Get Dressed for the World's Largest Party: Olympic Uniforms through the Ages

Patricia Reymond
Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage, Lausanne
Switzerland

Abstract

On 23 July 2021, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games will begin for a two-week sports and cultural festival, placing the metropolis at the centre of worldwide attention. Athletes, officials, teams working for the organisers, media crews, and representatives of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and sports federations will gather in the Olympic venues. This diverse population has something in common: the adoption of distinctive Olympic uniforms. They have a purpose: visually communicating the event, they convey national identity and identify the wearers' function, granting them access to the venues. They must allow people to perform their role, while making them look attractive and proud to represent their country. The Olympic Games are now one of the biggest national branding showcases in the world. This paper will present how designers like André Courrèges, Issey Miyake, Eiko Ishioka, Stella McCartney and Christian Louboutin/Sporty Henri have dealt with the constraints of reinventing uniforms that connect tradition and modernity.

Content

Come as You Are

At early Olympic Games, participants wore their own sports apparel or suits, even during the protocol events and ceremonies. As it was important to identify the different populations present in the venues, distinctive wearable signs like badges, armbands or bibs, and colour-coded clothing were used. The best examples are the function badges that were issued since the first Games held in Athens in 1896. The successive organisers produced badges with coloured ribbons associated with the sports or venues. This tradition survived until the 1980s, long after the introduction of specific uniforms. The development of national team uniforms reflects the evolution of the ceremonies. Introduced for the first time at the London 1908 Olympic Games, the athletes' parade had a clear impact on the development of formal uniforms, by giving spectators and the media the opportunity to compare the delegations. The wearing of competitive clothing shifted in the 1920s to uniforms emblazoned with a patriotic touch. At the Opening Ceremony of the 1924 Games held in Paris, many delegations adopted a national uniform. The Official Report noted that this sartorial diversity punctuated the 2km-long parade

which would have been annoying otherwise (*Les Jeux de la VIIIe Olympiade*, Paris 1924, p. 81), even though white and dark coloured outfits dominated during the first half of the last century.

Figure 1. *Jacket and beret worn by British shooter Charles Willott at the London 1948 Olympic Games, pictured with function badges of various sports. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

There is no clear-cut time when Olympic workers started to wear specific outfits. Not surprisingly, their adoption began in the 1920s with those playing a protocol role or in direct contact with the public, like the ceremony heralds or stadium doormen. The 1936 Games held on German soil were somehow a threshold, with the introduction of distinctive uniforms for many functions like the ticket sellers, guides and musicians, predominantly dressed in neat white suits. After World War II, the Olympic Games grew in importance and size, and their administration required ever more specialised profiles. In the 1970s, staff uniforms came in different styles and colours to help distinguish between the numerous functions. Paradoxically, and despite the strong commitment of the designers of this time to develop informal and relaxed outfits, the diversity showed the implicit hierarchy between the workers. By contrast, current organising committees favour uniformity. Volunteers and paid staff wear very similar gear, if not the same uniform. While in the 1960s, the recommendation given by former organisers was to avoid the bright colours normally used by national teams (Duncan, 1973, p. 83), the following decades saw an explosion of colour. As a recent example, the London 2012 volunteer uniform mixed beige with bright colours like red and purple as a vibrant celebration of British eccentricity, pop music and royalty.

Figure 2. *The London 2012 volunteer uniform with its patterned epaulettes. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

The Right Stuff

Olympic uniforms are designed to fulfil many functions at the same time: to distinguish insiders from outsiders, evoke specific feelings and behaviours and, of course, protect the wearers from shocks and extreme conditions. They reflect the trends in the sporting goods industry, the

budgetary constraints, the hygiene and safety requirements, the moral codes of the time and the brand strategy adopted by the nations and outfitters (Terret, 2015, p. 51). A ban on advertising or any political messaging on the sports and formal clothing applies but allows a strictly controlled manufacturer's identification (Borgers, 1993, p. 323). The Olympic Games have distinguished themselves from other international sports events by developing a strong ceremonial and a consistent brand experience known as the Look of the Games, which is unique to each edition. It is reinforced by the clean-venue policy of no advertising and no propaganda in the venues. Both policies were developed in the 1960s to offer a neutral environment. In that context, the various people stand out better and viewers may identify their role at first glance. Because they are usually visually linked to the event, by bearing the date, the name of the country or the host city, uniforms also serve as mementos. As such, they are often autographed, offered to fans or traded among the participants. 1932 Olympian Evelyne Hall Adams recalled: *"We even changed uniforms back and forth. I changed with one of the German girls, Tilly Fleischer. I wore her costume for pictures, and she wore mine (…) This was only for pictures because we only had one uniform and couldn't trade them..."* (Hall Adams, 1988, pp. 13-14).

Figure 3. *Uniform worn by the Mexican 1968 welcome hostesses, designed by Angie Amrein in line with the Games' logotype. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

Supplying clothes could be a great expense for National Olympic Committees (NOCs) because delegation members are usually dressed from head to toe. Olympic fashion for the athletes takes two forms: the uniforms worn by delegation members outside competitions and the sports clothing that follows the rules of the International Sports Federations (IFs). While the delegation uniforms are usually supplied by one outfitter, the sports clothes and accessories are provided by different specialised brands, which explains why the sports outfits of one delegation may have different looks. Some sports provide opportunities to wear artistic costumes or allow customised accessories, such as decorated helmets. Others strictly control the fabrics and materials, the cut, fit and flare or even the colours to guarantee more safety and fairness, as several research projects stressed the impact of colours in judging sports. For instance, for many years, the wrestling IF regulated the uniform colours to distinguish between the contestants. Only all-red and all-blue singlets were permitted. But recently the Federation has allowed patterns and a wider range of colours to evoke national pride among the wrestlers, as well as the fans.

Figure 4. *Red singlet worn by Armenian-born wrestler Alfred Ter-Mkrtchyan, competing for the Unified Russian Team at the Barcelona 1992 Games with that of his fellow citizen, Arsen Julfalakyan, used at the Rio 2016 Games. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

Challenged Uniformity

After World War II, the Olympic Games became a field of play for fashion diplomacy, and this style exercise has grown in importance with the increasing media impact of each edition. The wearing of uniforms was challenged sporadically during the Cold War. In 1955, German sports journalist Ernst Hornickel suggested the use of the Olympic rings to replace the national flags on team outfits ("Concerning the excessive display of nationalism", 1956, p. 63), an idea partly experimented with for the emblem of the united German team in the 1960s. In 1972, Otl Aicher, the head designer of the Munich Olympic Games, found the use of uniforms too militaristic and suggested they be withdrawn from the athletes' parade (Large, 2012, p. 142). The athletes embody the image of their nation. To protect the team's representative image and ensure the athletes' exemplarity, several NOCs issued rules of conduct like the smoking prohibition for Finnish athletes in the 1950s (Jantunen, 1996). Teams in uniform are highly recognisable and therefore exposed, as noted by Malcolm Metcalf, who competed at the Berlin 1936 Olympic Games*: "One day, Bartlett, Terry and I were in Berlin and we had all our uniforms on, so everyone would know who we were. We were signing autographs in a little place where we were eating."* (Metcalf, 1988, p. 17).

Figure 5. *A rowing shirt of the Unified German team at the Rome 1960 Games, with the tracksuit jacket worn by the West German athletes in Mexico City in 1968. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

Several designers have left their mark on Olympic fashion. Among them was André Courrèges, an enthusiastic sportsman. However, his experience of designing the Munich 1972 staff uniforms turned out to be a partial victory. The French couturier had been encouraged to answer the tender by Swiss journalist and environmentalist Franz Weber. The organisers wanted to give these Games an informal and relaxed character, with the intention to distance them from the Berlin Games in 1936 held under the auspices of the Nazi regime. But Courrèges was annoyed when Otl Aicher presented the requirements: the bidders were requested to find

their inspiration from Bavarian folklore and safari style, and the colour palette had been already defined, with light blue, green, lavender, orange and silver grey, excluding his favourite colour, red. Nonetheless, he took up the challenge, alongside Daniel Hechter, Louis Féraud, Nino Cerruti and several German designers. Courrèges won the tender with his sketches of practical outfits incorporating overalls, baseball caps, miniskirts and lumber jackets (Asaria, 1972). But he was immediately forced into making concessions, ranging from accepting a very modest fee, the close supervision of the Organising Committee's President, Willi Daume, who personally monitored the development of any design, the exclusivity granted to German manufacturers, and, on the top of that, the inclusion of folkloric costumes in the set of uniforms. The dirndl worn by the welcome hostesses outraged Courrèges' aesthetic sense, but has been recorded for posterity, thanks to the hostess and future Queen of Sweden Sylvia Sommerlath portrayed in this costume.

Figure 6. *The light blue outfit worn by the security guards and the dirndl costume of the welcome hostesses at the Munich 1972 Games. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

A Japanese Approach to Olympic Fashion?

In 1992, Issey Miyake designed the official uniform for Lithuania, which had just acquired independence from the Soviet Union. The idea came from Dr Edward Domanskis, a Californian plastic surgeon of Lithuanian descent who had become the team's physician. After the Opening Ceremony of the previous Winter Games in Albertville, where the team paraded in dull dark suits, Domanskis took the initiative of asking Miyake to create something more artistic. The answer was immediately positive: "*I was always attracted to the functional beauty and energic style of athletic clothing. The Lithuanian's enthusiastic request prompted me to try to create a uniform whose design theme was the three colours of the Lithuanian flag (…) I would not be able to compete in the actual Games, but I was delighted to be offered the chance to participate through this project."* (Press release by the NOC of Lithuania, 18 June 1992). The outfit consisted of a pleated jacket, T-shirt, loose trousers, cap and trainers. The jacket was the masterpiece of this outfit with its large hood forming a banner with the country name, when unzipped, but could also be rolled into a high collar. It included some innovative details, such as lightweight polyester fabric, oversize zippers, and mesh inserts inside to keep it cool. The NOC struggled to fund the uniform, as the budget of the Olympic delegation was very limited. To reduce the costs, Miyake designed the outfit for free and obtained the support of several Japanese companies, including the sporting goods manufacturer Mizuno, to provide the fabrics and handle the production. The couturier was delighted at how quickly the Lithuanians adopted their uniform, wearing their collars differently from how he had thought. The small Baltic country did not go unnoticed wearing this New Age outfit!

Figure 7. *The Lithuanian parade uniform at the Barcelona 1992 Games*
In 2002. *© 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

In 2002, Japanese sports manufacturer Descente received the commission to design sports outfits and uniforms for several delegations at the Salt Lake City Winter Games. Descente made the daring choice of recruiting Academy Award-winning costume designer Eiko Ishioka. After her previous work on productions like Francis Ford Coppola's “Bram Stoker's Dracula” and Tarsem Singh's “The Cell”, it was a very joyful challenge but Ishioka approached it with her usual criteria which aimed to create a positive psychological impact on the wearers: *“I thought about the camera on the athletes as they were holding up a gold medal (…) The goal is to thrill the audience”* (Pearlman, 2002). She conducted a study of Olympic Games history and looked at Descente’s archives. She was highly impressed by the gold suit worn by US speedskater Eric Heiden, who had won five gold medals at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympic Games and also consulted top athletes. With their expectations in mind, she created the Concentration coat, a cocoon meant to help athletes rid themselves of distractions before competition. The formal uniform worn by the Swiss delegation was made from Morphotex, an optically-coloured fabric selected by Descente (Shuichi Sano, Kathryn Johnston, 2019). At first, the designer was not convinced by the sample she received, but Sano was determined to win her over, so he took a 10m piece to New York where she lived. There, at night, using the taxi headlight, he showed her the ability of the fabric to refract light and create the desired lustrous surface colour. The unisex suit and long coat worn by the Swiss delegation received high praise in Switzerland. It also attracted international fame through the young and charismatic double Olympic champion Simon Ammann, who was nicknamed Harry Potter by the US media.

Figure 8. *The Concentration coat and uniform worn by the Swiss delegation at the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Games. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

Fashionable Team Spirit

Since 2004, Stella McCartney had partnered with Adidas to create women's sports apparel for golf, running, yoga and so on. When selected to develop the complete Olympic kit of Team GB for the 2012 Olympic Games, she reached a level that few designers have achieved: designing the apparel for all participants across all competitions. She confessed that it was a more exciting challenge than designing the formal uniform to be worn during the ceremonies (Gibson, 2012). For the London 2012 Games, she delivered a deconstructed Union Jack flag pattern, that some people criticised as "too blue". For the 2016 Games, McCartney made an unexpected choice of a bold heraldic design with large GB letters. Adidas commissioned the College of Arms to design a coat of arms featuring the floral emblems of the four nations forming Great Britain and the British lion, which is a symbol of strength and athleticism. The coat of arms came with a Latin banner calling for unity and team spirit. It was later reworked by digital artist Quentin Peacock to be applied on every piece of the kit. All pieces were different and could be combined. The couturier paid great attention to details such as pockets and zippers for more practicality. Adidas introduced technical improvements for all national teams they supplied: the fabrics were around 10 per cent lighter than those worn in London and included titanium fibres woven into yarn to draw heat away from the body, as well as aluminium cooling dots. The coat of arms was McCartney's idea, and she had to impose her view. Through this uniform and its highly patriotic design, she wanted to help the athletes to feel like a team. The need was best expressed by rugby player Tom Mitchell: *"The kit is important because it unites us as a team. When you're walking around the Village, it creates that immediate link."* (Cartner-Morley, 2016).

Figure 9. *The Team GB uniforms of London 2012 and Rio 2016. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

For the 2016 Olympic Games held in Rio, Christian Louboutin teamed up with the French e-concept store Sporty Henri to support the Cuban delegation by supplying the athletes with a parade uniform. He was willing to pay tribute to Cuba – an island for which he has a special affection. The different outfits were designed in close collaboration with the Cuban athletes, whose energy and joy of living, despite the hard training, impressed the two designers. The starting point of the kit was the national flag, but they wanted to create an outfit which could be chic and minimalist. A former professional handball player himself, Henri Tai of Sporty Henry wanted to create silhouettes that expressed the Cuban sense of elegance and sublimate all bodies whatever their morphology. He explained that the clothes had to enhance bodies that bore no relation to classic measurements. *"It was our duty to make them appear fitted and flattering."* Drawing inspiration from the rich Cuban cultural heritage, he found inspiration in the typical guayabera shirt (Henri Tai, 2019). A Parisian atelier created sharply-tailored jackets, in red for men and beige for women, which contrasted with interchangeable trousers, shorts and skirts. The jackets bore the nation's flag on the breast pocket and a five-pointed star used as a lucky emblem on the back. Many fitting and retouching sessions were organised. The final touch

was added with red-soled sneakers and sandals that completed the outfits. The designs were created solely for use by the athletes of the Cuban delegation to celebrate their participation to the Rio Games and not put on sale or retail, which is nowadays uncommon.

Figure 10. *The Rio 2016 Cuban uniform for women and men, styled with Louboutin sneakers and sandals. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

A Catwalk Like No Other

Olympic kits must balance delicate elements like comfort in mainly outdoor conditions and the wearers' performance, while making them look attractive and proud to represent their country. NOCs take this aspect seriously, and the delegations have often been dressed by iconic brands closely associated with their country, such as Ralph Lauren for the United States, DSquared2 for Canada or Lacoste for France, to mention a few recent cases. The public presentation is usually carefully staged, with athletes posing like models. For the outfitters, it gives good media exposure to their products, but the challenge may be risky. The unveiling usually receives considerable attention from the media, and the critics often raise the level of public expectation. What are the key factors in designing successful Olympic kits? Most athletes would answer comfort, as outlined by French swimmer Monique Berlioux who recalled her discomfort during the 1948 Opening Ceremony: *"Christian Dior had launched the new look with long skirts, and ... for the uniforms the Federation had chosen the long skirts, together with a jacket made of good wool, very strong. And the sun was shining terribly, and so we were in those uniforms, which was quite… melting"* (Berlioux, 2013, p. 6). Henri Tai goes further, by mentioning a good knowledge of the national culture, the ability to determine the identity codes of the country, the use of quality materials that make sense, the creation of strong and emblematic designs or pieces, a close collaboration with the athletes and the selection of a manufacturer able to produce uniforms that fit all athletes.

Figure 11. *Details matter: the interior of the Albertville 1992 Finnish uniform jacket celebrated the winter beauty of Lapland, while the lining of the tracksuit worn by the 2016 Italian delegation bears the first lines of the national anthem. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

By nature, uniforms raise questions about a sense of belonging, individuality and conformity (Hertz, 2007, p. 43). For complete adherence, designers shall not only take into account the wearers' morphologies and expectations in terms of performances, but also understand their vision as comrades, as citizens and role models. The outfits "speak out" to the individuals who make up the multicultural nations that most countries have become in the 21st century. Consequently, the latest trends in Olympic clothing are mix 'n' match, allowing for customisation and the reinterpretation of national symbols and colours to create complicity between teammates and supporters. Developed to be seen by a large audience or only accessible through close-up views, the designs celebrate national identity. They are so familiar in the Olympic fashion repertoire that the public may notice their absence at first glance. As a demonstration, this paper concludes with the shirts successively worn by South Sudanese refugee Guor Marial, who competed as an Independent Olympic Athlete at the London 2012 Games and under his new country's flag at the Rio 2016 Games.

Figure 12. *The shirts of Guor Marial competing as an Independent Olympic Athlete in 2012 and as a South Sudanese representative in 2016. © 2019 International Olympic Committee / Grégoire Peter*

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