

# Gym Clothes for the Modern Woman:

A Comprehensive History of American Activewear

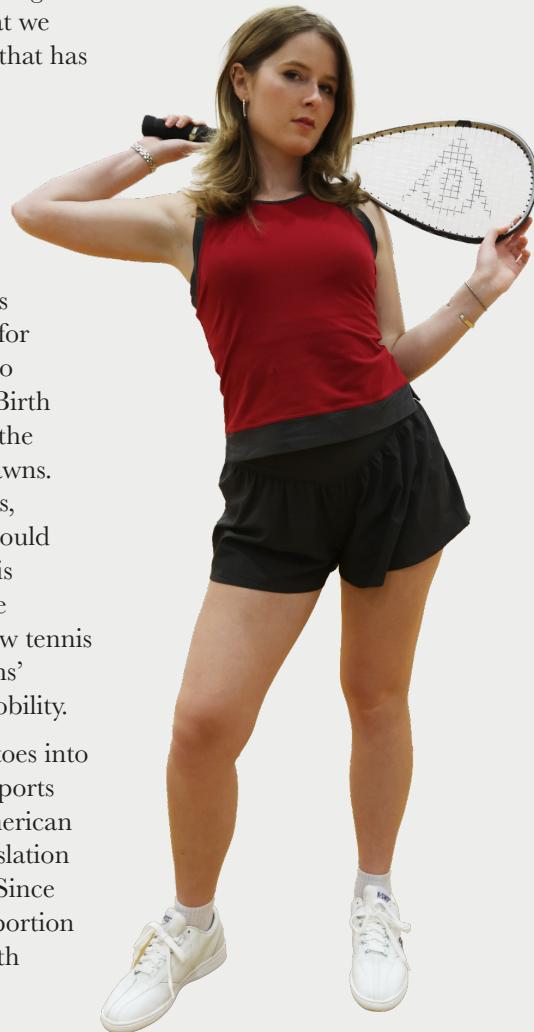
by morgan boakye  
layout by ashtin barker

It's difficult to pinpoint one starting point for the evolution in women's activewear. What we do know is that 19th century America was a dynamic environment where women of all kinds were trying to innovate fashion. Early American activewear was inspired by our European neighbors, however America has transformed the sportswear industry, particularly for women, in an extraordinary way. According to Statista, the over \$300 billion dollar industry of activewear that we have built today is the product of decades of American progress that has broken socio-cultural and economic boundaries, challenged gender roles and innovative textile manufacturing.

## Socioeconomic Factors

Starting in the 1800s, Americans started playing recreational sports like croquet, after observing the game's popularity in Europe. With this spread of different types of sports across America, starting in the mid-19th century, came the need for the upper class Americans to differentiate themselves in regards to exercise. According to "When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear" written by Patricia Campbell Warner, the first instance of this came with the invention of tennis on grass lawns. This invention, along with the creation of bounceable tennis balls, developed into an activity that people of lower economic status could rarely afford to play. This older version of what we know as tennis today, highlighted the socioeconomic differences within the active American population at the time. It also led to the creation of new tennis attire for women made using a Jersey knit, one of the first womens' activewear garments designed with more stretch for increased mobility.

While the Americans of the 19th century started to dip their toes into recreation and casual sports, the 20th century Americans made sports and activewear what it is today. With the development of the American middle class, supported by economic prosperity and political legislation like the GI bill after WWII according to "HIS115 – US History Since 1870" written by The American Women's College, a significant portion of Americans were left with disposable income. This, coupled with more leisure time, led to the democratization and popularization of recreational sports and exercise for the average American, and led to the development of higher quality sportswear in terms of performance, construction and visual design.





## Gender Roles

Taking a look at the current fashion zeitgeist, a hot topic of discussion in modern fashion are garments named bloomers. The modern version of bloomers are almost unrecognizable compared to the original garment, but they inspired almost the same amount of controversy in the social sphere. According to Britannica, a young woman named Amelia Jenks Bloomer created bloomers in the mid-19th century, based on a pair of Turkish trousers. At the time it was not common for women to wear pants of any kind, so the style was infamous and representative of women's growing desire for autonomy before women's suffrage. Thus, Bloomers were a significant garment in women's fashion history because its popularization led to the creation of other women's activewear pants, like Knickerbockers in the late 19th century that were used for bicycle riding.

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This type of sentiment is a difficult thing to conceptualize today because pants of every kind are normalized for women to wear, especially when doing physical activity. Alongside having to wear skirts, especially in the 19th century, sportswear was also large, cumbersome and impractical for exercise. Women's activewear was designed using existing standards for women's public attire in the 19th century. Therefore, it was designed with the idea that they would be interacting with men while wearing the clothes and it focused less on practicality and more on appearing as the perfect image of femininity. According to Warner, "sport took place in the public sphere, exercise in the private. In public, women were expected to be modest and demure and to wear, to the best of their ability, the fashion of the time. Women's clothing for sport, then, was almost by definition clothing for interaction with men."

While women's activewear in the 19th century can be considered a symbol of the more rigid, traditional standards for



women, the activewear of the 20th century and beyond encapsulates the changing attitudes towards those standards for modesty. According to CNN, one of the most pertinent examples of this evolution was the integration of pants into women's wardrobes, reportedly popularized by designers like Coco Chanel starting in the 1920s and onwards, and undoubtedly supported by the enfranchisement of American white women in 1920 and the help of the bloomers we still have today.

## Technology

Along with ever evolving socio-cultural values, the fashion and sportswear industries were allowed to prosper with the support of the Industrial Revolution in America. From the patenting of the sewing machine by American inventor Isaac Singer, according to Britannica, to the development of industrialized clothing production facilities, the sportswear industry was allowed to grow with the rising popularity of sports. According to Fashinnovation, the development of mass production in fashion allowed for the garment making process to be streamlined, more cost-efficient and more accessible to the general American public.

As American clothing brands moved into the 20th century, these more rudimentary garment production processes became more complex, and continued to improve the performance aspects of activewear. According to the Science History Institute, American chemical company DuPont invented Nylon in 1938, the first fully synthetic fiber. Nylon was revolutionary for women's activewear because it paved the way for the development of other synthetic fibers and improved the durability, stretch, comfortability and overall performance of sportswear garments throughout the 20th century until today.

These numerous technological innovations, spurred by the demand for new garment types and changing gender roles, supported overall American economic development and transformed the American activewear industry. The women's sportswear industry in America represents the ever changing aspects of our lifestyles and how those facets are influenced over time, whether intentionally or not.

