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Suzanne Lenglen's dress: between high fashion and high performance

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On the 8th of July 1920, the French illustrated sports newspaper *Le Miroir des sports* featured Suzanne Lenglen on its cover during the mixed doubles final of the Wimbledon tournament. She was shown leaping towards the ball, while her partner stood motionless. She was wearing light shoes, a headband, and a knee-length dress (white, as required by the rules) with short sleeves, revealing part of her stockings, also white. The dress was made of fine silk, her legs showing through. As this photograph shows, the dress gave her a wide range of movement; her collar, arms and legs were free, leaving her free to run... and jump.

In 1920, Suzanne Lenglen (1899-1938), 21 years old, was already a world-renowned champion. She held the titles of world champion on clay and had won Wimbledon in singles, doubles and mixed doubles. In France, she was considered a national symbol, one of the few French sportswomen to win against the British players, who dominated the tournaments. She was nonetheless admired across the Channel and the Atlantic, where the press and the public gave her triumphant welcomes when she travelled. From a tennis champion, she became an icon, and a fashion reference and role model. She is told - sometimes with exaggeration - to have created on her own a new style, called “garçonne” in France or “flapper”, to use the English-language term of the day.

In fact, she was not the only one to have taken part in this phenomenon, but she was a particularly active participant, as shown by the spread of the headscarf that held her hair in place and was even referred to as the “Suzanne headband” (“bandeau Suzanne”). For a sportswoman, it was of course essential to be able to see well and not to be embarrassed at the critical moment by a misplaced lock of hair. Accordingly, what became a fashion accessory was first and foremost a way of improving sporting performance. Similarly, Suzanne Lenglen's dress, which is much talked about as an iconic outfit, was just as much a technical innovation based on the logic of performance.

How does this dress represent an innovation facilitating women players' performance? Tennis was developed at the end of the 19th century as an elite sport allowing mixing of the genders, thus enabling matrimonial encounters. In this context, women players were not actually expected to chase the ball, and they played in street clothes, hats, buns, corsets, petticoats, heels, etc. This dress began to be simplified before the First World War. In 1914, Suzanne Lenglen was 15 years old, an age at which girls were more commonly allowed to wear short skirts and were exempt from wearing corsets. She triumphed over her older competitors with more sophisticated outfits and won the World Tennis Championships.

After the war, sports entertainment flourished, encouraged by the press, which presented and celebrated the first champion figures. Suzanne Lenglen appeared to have become aware of her public image and the importance of maintaining her popularity in front of both the spectators and the media. Through her dress, her make-up and her poses, she put herself on stage in the image of a movie star and was indeed compared to a “diva”. These tokens of femininity and seduction facilitated the acceptance of her transgressions, as she simplified her dress even

further, shortening it to above the knee and elbows. Some criticised her dress for being too short, revealing her stockings and garters decorated with a red bow. But Suzanne Lenglen set an example, and her successes subsequently justified her audacity.

As a result of her success and growing fame, she was soon imitated both on and off the court. After being criticised, over time she became iconic. She popularised a light outfit, which allowed more motion. This way, the dress can also be considered as a symbol of emancipation, freeing the women's bodies from their clothing-induced immobility and allowing them to demonstrate their physical abilities. This was a crucial time for women's sport and its growth; in order to develop a sense of performance and not just gallantry and mundanity, women's sportswear was in need of reform.

Suzanne Lenglen's dress thus emerges as an example of an innovation that enhanced performance. The fashion phenomenon extended to her whole outfit: dress, headband, matching cardigan, etc. From the beginning of the 1920s, it became clear that the champion's fame influenced and stimulated sales of the items she wore. However, in the 1920s, professionalism, and therefore sponsorship, was formally prohibited by the tennis federation. Despite her sporting and media successes, Suzanne Lenglen did not – officially – earn any remuneration.

Yet she played tennis full time and devoted her life to it. In 1926, Suzanne Lenglen decided to turn professional, scheduling a round of lucrative games in the United States. She was therefore excluded from the tennis federation. She argued that she was tired of the injustice of this situation and that her family was in financial difficulty. From then on, freed from the rules of the federation, she appeared in fashion advertisements for the French haute couture designer Jean Patou. However, it is worth noting that the partnership between the champion and the designer dates from well before Suzanne Lenglen's official transition to professional tennis. From the early 1920's onwards, the designer cut her dresses to measure, with her initials, enabling him to gain fame in the media, which often highlighted the name of the creator whose fashion was worn by the champion during her appearances.

The existence of a real contract before 1926 has not been proven to date, but raises considerable suspicion. However, it is known that Suzanne Lenglen was able to use the designer's collections as she wished and that her partner Didie Vlasto received substantial discounts. Was this first form of sponsorship tolerated by the federation, despite strict regulations, making an exception for its greatest champion? Other sources of income tolerated by the federation may have existed, such as a partnership with a brand of shoes or paid articles for the press. The museum of the French tennis federation at Roland Garros also has one "Suzanne Lenglen" doll and one racket, suggesting other sponsorship deals.

In conclusion, Suzanne Lenglen's dress thus invites us to question not only the influence of sport in the evolution of women's fashion and emancipation, but also the progression of performance in women's sports and the beginnings of sponsorship in a tennis federation officially opposed to professionalism until the 1960's.

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Le Miroir des Sports, 8 juillet 1920, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica.

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