

## **Striking Black**

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### **Abstract**

Colours play an important role in sports. They enable players to distinguish their teammates from their opponents and strengthen their sense of belonging, while allowing spectators to recognise their own teams and identify with them by wearing replica kits in the same colours. This cohesive function is so important that many sports teams are named after the colours they adopt. In the world of sports, black is linked with objects, like the black belt in martial arts; with roles, for example the referee, who is commonly known as the 'man in black'; or with teams, like New Zealand's rugby players, the All Blacks. This paper will explore several uses and meanings of black worn in a sporting context.

### **Content**

1. Sport gets some colour
2. A strong colour
3. Science versus perception
4. Power of black

### **Sports gets some colour**

In an article about colours in sports, French historian Michel Pastoureau wrote that white, the colour of purity, and black, the colour of dignity, were the only acceptable colours for sports clothing in the early 20th century. This is a legacy of the Protestant Reform, which strongly influenced industrial societies. Successively, shades of blue, particularly dark blue, made the transition, before the introduction of red and brighter colours in the interwar period (Pastoureau, 1990, 11-12). These observations hold true for some sports but less for others. For instance, most football clubs chose their colours at the end of the 19th century, without excluding vivid colours like red or garnet. This article presents past cases of competitive sports at international events like the Olympic Games, where team uniforms were worn. The type and quantity of available resources to undertake this research presented difficulties. There are only a few surviving sports clothes from the first half of the 20th century, but many black-and-white photographs. With these, it may be difficult to establish if uniforms were actually black or dark-coloured, or if they were grey or had faded to black after being washed

several times. It is therefore very important to compare photographic documentation with written sources (**Fig. 1**).

At the beginning of the 20th century, white and off-white colours predominated, mainly in sports enjoyed by the elite, like athletics, tennis, and rowing. Interestingly, white was adopted by teams from every continent and not only by Western countries. Wearing white was a sign of both moral and social superiority, indicating that the wearer had the money to purchase special clothing to practice sports, and to have it frequently and effectively washed. Sweat is less visible on white clothing, and at the time, it was unseemly to lose one's cool or perspire in public. The colour was also very common in the parade uniforms worn for ceremonies. In contrast, white was less predominant in popular sports such as football and boxing and less imbued with Anglo-Saxon traditions, such as cycling, wrestling and gymnastics. For practical reasons, white lost its top spot in both winter and aquatic sports, for which the body—especially women's bodies—had to be covered up prudishly. In the first half of the 20th century, the official swimming costumes were black or dark coloured, even if that did not prevent them from becoming transparent once wet. Swimmers generally wore underclothes beneath their costumes, and until the 1930s, they would not be seen without a bathrobe when not in the pool, except when posing for photos. This explains the pile of bathrobes beside the British female swimmers at the 1912 Games in Stockholm (**Fig. 2**).

Whereas other colours made their debut in the majority of sports, fencing moved the other way. Until the start of the 20th century, it was not unusual to see fencers in dark colours. In his fencing manual, French author Ambroise Baudry compared some competitors in white breeches and silk stockings to brides, while he described the black velvet costume as 'chivalrous and romantic' (Baudry, 1893, 40). The choice of black seems prosaically linked to the way hits were counted, as these were sometimes marked with white chalk (Amateur Fencers League of America, 1895). Then the system of using black ink spots was introduced, which required wearing a white jacket so that the judges could see the hits. Black clothing gradually disappeared from the field of play to become the distinctive mark of a master of arms—black being the symbol of excellence and respect for tradition. The female fencer dressed in black on the poster for the fencing competitions at the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris is more of a fencing allegory than an accurate depiction of a female athlete, not least given that women were not allowed to compete in Olympic fencing until 1924 (Timmers, 2012, 14). If all male competitors had already adopted the all-white outfit at that time, several women still adorned black skirts. The adoption of electronic systems during the 20th century had no impact on this tradition of wearing white.

## **A strong colour**

Black is associated with positive values in several cultures, albeit with some nuances: it symbolises work, rigour and mastery, qualities needed by martial arts practitioners. The father of modern judo, Jigoro Kano, initially chose two colours, white and black—other sources mention brown, too—because he thought that pupils would be more motivated if their progress was marked by intermediate levels associated with different colours (Nicolas

Messner, blog, 2020). In a 1930s text, Kano explained that he was inspired by the 'Menkyo' reward method, consisting of rolled certificates of different colours. In the mid-1920s, Kano's British disciples devised a more gradual system, with colours believed to have been inspired by billiard ball colours. Kano further developed a belt colour scheme using pale blue, white, brown, purple, red, and black and established a special white-striped black belt for women (Callan-Spenn, 2019, 118). Until 2000, only white judogi were used at the Olympic Games, and competitors were required to wear an additional white or red belt to differentiate between the two contestants. Since then, white and blue judogi have been implemented, and judokas wear their black belt alone. Considered by many as a symbol of gender segregation, the white-striped black belt was no longer used in international competitions after these Games (**Fig. 3**).

Since the 19th century, black has been chosen for the referee's outfit in football and other team sports, as it is associated with the uniforms of representatives of authority and justice in Western societies (Pastoureau, 1990, 15). The black or black-and-white-striped shirt has thus become their distinctive mark, with exceptions such as in boxing, where the referee generally wears white to better blend into the small enclosed area of the ring. Paradoxically, black allows referees to be both easier to identify, and invisible amidst players wearing more brightly coloured shirts. That is precisely the intention, as rules are imposed not on black but on discretion. A 1952 FIFA regulation required a referee to avoid 'anything that savours of the ostentatious or flamboyant,' and even suggested a cream or white blazer to avoid clashes with players wearing dark colours (Clément Leminoux, email, 2023) (**Fig. 4**).

New Zealand's rugby team is named after the black color: the All Blacks. Their uniform for international tournaments has been completely black since 1893. This was the choice of their captain, Thomas Rangiwahia Ellison, inspired by the jersey of a team of Māori players. It was claimed by the media that this choice was linked to the symbolic value of black, but no reliable sources can attest to that. It cannot be ruled out that black was chosen simply because it was cheap, and was accepted because it did not clash with English clubs' colours. But it is also possible that its success was partly due to its positive significance for both British settlers and the Māori. The *Daily Mail* stated in an article published in 1905 that their attitude and attire made a lasting impression, partly because of their "stable and unrelieved costume" (Palenski, 2009, 25). The team's success, in terms of both sport and its contribution to national unity, has ensured that black is still used for New Zealand national uniforms, with black-and-grey and black-and-white variations (**Fig. 5**).

### **Science versus perception**

As a colour also associated with death in many cultures, black is seen as intimidating. The All Blacks are said to be in mourning for their opponents. Wearing a black outfit is often a tactical choice. French fencer Louis Mérignac reputedly wore a black outfit to confuse his opponents by fooling their perception of distance (Tavernier, 188, 135). In the 1950s, Soviet Union goalkeeper Lev Yashin, and his Hungarian contemporary, Gyula Grosics, were both known for their dark outfits, which earned them the nickname 'Black Panther.' Reputed for his imposing presence in goal, Yashin was also known as the 'Black Spider,' even though his clothing was in fact very dark blue. More recently, Chinese champion Lijia Xu explained that

many sailors wear black to make themselves harder to see for the judges tasked with monitoring the athletes at a distance and penalising prohibited actions such as pumping more than once on each wave (Lijia Xu, personal communication, 2023).

The influence of colours worn by athletes on their results has been the subject of numerous sports psychology studies. Researchers Mark G. Frank and Thomas Gilovich showed in an article published in 1988 that players in American football and ice hockey teams with black uniforms were more often penalised than the others (Frank, Gilovich, 1988, 83-84). How is this to be interpreted? Do black clothes make the people wearing them more aggressive, or is this the biased perception of referees? Does the phenomenon also apply to other sports outside the United States? Since then, a number of studies have sought to understand what was happening. But a critical review published in 2020 concluded that there was little hard evidence for this colour influence, pointing out the methodological limits of several studies and how much their results had been hyped by the media, eager for new strategies and performances (Goldschmied, Furley and Bush, 2020, 16-17). The subject is still under discussion for black, red, and blue, especially in combat sports where contestants traditionally have to wear only two distinctive colours. Rules are evolving. Recently, United World Wrestling has allowed national teams to endorse a broader colour palette to 'honour' their national colours through light and dark versions of the same competition uniform. The new scheme replaces the once-standard red and blue uniforms, but there are still rules to avoid competitors wearing the same colour range. It is therefore recommended to combine blue with black, grey, green, and purple for the dark version (United World Wrestling, 2017) (**Fig. 6**).

### **The power of black**

As Pastoureau pointed out, the increasing predominance of blue in many aspects of modern life limited black to more formal, elegant occasions or more marginal use. This was also true in sports. Black became a symbol of refinement in the 1920s, and even today it is chosen by athletes looking to highlight their elegance and good taste in artistic disciplines such as figure skating, artistic swimming, and rhythmic gymnastics. On the other extreme, black is also associated with a kind of non-conformism, and adopted by urban sports such as breaking. Adopted because it was practical and associated with the virtues praised in sports, black is popular with many brands and designers because of its graphic qualities. It highlights designs, flatters body shapes, and goes with all other colours, especially gold, a colour associated with victory. Today, black remains common in formal uniforms, especially for teams whose national flag features the colour, or when it has a symbolic value, like the '*qara shañraq*', literally "black ceiling," worn by the Kazakh team flagbearers at the Beijing 2022 Games. In this case, black is a reference to the Kazakh tradition of the youngest child, who, by looking after his parents, becomes the pillar of the family and guardian of the home and its traditions (Violetta Ivanova, email, 2023) (**Fig. 7**).

Black is also linked with innovation and new materials such as carbon fibre. For instance, iconic swimwear like the black polyurethane suit launched in 2009 and banned at international competitions has created a strong link between black and performance for many swimmers. Black predominates in this sport, despite the manufacturers' efforts to offer a

broader range of colours or make black more subtle with the introduction of patterns or the combination of matte and glossy textures. The popular superhero culture that has influenced sportswear has also encouraged the adoption of head-to-toe black. The controversial black outfit that Serena Williams wore at the French Open in 2018 was seen as a reference to the superhero movie *Black Panther* by Ryan Coogler. The American tennis player explained how this black suit, reminiscent of the T'Challa character, gave her a feeling of empowerment, like a warrior on the court, as she returned to the professional circuit after giving birth to her daughter. She was fully aware of the effect her outfit could have in a sport that has long made white its colour (Williams, 2021, 10) (**Fig. 8**).

Black and white were long seen as the most hygienic and respectable colours, making them ideal for close-fitting clothing. No wonder that sport, which was at the time in search of recognition, also adopted them. But these two colours imposed a uniformity that was unsuitable for sports competitions, particularly international multisport competitions like the Olympic Games. The increasing media coverage, public expectations in terms of clarity and identification, nationalism and, later, marketing strategies accelerated the introduction of other colours to Olympic fashion, first with national colours and then with an increasingly wide range of other colours and shades. Black has retained its place among the colour palette of sports clothing, either in touches or as a head-to-toe total look in order to stand out.

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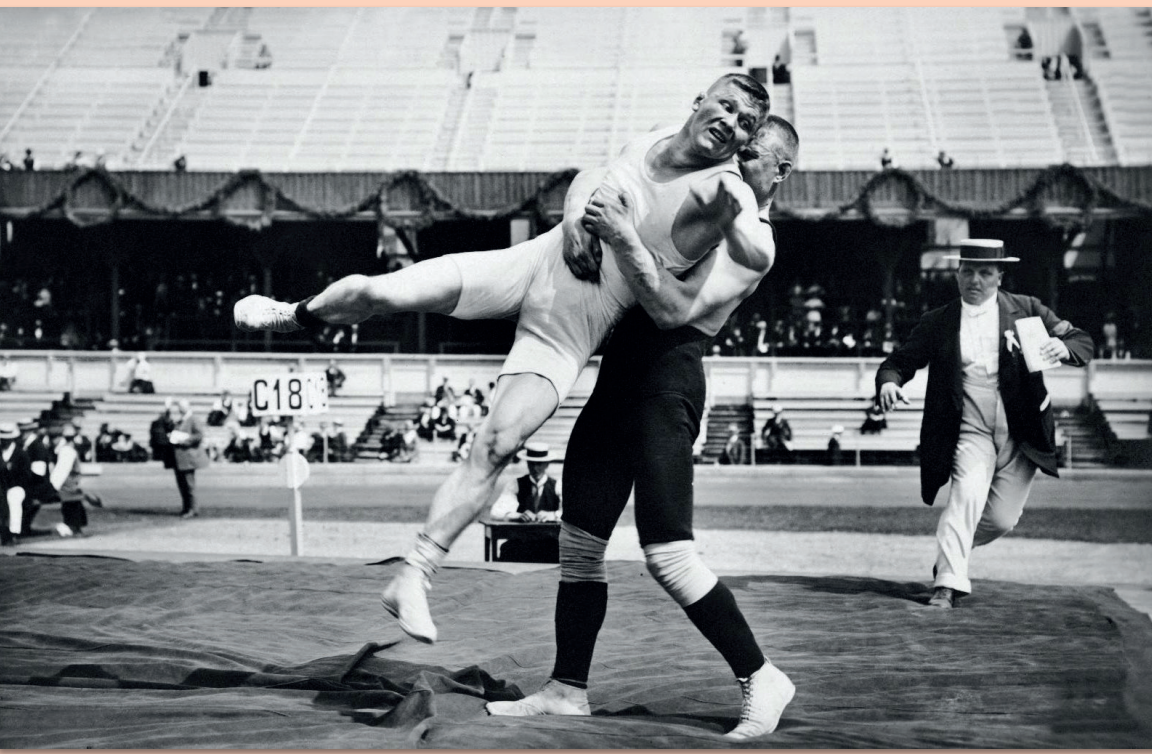
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**Fig. 1** Stockholm, 1912, Martin KLEIN (Russia), 2nd, against Alfred ASIKAINEN (Finland), 3rd, in the men's middleweight Greco-Roman wrestling event.

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**Fig. 2**

Stockholm, 1912, Isabella Mary MOORE, Jennie FLETCHER, Annie SPEIRS and Irene STEER posing beside the pool.

© 1912 / IOC





**Fig. 3**

Atlanta, 1996, Isabelle SCHMUTZ (Switzerland) who wore a white-striped black belt facing her opponent in the women's judo 48-52kg (half-lightweight) event.

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**Fig. 4**

Seoul, 1988, referee announcing the additional time during the final match between Brazil and the Soviet Union.

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**Fig. 5**

Rio, 2016, New Zealand's rugby team performing a haka.

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**Fig. 6**

Tokyo, 2020, Aline ROTTER FOCKEN (Germany), 1st (dark), versus Maria Adeline GRAY (USA), 2nd (light), in the women's freestyle wrestling -76kg event.

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**Fig. 7**

Beijing, 2022, Abzal AZHGALIYEV and Yekaterina AIDOVA carried the national flag in the costumes designed by Violetta Ivanova.

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**Fig. 8**

Beijing, 2008, Katie HOFF (USA) wearing a swimsuit designed by Speedo/Comme des Garçons.

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