

In the closet

At the women's Olympics, a lot of fuss over clothes



With apologies to our male readers

At the flamboyant Olympic opening ceremony on July 27th, Jacques Rogge of the International Olympic Committee declared the London games a “major boost for gender equality”. For the first time all sports are open to women and all national teams include female athletes—Brunei, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had never sent women before. Women make up 44% of competing athletes, the highest share ever; in the American and Canadian teams they outnumber men.

The Olympic movement has rarely been at the forefront of women’s rights. The ancient games were open only to men. For Pierre de Coubertin, who revived the Olympics in 1896, the event was about the “exaltation of male athleticism”. Women were there to applaud—for them to compete would be “impractical, uninteresting, ungainly and...improper”. In Paris in 1924 female players topped 100 (there were nearly 3,000 men by then); they crossed the 1,000 mark in Munich in 1972 but the ratio was still six men to one woman.

London got off to a promising start. The tableau of Britain at the opening ceremony included suffragettes, hundreds of dancing nurses, a strident Mary Poppins banishing multiple villains and even a shot of the first lesbian kiss aired on prime-time television. Tickets for men’s and women’s events in most sports have been priced the same throughout the games.

Yet much attention has focused not on physical prowess but female dress. Some of this scrutiny has been benign. A ruling that women competing in judo could not wear headscarves for safety reasons was overturned on July 31st to allow a 16-year-old Saudi, Wojdan Shaherkani, to fight. Meanwhile beach volleyball, a rather silly sport famous for its scantily clad players, is for the first time letting women don shorts, leggings and T-shirts or even full bodysuits (pictured) if they wish—in the name of modesty, or Britain’s irksome summer weather.

Other rows have been less elevating. Female participants forced the Badminton World Federation to revoke a rule that they had to wear skirts or dresses to raise the “profile” of players and “enhance the presentation” of the game. Women’s boxing makes its debut at the London games—two millennia after the sport featured at the original Olympics—yet the International Boxing Association also considered making skirts mandatory.

The ruckus over women's garb taps into longer-running British debates. Sports played by women attract only a small proportion of commercial sponsorship by value, according to the Commission on the Future of Women's Sport, a lobby group. Lizzie Armitstead, who won Britain's first Olympic medal in London, gripes that the salaries and profiles of female cyclists lag behind men's. Change has been slow even in high-profile tournaments: only in 2007 did Wimbledon equalise the winning prize money for tennis players of each sex.

Yet the Olympics does offer a corrective to the often skimpy media coverage of women's sports. A gold, silver or bronze won by either sex contributes equally to the all-important national medals tables, casting female victors into the limelight—a rare chance to increase their coverage without uncovering their bodies.

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