

“From dark casuals to silvery spacesuits”

The Uniforms of the Finnish National Winter Sport Teams from the 1920's to the 1990's.

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”In Olympic Games, it is not most important to win but to participate”

Baron Pierre de Coubert 24.07.1908

Finland's Image, National Identity and Sport Diplomacy

After gaining independence in 1917 it became very important for Finland to participate in international sport events of the 1920's and 1930's. Participation gave Finland the opportunity to gain international publicity as an independent nation. Sports also helped to create political and trading liaisons and to bring the outside world closer to Finland. For an ordinary Finn, expensive trips abroad were luxury outside of reach. But athletes in the national teams were privileged to the opportunity to travel and see the wonders of the world, in America, the Far East, and elsewhere. Reciprocally, foreign sport event organizers and athletes learned to know Finnish people, their customs and mentality. The state leaders received a splendid opportunity to spread propaganda and sport diplomats worked hard to build a national image for Finland in the eyes of the outside world. Propaganda had a twoway effect: along with the intended audience abroad it also touched the Finns themselves. Finland's success in Winter Olympics was cleverly used to unify the Finnish people after the civil war of 1918, which tore the nation in two, and to back up the national identity of the Finns. In international circles, personal behavior and appearance became important means of communication, especially when a common language did not exist. Gestures, expressions and clothes replaced the missing words.

After the Second World War, Finland concentrated all its efforts in rebuilding the country's infrastructure and economy. The hard years of the war had also burdened the small nation's resources in sports. This was clearly visible in the decline of Finland's success in international sport games. In international politics, Olympic Games were used as the battlefield of western and eastern ideologies (e.g., East Germany had its own team since 1968), until the 1990's when political ideologies were overrun by commercialism. During the cold war, sport diplomacy often found more gentle and effective ways than traditional UN-diplomacy. Sport diplomacy was able to make a difference for example by prohibiting participation or by boycotting certain events. Finnish sport politics intentionally started to polish the image of Finland and to search international recognition for Finland's special position in world politics because of its Soviet relations. The country's national identity was left in the background when Finland found itself in defence position. It tried to keep up its neutrality but at the same time the Finns wanted to show the world they were truly European. Today it is however fully recognized that the backbone of credible national image is strong national identity. Yrjö Länsipuro, head of the press and cultural department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, once said: A good image can only be based on identity fully accepted by the owner.

The Image of Finland Reflects in the Winter Sport Uniforms of the Finnish Teams

In this exhibition we wanted to exchange the slogan “All Finns are watching us” to the expression “We symbolize the Finnish people”. What is actually the image transmitted, international or not, to the world by the clothing of our winter sport athletes from the 1920's to the 1990's? Can the traditional national characteristics, guts and modesty, be seen in the uniforms? Or the contemporary symbols of Finland, like high-tech? Is Finland's image in the line with reality?

Uniforms Connect with Distinction

The Finnish national teams participating in Olympic Games have used team uniforms in the competitions since 1908 (London). Since 1924 (Chamonix and Paris) they have also traveled in

identical outfits. Uniforms were very important for the representative image of the team. The athletes were dressed up from head to toe, the co-ordinated outfits even included underwear and pajamas. It wasn't unusual that the athletes had to give back their expensive clothing when the games were over. To promote the team's representative image and role model position specific rules sometimes regulated the team member's personal conduct, like the prohibition to smoke in the 1950's and 1960's. The most typical Finnish winter sport uniform has been a dark suit accented with the Finnish flag. Elegant outfits have however always caught the eyes of the Finns, and as we can learn from a description of the 1925 Labor Olympics, style has always been highly appreciated: "In elegance, the French were unbeatable. The identical coats united the French team harmoniously and caused irresistible admiration."

Winter Sport Game Uniforms from Chamonix to Lillehammer

Tapani Niku, the first Finnish skier to win an Olympic gold medal, reminisced his outfit at the Chamonix Winter Games in 1924 like this: "We were dressed in similar "riding-breeches" of fine diagonal material and similar sweaters." The Finnish skiers were dazed by the Chamonix winter game fashion. Special amazement was caused by ladies wearing trousers. In those days, Finnish women were hardly ever seen in "men's clothes", not even when practicing sports. (Trousers became standard skiwear for women first in the 1940's).

Finland's participation in the Lake Placid Olympics in 1932 caused big public debate because of the country's poor economical state. The lack of money resulted in that ski jumpers and Nordic combined competitors were dropped out from the national team. The team leaders took care of all travel arrangements, including boat and train trips, the team's uniforms, necessary provisions (like dried bread and meat products), and the packing of all belongings. It was worth the effort. The Finns returned home with their first Olympic gold medal in skiing.

St. Moritz Olympics in 1948 were carried out modestly. The Ministry of Supply had granted the Finnish national team extra supplies of butter and sugar, which were rationed goods back then. There was also lack of clothes and equipment. For example, the woolen sweater that was the uniform of the Finnish ski jumping team, was also a rationed product. The sweaters were manufactured by Orimattilan Kutomo. Despite the shortage, the Finns appreciated the quality of domestic work. Aaro Eloranta (1947-48), the main coach of the Italian national team in skiing, persistently stated that the Italian uniform was poor: "They simply can not make uniforms to match the quality of those made in the Nordic countries." Eloranta also wrote a skiing guidebook (1949), in which he included suggestions for proper skiwear.

Women were permitted to participate in Winter Olympics for the first time in 1952 in Oslo. The successful Finnish girl trio (Wideman – Rantanen – Polkunen) represented Finland in practical and sporty outfits: they wore skirts and ski footwear.

In 1964 in Innsbruck Nordic visitors of the Olympics surprised the rest of the world by wearing the same official uniforms as their national teams. Even Crown Prince Harald of Norway and his sisters represented their country wearing the Norwegian Olympic uniform. The ladies of the Finnish team were easy to separate from the mass because of their bright-colored outfits. The Finnish men were dressed in dark outfits, just like the teams of so many other countries. In the 1960's manmade fibers conquered the market of textile industry.

At the Nordic World Ski Championships in Oslo in 1966 the Finnish magazine *Apu* organized a playful Gallup poll about game uniforms and received opinions from 14 people, representing Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union, the United States, Czechoslovakia, West-Germany, and Finland. The Gallup resulted in that Sweden won with 4 points and Norway became second with 3 points. The participants voted the Soviet uniform the ugliest, it received 3 points. An interesting aspect was that 2/3 of the Finns regarded their own off-white military-style uniform as the most ugliest one, but the foreign people participating in the Gallup were of very different opinion.

In the 1968 Olympics in Grenoble the Finnish team was confronted with "the battle of the red shirts". Dozens of Finnish clothing factories had volunteered to take part in clothing the national

team. The manufacturing problems were caused by the fact that the materials and factories came from various locations in Finland. A reporter of the Finnish magazine *Seura* commented (with slight envy?) that the Olympic uniforms of the French national team had been designed by the famous fashion house Balmain.

The clothing factory Tuomisen Puku Oy received an order from the Finnish Ski Association to make the Finnish national team uniforms for the 1970 World Championships in Upper Tatra. The uniform consisted of a suit and a coat. The outfits of the representative team were tailor-made but the young athletes' team had to settle with ready-made clothes. Eero Mäntyranta described the exiting moments when our young athletes were about to leave to the European Ski Championships in 1970:

“Outfits were handed out, tried on, and exchanged to find the ones with perfect fit. The girls' stunning furry cap was admired. The overall opinion was that the new uniforms continued the traditionally darkish trend in Finnish ski team fashion. In the 1970's, artificial fur and acrylic knits were especially popular materials.

In the 1980's, the Finnish Olympic Committee really started to put effort in carefully choosing the national uniforms. The main values in the design of an Olympic outfit were representativeness, quality and practicality. The blue-and-white uniforms of the Finns in the Sarajevo Olympics in 1984 were designed by Esa Lukala.

In 1988 in Calgary the Finnish national team was seen in sporty tartan outfits. The team's wardrobe was completed with raincoats and rubber boots.

In the early 1990's the commercialization of sports changed the uniforms as well. Clothing manufacturers received full rights to unrestrictedly sell official sport apparel. In practice this meant that anybody could go and buy a uniform used by the teams and if they so wished, self have a national logo printed on it. Since the Val di Fiemme Games in 1991 the Finnish ski team outfits have been free of all sales restrictions. As a countermove in January 1991, the magazine *Suomen Urheilulehti* started a campaign to revive the honor of the official Finnish uniform. The strong public opposition against commercialization of sports was surprising. Just before the 1989 Nordic World Ski Championships in Lahti, secretary general Pirkko Hannula stated commercialization of sports was not only an inevitable but also a positive change.

The new era of Olympic uniforms started in 1992 in Albertville. A young talented fashion designer Anja Korhonen was chosen to design the uniforms. The vivid heraldic design on the back of the white march suit raised much discussion. Anja Korhonen was inspired by Lapp nature with its Northern lights when she created this impressive uniform.

One of the Finnish sportswear design's top moments was in Lillehammer in 1994. The top-fashion spacesuit-resembling uniform that was “an absolute must for the team image” cost 10.000 marks a piece. The uniforms were designed by Anja Korhonen and manufactured by Terinit Oy. The coordinated wardrobe consisted of a marching suit (opening and closing ceremonies), an outdoor exercising outfit, a sweat suit, and a gala costume. The modest gray sparrow of past winter games had turned into a coquettish peacock.

Concluding Words

The Finnish Olympic Committee has been responsible for acquiring the uniforms used in the Olympic games. Public collections have been organized to arrange funds to cover up clothing and travelling expenses caused by participation in the Olympic games. Many Finnish companies have sponsored the country's sports life in many different ways (e.g., cloth manufacturing). It has been seen important for the Finnish national identity and the country's image to send Finnish athletes abroad to represent the country. The importance of representation seems yet to grow: for the World Championships of 2001 in Edmonton the Finnish National Team even brought along its own make-up artists.

Finnish know-how has been used in the manufacturing of winter sport outfits (compare with the Italian made outfits of the Finnish track-and field team). Confidence in domestic clothing industry

has remained strong despite the public speculations of the lacking sense of style among the decision-makers in sports fashion. The Finns rely on the top quality of domestic products. Finnish design has its roots in the old saying "only practical is beautiful." This attitude has affected clothing industry and even ski manufacturers. Sportiveness, which relates to practicality, has also been very important in the design of the Finnish uniforms. We have wanted the world to see our skiers dressed in sporty clothing, not in parade costumes (in the 1950's skirts and ski footwear, in the 1970's and 1980's quilted sport outfits) Economical realities along with attitudes have always seen important criteria in choosing the uniforms.

The Olympic Committee pinpointed the clothes design issue in its seminar in the early 1980's. The committee required quality, practicality and style. In the 1990's, features of Finnish high-tech and top design became visible in clothes design too. Unconventional materials and colors gained popularity and fashion designers' professional skills new respect. The choice to let Anja Korhonen design the outfits of the national team was one indication of this trend. Commercialism went hand in hand with fashion. The more fashionable, technical and expensive the outfits got, the bigger got the logo of the manufacturer or sponsor.

Wearing the official uniform of the team with its national symbols has been regarded an honor (compare with flag-bearers in opening ceremonies). Official representative of a country must earn the merit by success in sports, not by money. As early as in 1964 in Innsbruck the Finnish and Norwegian tourists wearing national outfits received public attention. Dressing up created stronger feelings in 1991 when commercialization of sports and inflation of values got the blame.

The color scheme of the official uniforms has slowly transferred from dark shades to bright ones. For the first time this trend became visible in 1964 in Innsbruck where the colorful outfits of Finnish women got lots of attention. Men had to settle with dark or neutral colors for much longer. The real breakthrough happened as late as in 1992 in Albertville by the uniforms designed by Anja Korhonen. She combined the familiar white color with Lapp exotics and strong shades of yellow, blue and green. The choice of uniform colors clearly indicates the position of skiing as Finland's national sport. For this reason it is not surprising that the most permanent elements of Finnish national sport uniforms have been the country's own flag and the blue and white colors.

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