Evolution of Women’s Athletic Wear: Historical Thinking Skills Activity

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at Mount Holyoke College in 1856.

The calisthenics were taught in a room in the second story not yet arranged for recitations, and came first in the middle of the forenoon. Afterward, they came in the afternoon also. The time was not less than twenty minutes nor more than thirty. No change was made in the dress, and no suggestion was made concerning the removal of 'stays' (McCurdy, 1980).
1858 gymnastics costume from Godey’s Magazine
An observer at Oberlin College in 1884 reported that at first women wore blouses with very full bloomers for the exercise period. The dean “would not all the students to go without a shirt, and the result was a scanty skirt and scanty bloomers, a suit that was anything but becoming. We had a woman make these suits at the gymnasium”. (Aldrich, 1930)
Abbot Academy 1905, Andover, MA.
1910-1920’s
Mid 1920’s-1930’s

Knickers made shorter with elastic in the hems. 1925.
Radcliffe College varsity field hockey uniform, ca.1925.
Change Over Time

Looking at the sources of women’s sportswear from the mid 19th century to the 1930’s, how have what women wore changed over time? Has anything stayed the same?
Comparing and Contrasting

1. Looking at each set of sources list three ways in which they are similar and three ways in which they are different.
2. In what ways does the sportswear in source 1 differ from source 6?
3. How did sportswear change from source 1 to source 2?
4. How did the field hockey uniform in source 3 change from source 6?
5. What set of sportswear would be the easiest to play a sport in? Support your answer.
Contextualization

Using your background knowledge of women’s position in society and societal norms during the time period, does women’s sportswear reflect the feelings of the time periods? If so, how?
In many ways women participating in sports served as a way to break free from the constraints of society that women faced day in and day out. Develop a thesis statement in which you argue whether or not this liberation is reflected in the athletic wear women wore.