

Earlier this year, the World Badminton Federation announced a new dress code for female players of the sport. The rule has since been shelved, amid criticisms from badminton players and officials, but has started an interesting debate about male and female dress codes.

Skirting the issue

According to the World Badminton Federation (BWF), the sport of badminton does not receive enough public interest. Despite the increase in its popularity when it debuted at the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, badminton is still regarded as a minority sport and has never garnered the success of its main rival, tennis. The BWF believes that the women's game in particular is out of favour. It is with this in mind that the Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia-based federation announced in April that women badminton players must wear skirts to play, effective June 1.

"In order to ensure attractive presentation of badminton at tournaments organised or sanctioned by the BWF, all clothing worn by players shall be acceptable badminton sports clothing," said the ruling. "In level 1–3 tournaments women must wear skirts or dresses".

Outcries of dismay from players of the sport and the media led to the Federation accepting a recommendation from the Women In Badminton Committee to "further study... the general clothing regulations and thereby not to introduce the regulations as currently drafted". There has since been an ongoing discussion on the popularity of the sport and whether or not the rule was gender discriminatory or an acceptable way to garner more attention.

The skirt rule was formulated in conjunction with Octagon, an international marketing firm. The dress code would make female players appear more feminine and appealing to fans and corporate sponsors, officials said. Although it received some support from those involved in the sport, including a number of female players, the rule was swiftly criticised by many others as

Top badminton player Judith Meulendijks in her ladies' singles final at the Dutch Badminton Championships in 2009 in Almere, Netherlands.

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sexist, a hindrance to performance and offensive to Muslim women who play the sport in large numbers in Asian countries. Several athletes' representatives said they would seek to have the dress code scrapped.

"This is a blatant attempt to sexualise women," said Janice Forsyth, director of the International Centre for Olympic Studies at the University of Western Ontario. "It is amazing. You'd think at some point, somebody would have said: 'Wait a minute. What are we doing?'"

Under the rule, women would still be allowed to wear shorts or long trousers for cultural and religious reasons – but such garments must be worn beneath a dress or skirt.

"You sweat a lot doing badminton at a really high level," Ms Forsyth said. "Sometimes clothing sticks to you. Adding another layer does not enhance performance. It detracts. It counters the basic argument that they're trying to generate more interest in women."

The debate of female attire is not unique to badminton. In 2004, Sepp Blatter, president of football's international governing body, FIFA, suggested that women wear tighter shorts to promote "a more female aesthetic". In some respects, the BWF seems to be merely catching up with the idea that the female versions of many sports are more fashion-led and therefore sometimes more appealing to the public.

Form over function

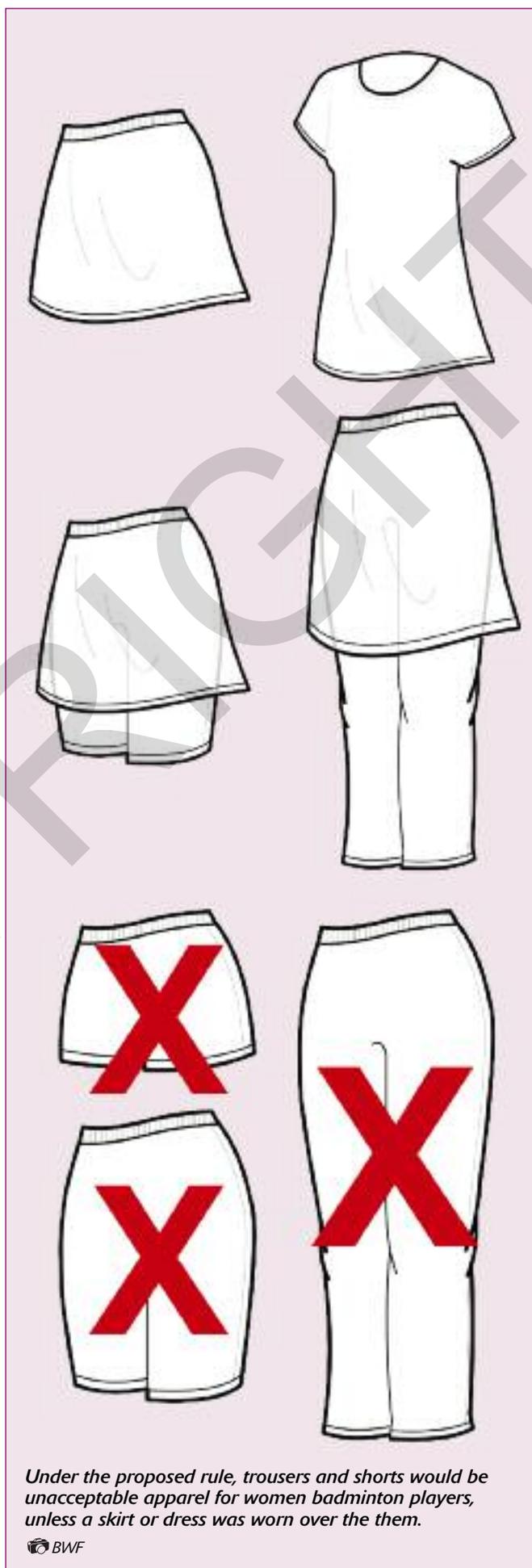
The badminton rule seems to have been devised purely for aesthetic purposes, rather than for any performance-related reason, say critics of the rule. "When you dictate apparel for reasons of sexuality, it should be offensive," said Donna Lopiano, a former chief executive of the Women's Sports Foundation. Male players are required only to dress in "proper attire," officials said.

The BWF has insisted that the rule was intended to increase the popularity of the sport, and not for the sex-appeal of a skirt. "We're not trying to use sex to promote the sport," said Paisan Rangsitkpho, from the US, who is deputy president of the BWF. "We just want them to look feminine and have a nice presentation so women will be more popular." Interest is declining, Mr Rangsitkpho said. He also said that some women compete in oversized shorts and long trousers, appearing "baggy, almost like men".

"Hardly anybody is watching," he said. "Television ratings are down. We want to build them up to where they should be. They play quite well. We want them to look nicer on the court and have more marketing value for themselves. I'm surprised we got a lot of criticism."

A number of female badminton players embraced the rule and agreed with the BWF's reasons for creating it. Nora Perry, a former world doubles champion from England who is on the council of the world governing body, said in a statement: "We need to be able to differentiate the women's game to create the attention the game deserves."

Cee Ketpura, a 17-year-old rising player from the US, said she always wore skirts in competition because she believes they look "more professional". Indeed, the majority of female players tend to wear skirts on court, suggesting that the criticism of the rule has more to do with curbing freedom of choice than anything else. Kaveh Mehrabi, an Iranian who is president of



the Badminton Players Federation, which gives voice to the concerns of athletes, disagrees with the rule for this reason.

"I believe the intention is good to raise the profile of the sport, but it takes freedom of choice away from female athletes," Mr Mehrabi said. "I think we should work on promoting personalities. When people watch tennis, they like the stories around the rivalries and personal lives. Whether you wear a dress or not doesn't make much difference."

A number of female players have said that while they supported attempts to popularise women's badminton, such as offering equal prize money, they considered it an affront to be told to wear a dress or a skirt. Mesinee Mangkalakiri, 28, who competed for the US in the 2008 Beijing Olympics and is known as May, said that she preferred shorts. Skirts made her feel self-conscious earlier in her career, she said.

"It doesn't matter what Kobe Bryant wears," Ms Mangkalakiri said, referring to the NBA player. "People like his skills on the court. You'd hope they come to watch you because you are their favourite player and you have ability and style, not because you're wearing someone's favourite skirt."

No rules for men

Another criticism of the rule has been the apparent unfairness that, while there are no dress code rules for male badminton players, there would be specific rules for women. "It is sexist to demand that women wear skirts while men can wear short shorts, baggy shorts, whatever they want," said Imogen Bankier, 23, a Scottish doubles player. "It is a silly rule and it is unnecessary. I don't think women in sport should be told what they can and can't wear when men aren't told the same thing. We have always had a choice of wearing a skirt or shorts and I don't see why that has to change. I understand what they are trying to do – make it more appealing to spectators and the media. But I don't think women wearing skirts is going to make it more aesthetically pleasing. If people want to see women in skirts they will go elsewhere – they won't go to watch badminton."

Writing in *The Hindu*, an English-language newspaper based in India, columnist Kalpana Sharma noted that while badminton took its cue from the glamour of tennis, female tennis players have greater input in the way their sport is operated.

"Thus what women wear is decided by women players and not imposed by a male club," Ms Sharma wrote. "If women tennis players choose to be seen as fashion statements, it is their choice."

Fashion forward

It is true that tennis apparel is more fashion-driven than other sports. Indeed, the collaboration between UK fashion designer Stella McCartney and German sportswear brand adidas is testimony to the fashionable direction tennis is heading in. Badminton apparel, on the other hand, has not been so trend-driven. Perhaps the proposed skirt ruling was an attempt to increase the fashion potential of badminton – in which case, it will be interesting to see whether sports brands such as adidas pick up the cue and begin creating outfits for badminton players in the vein of the outfits it creates for tennis players. 



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