

Reflections on the History of Swimwear



> In the early 20th century, technology and practicality came to the fore on parallel tracks, and modern-day swimwear was born. Story has it that a member of the Portland Rowing Club in Oregon prevailed on three of his fellow club members who owned the Portland Knitting Co. to make him rowing trunks suitable for foul-weather days. The one-piece suit was a tipping point for the knitting company that would become known as Jantzen. "It was made of 100 percent virgin wool and weighed 8 pounds when wet," says Carol Alhadeff, Jantzen historian.

By 1915, the company's catalog featured a lighter-weight, rib-stitch bathing suit. "They stretched because of the way they were knit," Alhadeff explains. Encouraged by sales success of these early suits, Jantzen next embarked on a bold marketing plan to "change the idea of going to the water for medicinal and

therapeutic reasons to going for recreational enjoyment," says Alhadeff. Enter Jantzen's Red Diving Girl, with the accompanying slogan, "The suit that changed bathing to swimming." Exquisite in her cap and stockings, she appeared in three national ads that Jantzen ran in *Vogue* and *LIFE* magazines and on billboards in San Francisco and Los Angeles. "In 1921, that was revolutionary," says Alhadeff.

With a little marketing prowess, swimwear was soon on the rise worldwide. In Australia, the MacRae Hosiery company introduced the Racerback swimming suit in 1928, along with the slogan, "Speed on in your Speedos," which led to a name change for the company.

The athletic tank suit of the 1920s freed swimmers' arms and legs from their encumbrances, but suits were still flat knit with little shape. When Lastex rubberized yarn

came along in the 1930s, Jantzen introduced the bra-lift suit for women. Suddenly there was shape and structure. Men got their turn that same decade, with the Jantzen "topper," a tank top easily unzipped from the trunks and removed.

Fashion houses then came to the party, especially in the post-war 1940s when nylon changed swimwear once again, and luxurious miracle yarns produced other velvety synthetics favored in the 1950s and '60s. The French maillot and the two-piece suit dawned for women. Then came Lycra in the 1970s, with swimwear technology making another leap forward.

Through the decades, Jantzen's Red Diving Girl kept pace, undergoing three transitions: sans cap and stockings in 1928, strapless in 1948 and sleekly elongated in 1980. Her marketing star has now set, but she's the girl who helped change it all. <<<

FULL CIRCLE COVERAGE

B.C.: Greeks and Romans wear togas to their "baths."

Middle Ages: Virtually no swimming, nowhere.

Victorian Era: Head-to-toe coverage; modesty reigns.

1913: Portland Knitting Co. (forerunner of Jantzen) produces a woolen bathing suit for a rowing club member.

1920s: Tank suits reveal limbs and provide more freedom of movement in the water. Jantzen devises a marketing campaign to change bathing suits to swimming suits, and begins to promote swimming as a sport. The Red Diving Girl highlights Jantzen's 1921 foray into national advertising. Admirers cut the bathing beauty from the Jantzen catalog cover and pasted her on the windshields of their autos. In Australia, Speedo introduces the Racerback athletic tank in 1928.

1930s: American Rubber introduces Lastex, an extruded rubber surrounded by fiber, providing a tighter fit and more structure to swimsuits. Men go swimming shirtless, first in Hollywood, and then gradually on the East Coast as regulations loosen on full-body coverage while swimming.

1940s: Women's midriffs peek out, and the bikini hits the Paris runway in 1946, but scant coverage is not widely accepted until the 1960s.

1950s: Quick-dry nylon (invented by DuPont in 1938) becomes the rage in swimwear. DuPont introduces Lycra spandex fiber in 1959, but it will take another decade to transform swimsuits from droopy to snug.

1960s: Focus turns to style and design innovations for swimwear.

1970s: Lycra looms large on the swimming scene—all stretch and no bag.

2000: Swimwear goes full circle with the Adidas full bodysuit (1998 concept) and Speedo's Fastskin making their debut, and full-body coverage becoming at once high tech and high fashion.

Sources: Jantzen Inc. and Speedo brand history archives; Archives Center of the National Museum of American History.