

Desire for Speed and Equality: Women's Olympic Swimwear in the Early Twentieth Century

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Issue

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Olympic swimwear evolved to become more practical for women participating in water sports and allowed them to gain a wider acceptance in the swimming world. Advancements in swimwear design and materials led to the inclusion of additional women's competitive swimming events.

Methodology

This research investigates how the design and materials of early women's swimwear impacted aquatic performance and influenced acceptance of new fashions. For each Olympic Games, a prominent woman competitor was profiled for their choice of swimwear fashion that enabled them to excel in their water event. The influence of these women aquatic athletes' fashion choices enabled the greater society to integrate these swimwear styles for use by the general public. For this work, I referenced historical photographs, documents, books, articles, and consulted with representatives of the United States Olympic Committee.

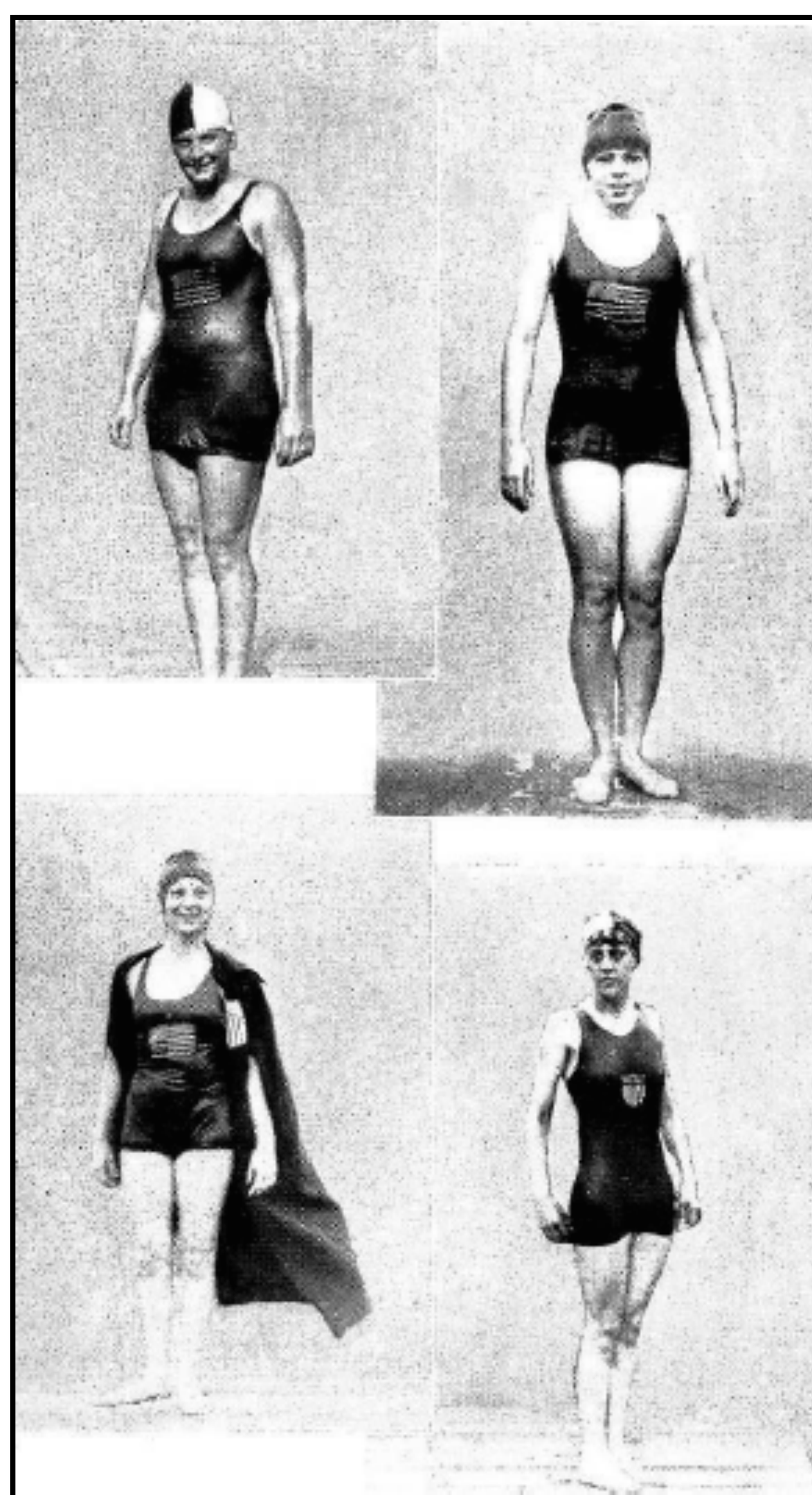


Figure 1: "Four American Mermaids." Photograph. 1920. Photo credit of Report of the American Olympic Committee: Seventh Olympic Games Antwerp, Belgium 1920 by American Olympic Committee.

Research Findings

Turn of the Century – Women wore swimming dresses with same-length bloomers under the dress. When bathing in public, women were also required to wear long stockings and bathing slippers or boots that were calf to knee-length.

1910s - Swimsuits during this time were made from a variety of materials that included flannel, cotton, silk, mohair, and many other fabrics. Colors of the suits were limited to include black, gray, navy, olive, and maroon. In opposition to the societal expectation to cover their bodies, women Olympic competitors chose to wear formfitting suits that were more revealing than attire seen on beaches. Jantzen© used "elastic" or "rib" stitches to add elasticity and suppleness to their fabric.

1920s – In breaking with the tradition of wearing wool swimsuits, swimwear at the 1920 Olympic Games was constructed from various materials. American women were supplied with long black, transparent, mercerized cotton one-piece bathing suits. During the 1920s, American women could be issued a citation, receive a fine, or be physically taken from public beaches for exposing their legs.

1930s - Some swimmers still chose to wear the traditional wool and cotton bathing suits, but many competitors opted to embrace wearing suits made of silk since this fabric allowed swimmers to go through the water faster. Prior to the 1932 Games, new advancements in competitive swimwear were made possible with the introduction of Lastex™, a stretchy, rubber yarn textile used for plain or patterned swimsuits. American sportswear designer Claire McCardell used material from jersey fabric drawstring bags that were fast drying.

1940s – To help with the war effort, Americans made their own swimsuits since most synthetic fabrics were rationed. The two-piece swimsuit became popular during the war since it required the use of less material. After WWII, Lastex™ and nylon would be used together in women's competitive swimwear to increase speed in the water. Competitive swimmers went on to wear these synthetic suits when providing aquatic entertainment in films, live shows, and fashion publications.

Conclusions

Innovations in swimwear designs and materials enabled women swimmers to enhance their speed and precision in the water. By choosing to wear these new swimwear fashions, female athletes have influenced the public's acceptance of these styles. Throughout the twentieth century, competitive swimwear evolved along with the advancement of women's equality in the sport.

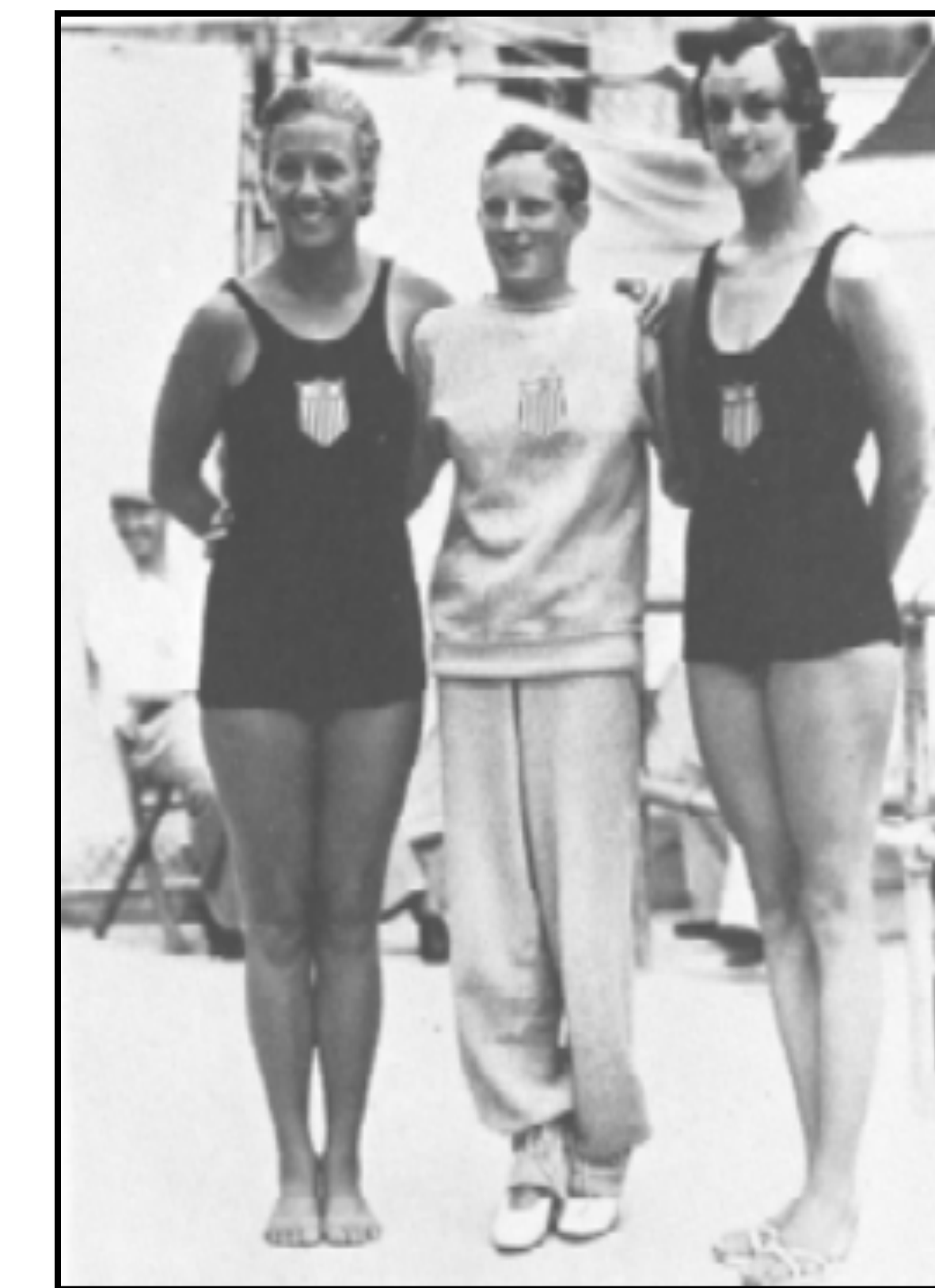


Figure 2: "1932 three-meter springboard medalists." Left to right: Georgia Coleman, Katherine Rawls and Jane Fauntz. Photo credit of *The Games of the Xth Olympiad, Los Angeles, 1932, Official Report*.



Figure 3: "Claire McCardell Bathing Suit 1944." Designed by Claire McCardell. Manufactured by Townley Frocks. 1944. Wool, synthetic. Photo credit of Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute.

References

Full bibliography is available in the completed thesis by contacting the author or the George Mason University Library. Photo credits are listed under each figure.

Acknowledgements

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