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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

With Tennis Style, It's Hard to Ace the Classics

While Grand Slam season often forecasts men's wear innovations, the elegance of a crisp white look is tough to beat.

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For at least some watching Novak Djokovic win his seventh Wimbledon title and 21st Grand Slam crown on Sunday (surprising almost no one), there was one largely unacknowledged pleasure in the experience.

Sure, there were his bulletproof defensive skills and wizardly return of serve. Add to that the eye-candy thrill of watching Mr. Djokovic, a 6-foot-2 Serb, flaunt his Gumby-like flexibility and shredded physique (achieved with a no-gluten diet and a state-of-the-art training regimen) in a three-hour, four-set final. Yet for those who care about these things — fashion critics, for instance — the elegance of Mr. Djokovic's play benefited from an anachronism dating to the tournament's beginning in 1877. That is, the strict white dress code still enforced by the storied All England Club.

Modern players tend to bristle at the tennis whites that were originally conceived to curb or conceal evidence of perspiration — considered unseemly among the society sorts who long had the lock on this sport — and that are required to be worn by players at Wimbledon from the moment they enter the court area. Andre Agassi famously so disliked the Wimbledon dress code ("Why must I wear white? I don't want to wear white," he wrote in his 2009 memoir) that he refused to play in the tournaments from 1988 to 1990, holding out for his preferred raucous, colorful sportswear before caving and then going on to win his first and only Wimbledon title in 1992.

Far from obscuring players on camera, regulation whites outline their moves more crisply, as Novak Djokovic proves in the Wimbledon final on July 10. Alastair Grant/Associated Press

Rule creep is common. A degree of pushback is understandable in light of a rigid dress code that forbids nonwhite elements except in trim on outseams, necklines and shorts legs, as well as in logos that are wider than a centimeter. Even cream or ivory is considered beyond the pale, and orange-soled sneakers landed Roger Federer in trouble when he wore a pair to the 2013 tournament.

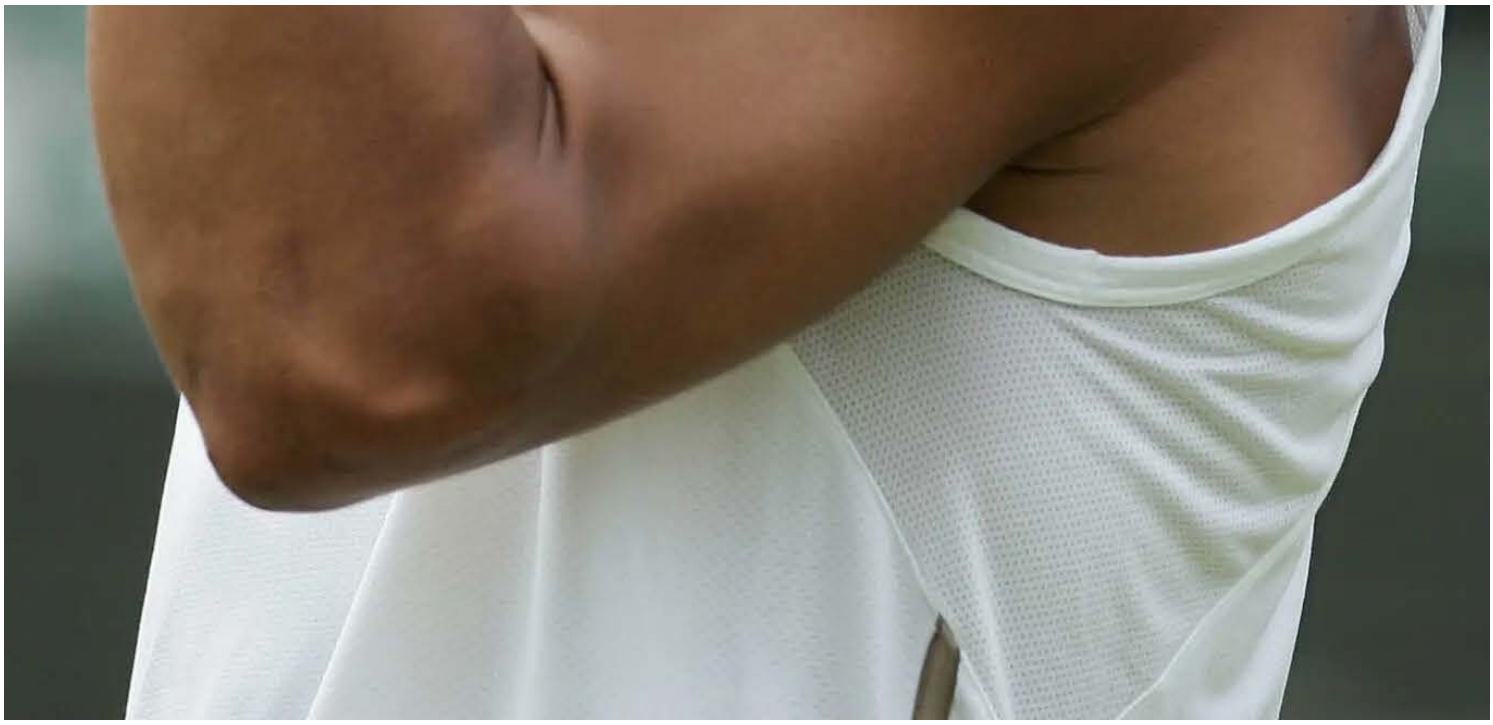
Tradition trumps comfort at Wimbledon. Look to the controversy that greeted Rafael Nadal when he wore one of his trademark sleeveless white quarter-zip tops in 2005. Gentlemen, the thinking goes, don't show off their guns. (For present purposes, it is the male athletes who are the focus.)

Still, what fascinates this observer is the question of why — aside from paid branding opportunities or a dubious assertion that took hold in the late 20th century that color reads better on TV — an athlete would want to deviate from a uniform that is simultaneously practical and sartorially foolproof, one with a rich history of influence on style outside the sport.

Even a cursory survey of its 20th-century history demonstrates how potent an effect tennis has had on fashion. From the 19th century on, the courts have been both a laboratory for innovation and, more often than you might imagine, a mirror of social change. Take the elegance of players like René Lacoste, the French tennis player of the 1920s nicknamed the Crocodile, who replaced the woven or woolen tennis

whites that were then customary with cooler and more efficient long-tailed, short-sleeved cotton polo shirts with the ubiquitous crocodile monogram. The shirts would become a popped-collar staple of preppy wear.

Fred Perry, left, looking runway ready in a signature polo, in 1935. Popperfoto/Getty Images



Rafael Nadal flexes his big guns in a controversial sleeveless top at Wimbledon in 2005. Phil Cole/Getty Images

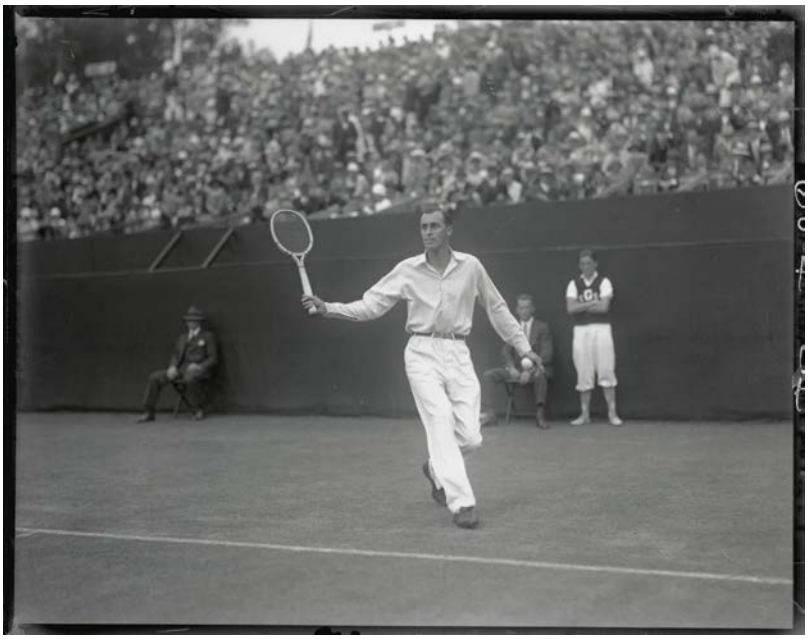
Consider, too, the unfortunate case of Fred Perry. A stylish former world No. 1-ranked player, Mr. Perry won eight Grand Slam singles titles in the 1930s, including three consecutive Wimbledon titles from 1934 to 1936. He went on to found a brand best known for white polo shirts trimmed with a yellow and black band, and the company came perilously close to foundering in 2020 when its polos were co-opted as a militia uniform by the far-right Proud Boys and it was forced to withdraw sales of its polo shirts in the United States and Canada.

Paragons of tennis elegance appear in every era. At one end of the 20th century, there is, for example, an International Tennis Hall of Fame fixture like Budge Patty — one of only three Americans to win the French Open and Wimbledon men's singles championships in the same year (1950) — and a sophisticate renowned for his easy tailored style both on and off court. Further along the arc stands Arthur Ashe, the only Black man to have won the singles titles at Wimbledon, the U.S. Open and the Australian Open, and a canny image manipulator who underscored his cerebral style of play with a Black Ivy cool — tailored shorts, snug polos, horn-rimmed glasses or oversize shades — intentionally engineered to counter racial stereotypes that still plagued the sport in the '70s.

Always restrained, Arthur Ashe brought graphic flourish to his tennis white at the U.S. Open, circa 1978. Focus on Sport/Getty Images

Style in that bad old era tends to get an unfair rap. And yet, while it is true we're unlikely to see the lawn-trousered, Fred Astaire elegance of an athlete like Bill Tilden — an American champion whom The Associated Press once voted the greatest player of the first half of the 20th century — that is no reason to forget or dismiss the contributions of players as well remembered for their sex appeal or wild antics as for their sartorial savvy.

We are talking here about John McEnroe and Bjorn Borg, rivals both on center court and in the '80s fashion arena. With his bum-hugging short shorts and banded track tops, Mr. McEnroe became a poster boy for the Italian sports apparel maker Sergio Tacchini; Bjorn Borg, the sexy Swedish longhair in a headband, helped put another Italian heritage label, Fila, on the map. And suddenly, those retro looks and those brands — with their taut proportions and overtly sexy celebration of the athletic male anatomy — look fresh again both for sports aficionados and for those who wouldn't know an ace from an alley.



Once deemed the greatest player of the early 20th century, Bill Tilden is style personified at the Davis Cup in 1927. Bettmann/Getty Images

Bjorn Borg, here defeating Jimmy Connors at Wimbledon in July 1978, snuck color onto center court in wristbands striped like the Swedish flag. Leo Mason/Popperfoto – Getty Images

At other Grand Slam events, Messrs. McEnroe and Borg both pushed their Fila-Tacchini looks to the limits, with banded sleeves, tone-on-tone jackets, pinstriped patterns, colored tab waistbands, terry wristbands in national colors or details that may never have passed official muster at the All England Club.

The truth is, though, that nothing additive was really needed. Whether on clay, grass, synthetic or cracked urban concrete, it is largely pointless trying to improve on tennis whites.

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