

Kiss and cry: the power of costumes in top-level artistic sports competitions

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Abstract

Contrary to most participants who compete in team uniform, figure skaters, rhythmic gymnasts and artistic swimmers wear unique custom-made costumes. These costumes need to be in harmony with the choreography, meet cultural expectations and comply with the sport's regulations. Their importance is reflected in the interest shown by the media and fans.

Commonly named kiss and cry in reference to the kisses exchanged and tears shed there, the area where the athletes wait for their marks provides a good opportunity for people to see the costumes outside the competition. It gives a close-up view of details that are not visible in the heat of the action. The paper focuses on several artistic costumes collected at the Olympic Games. Their re-contextualisation with the help of various sources, combined with a closer look at cuts, materials, and details, provides a better understanding of the constraints that prevail when they are made. This paper explores how the athletes choose them, how it can give them confidence and what impact it may have on the reception and scoring.

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The battle of the Carmens

A kiss and cry area was set up for the first time at the Olympics in Sarajevo in 1984, soon becoming one of the preferred spots of the television crews eager to capture the competitive climax. Four years later, at the Calgary 1988 Winter Olympics, it served as the backdrop to the duel between Katarina Witt, the darling of the East German communist regime, and Debi Thomas from the United States. They were the two favourites, and their rivalry turned into the so-called Battle of the Carmens, as both had chosen Bizet's music for their free programme. The red costume worn by Witt is one of the most iconic costumes in figure skating history.

In fact, it is a typical competition attire with its minimalist skirt and sleeves with finger loops. However, the choice of the colours and the well-positioned ruffles gave Witt a flamenco dancer's look (**Fig.1**). "The bells at the beginning of my music transform me into Carmen immediately," recalled the champion on her website. She started her programme with three jumps before moving to a slower, more seductive section. TV commentators painted this as her taking a moment to flirt with the judges, but in fact, it allowed her to catch her breath. The dress was made by Barbara Langer, a master tailor who fitted out all the skaters from Karl-Marx-Stadt, now Chemnitz. Coach Jutta Mueller had the last word on Witt's costumes (Barbara Langer, personal communication, 2022). After the fittings, the costumes were

tested on ice. For safety purposes, Langer sewed everything twice, because skaters get penalised with a score deduction if anything falls on the ice.

Witt obviously wore a garment under the transparent bodice and hid a knee bandage under her tights. During her career, she was repeatedly criticised for her sexy costumes by some Western officials and media outlets. The feathery skirt-less blue leotard she wore for the short programme led the International Skating Union to issue the so-called “Katarina Rule”, specifying that skirts had to cover the athlete’s hips and posterior. Despite being Witt’s strongest contender, Thomas refused to enter into the controversy; “I have a short programme outfit (a unitard) that I think is great, but a lot of people might think it is bizarre”, she explained to the press (Hersh 1988). In fact, the rule that was in force until 2003 concerned the wearing of a unitard as well.



Fig. 1. Katarina Witt, Calgary 1988 Olympic champion © 1988 / IOC / MACKSON, Richard

Like fire and ice

According to the International Skating Union’s regulations, competitive clothing must be modest, dignified and appropriate for athletic competition. The text outlines that it should not be garish or theatrical but reflect the theme of the music that accompanies the routine (rule 501). The Renaissance-style costumes worn by Gwendal Peizerat and Marina Anissina, playing Romeo and Juliet to Prokofiev’s music at the Nagano 1998 Olympics meet these criteria (**Fig. 2**). The classical costumes were specifically designed by Natalia Bolshakova to create a contrast with the innovative choreography (Natalia Bolshakova, email to author, 2022). The skaters started interpreting Shakespeare’s story from the end. The programme began with Juliet waving the dagger with which she kills herself and Romeo lying dead on the ice. The final lift evoked the famous balcony scene, but with Anissina unexpectedly lifting her partner. They worked with choreographer Shanti Ruchpaul.

Figure skaters who perform in the pairs or ice dance are more exposed to potential costume malfunctions because their clothing is more likely to catch and tear during lifts. Their costumes must be designed with these constraints in mind and are tested on ice several times. To strengthen the seams of the Swarovski crystals and avoid any incident or loss, Bolshakova waxed the thread before sewing, a technique she learned at the Bolshoi. Her team sewed the costumes practically without fittings, but they fit the athletes perfectly, which was a feat in itself.

Anissina wore tights over her skates, which made her legs look longer, and a long skirt with slit panels for freedom of movement. Gwendal wore tapered trousers and a quilted jacket that the designer lined with a thin synthetic winterizer to give it volume and shape without weighing it down. By choosing these elements, Bolshakova wanted to visually lengthen the athletes. The colour gradient and brilliant rhinestones stood out well on the ice. The designer chose the blue colour to match with the athletes' skin and Anissina's flamboyant hair. Peizerat and his partner formed a contrasting pair but they were complimentary, "like fire and ice" as noted by their coach, Muriel Boucher-Zazoui.



Fig. 2. – Marina Anissina and Gwendal Peizerat, Nagano 1998 bronze medallists in ice dancing © 1998 / IOC

Captain Zebra

Costumes play an important role in an athlete's performance. They serve as a "first impression", as they are seen by the judges and spectators even before the music starts. They often remain the last image. By choosing a costume that really hits the mark, the

athlete may win over the audience. At the same time, as pointed out by designer Mathieu Caron, it should be eye-catching but not distract the spectators' attention from the performance itself (Levy 2022). It is a question of balance, but some athletes managed to make a lasting impression, like Stéphane Lambiel from Switzerland, when he skated to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* at the Turin 2006 Olympics in an outfit considered by many as 'unlikely' (Fig. 3).

Indeed, Lambiel performed on the ice while wearing a zebra-striped one-piece suit. He later told the media that the programme and the costume recounted the story of a zebra discovering snow for the first time. "Well, actually, the costume represents the soul of nature. It has a lot of colour gradients, from cold colours to warm colours – to illustrate that nature has seasons. There is no story to the programme – there's more like an atmosphere, where you can see the different colours of nature," he said (Adams, 2010). Lambiel sketched it himself before having it made by Swiss seamstress Pascale Mueller, who spent many hours making the dyes and decorations according to his instructions. The costume was of great significance for him because it allowed him to express his personality, taste and audacity. The athlete recalled his coach's perplexity when he showed him the costume. It earned him the nickname of Captain Zebra when he became a coach (Vasilevya 2016).



Fig. 3. - Stéphane Lambiel, Turin 2006 silver medallist © 2006 / IOC

Wearing the trousers

Women in the singles and pairs events have been allowed to wear trousers for years, but this was only authorised in June 2022 for ice dance events. However, there are still only a few female competitors who wear trousers at international competitions. Skirts are said to better enhance the body lines and the flexibility required for spins. Furthermore, the rule changes have not altered the cultural expectations that may play a role in the scoring. The image of a ballerina in a sparkling floaty dress remains an ideal for many judges and fans. In any case, trousers need to be tight and offer little air resistance for the skater to be able to jump and complete several rotations (Sivertsen 2022).

Italian skaters Nicole Della Monica and Matteo Guarise have frequently opted for mirroring attire. Their Beijing 2022 costumes were designed by Claudia Germini, whose workshop Blulight provides costumes for roller skating (**Fig. 4**). As usual, they placed their trust in the designer, who received no instructions but was given the music that would be used for their programme, a special edition of *Let It Be*. She selected the colours herself by mixing and hand-painting the outfits to create a connection between the two pieces. The costumes were designed to celebrate the end of the pandemic. “We then created this new costume (...) to represent instead the hope of a better future, hence the choice of the colour yellow illuminated by gold to indicate precisely the light at the end of the dark period,” explained Nicole Della Monica (Arianna Riboni, email to author, 2022).



Fig. 4. Nicole Della Monica and Matteo Guarise, Beijing 2022 competitors in pair © 2022 / IOC / RUTAR, Ubald

Not a mermaid job

Previously known as synchronised swimming, artistic swimming can be considered an extreme sport. Swimmers have to perform five-minute-long acrobatic routines in time to the music, while holding their breath and smiling during the whole performance (Gatineau 2021). When Anastasiya Savchuk and Marta Fiedina won bronze at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Ukraine became only the eighth country to win an Olympic medal in this discipline, which became an Olympic one in 1984.

Many competitors favoured flashy colours to catch the eye of spectators from under the water. The Ukrainians opted for mainly white costumes with red, glittering elements that created a contrast and captured the audience's attention. The flesh-coloured inserts helped to refine their silhouette even further. Artistic swimsuits have a high cut around the hips, offering good freedom of movement. Furthermore, it makes the legs look longer and so the

figures higher, which could bring a few extra points. The material must be as tight-fitting as possible, like a second skin. This prevents the water from entering the swimsuit, which would compromise the figures where the athletes spring out of the water.

The swimsuits worn by the Ukrainian duo were inspired by traditional embroidered shirts (**Fig. 5**). Head coach Svetlana Saidova provided the main inspiration for the costumes (Tarashiuk, email to author, 2022). They were inspired by the music of the routine *The Flying Hearts* (Політ сердець). The leitmotif is two souls that soar over the water like birds in the sky. Their hearts beat in unison because they have a common dream. The floral patterns are the rose, because this flower symbolises love and mercy, and the viburnum, or Kalyna in Ukrainian, which is commonly present in Ukrainian poetry, folk songs, legends and decorative arts. First, a white background pattern was painted over the suit and fixed at high temperature. The red patterns were then painted and decorated with Swarovski rhinestones. More than one month was necessary to hand-make the costumes.



Fig. 5 - Anastasiya Savchuk and Marta Fiedina, Tokyo 2020 bronze medallists in the duet and team events © 2021 / IOC / RUTAR, Ubald

Gun down

Artistic swimwear must match the theme of the music and be attractive, but the regulations state that they should be in “good moral taste” – i.e., not transparent – and not carry any symbol that may be considered offensive (rule GR 5). The specific rules for artistic swimming also include restrictions on hair style and make-up, and a ban on the use of any accessory equipment. Swimmers are only allowed to wear nose clips or plugs. Their costumes must tell a story that is explicit without offending the sensibilities of audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Natalia Bolshakova explained: “If you think about revealing the idea, then working with a swimsuit is as difficult as possible. Using a minimum of funds, with a huge

number of restrictions (for example, you cannot make sleeves), you need to create a costume that would be not only beautiful, but also would convey the artistic image” (Maryanchik 2020).

The swimsuits worn by Pamela Fischer and Anja Nyffeler, representing Switzerland at the London 2012 Olympics, were designed to match the theme of the motion picture, *Sound of Noise* (2010) (Fig. 6). The film tells the story of six musicians who play music illegally in a public space and hold up a bank not for money, but to play the drums on the bank counters. Designer Alla Bogino came up with a costume decorated with a handful of dollars and a man holding a gun. The athletes felt later that these direct references were not appropriate and might not be allowed (Pamela Fischer, personal communication, 2013). Thus, the dollar sign was modified and the gun disappeared.



Fig. 6. Pamela Fischer and Anja Nyffeler, London 2012 competitors in duet © 2012 / IOC

Rocking the audience

Rhythmic gymnastics differs from artistic gymnastics in that competitors wear costumes specifically made for them and perform to music with a sports apparatus. The code of rules includes many clauses regarding the leotard, which must be all in one piece, high-cut and tight-fitting to enable the judges to evaluate the correct position of every part of the body. A skirt is allowed but it must not fall further than the pelvic area over the leotard, tights or the unitard (rule 10). There are also several proscriptions regarding tights, bandages, hair accessories, jewellery, and make-up. Until recently, a rule stated that bandages should be beige, assuming that it was the colour of the gymnasts' skin. Nowadays, it refers to skin colour (Mazumdar 2020).

At the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, Margarita Mamun won gold in the all-around individual final in leotards designed by Svetlana Gerasimova, who runs the Lara workshop in Moscow. Many of Mamun's fans enjoyed finding similarities between her outfits and the creations of Valentino, Elie Saab or Versace. Indeed, Lara stylists do find their inspiration in fashion catwalks, but they start out with the music and the team requirements which specify the

presence of a skirt or sleeves, the colour, etc. All the costumes worn by the Russian gymnasts had to be approved by head coach Irina Viner.

The pink and black one-sleeve leotard worn by Mamun went perfectly with the music choice, *We Will Rock You* by Queen (**Fig. 7**). The glittery crown featured on the back is an explicit allusion to the music. Gerasimova explained: “*We usually do one or two fittings. We try not to distract the gymnast from the training process. The rehearsal is not so much to check how the leotard falls, but to see how it works on the athlete's image*” (Vivaldi 2019). The colours of the leotard matched the green Rio background. Elite sport is a spectacle; designers consider the effect that the costumes have on those watching from afar. Unlike other artistic sports, where the dominant colour of the background is predictable (white ice, blue swimming pool), the platform in rhythmic gymnastics can be any colour. For this reason, Lara designers try to find out in advance what the décor will be.



Fig. 7. Margarita Mamun, Rio 2016 Olympic champion in the individual event, with coach Amina Zaripova © 2016 / IOC

Dressed to shine

What makes an artistic costume suitable for elite sports competition? The designer must create a costume that fits the musical theme, respects wearer's body shape and choreography, and takes into account the rules. It is therefore unsurprising that many designers are former athletes themselves, with a first-hand experience with sportswear. In any case, these costumes are built for performance and require several tests on the field of play to ensure resistance and comfort (Henning 1992). A costume is worn by an athlete in motion. It must accompany these movements and allow the judges to scrutinise the performer's body. Most rules are linked to safety and visibility, but others are rooted in the traditions of each sport. The regulations evolve with time, but the clothing in artistic sports still promotes an idealistic vision of the athletes, with a clear emphasis on looking taller and more slender.

For athletes, costumes have a cost, but are also a means of expression, sometimes even of assertiveness, when they are worn, despite the expectations of the entourage. A smart choice can increase the score for artistic expression and impress the audience. Meanwhile, it is easy to miss the mark, especially as the prescriptions for good taste remain vague in all three sports and the symbols and references conveyed by the costume are objects of varied cultural preferences. Some people even think that extravagant costumes discredit their sport. Indeed, the media often comment more on the costumes than on the choreography. What makes a costume stand out and enter the collective memory of sports? There is no rule, but, for sure, the most memorable costumes are not necessarily the most sophisticated. However, they often have a strong element – a colour or a pattern – that has visually translated the artistic idea behind the performance.

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