to worry about their menstrual cycle (Orlando Pride), or less-revealing kits like the Norwegian Beach handball team. Women want to feel comfortable so they can perform their best in their sport. They want to be seen as athletes and respected for their skill. They do not want to wear kits that objectify them or run the risk of a “wardrobe malfunction.” They want kits that are inclusive, so that more women and girls can participate. In the age of Spandex, in a world where women are encouraged to compete at the highest level, why are women still forced to advocate for the uniforms that make the most sense for them?

The world of sport and women’s sport has evolved. Things are objectively better than they were in Alice Bowman’s time. But there are still battles that women must fight for inclusive and comfortable sports clothing that allows more women and girls to play while validating them as full people worthy of respect as athletes and escaping the male gaze.

Note on Author: Jennifer LaVoie graduated in May 2023 with her Master of Science in physical education with a coaching concentration from Bridgewater. She earned her MA in English in 2002 from Bridgewater as well. She is a youth soccer coach for the Town of Kingston, MA and a member of the Executive Board. She is a runner, cyclist, swimmer, poet, and a vegan. She works in the IT department at Bridgewater State and Adjuncts at Bristol Community College in the English Department teaching composition. Professor Maura Rosenthal was instrumental in bringing this essay and project to completion as both a professor and mentor.

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