

Revisiting the 1970s Gym Uniform

The retro romper is chic, but this writer remembers when it was anything but

By [Robin Eileen Bernstein](#)

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Credit: Adobe Stock

A few years back, I took my then 15-year-old daughter shopping for clothes at an upscale boutique in suburban New Jersey, near where my parents used to live.

“Ma, look!” she said. She held up this ... this...THING. It was a mustard-colored, one-piece contraption with something that resembled bloomers at the bottom.

“Oh my God,” I said. “That’s my high school gym uniform!” At the very least, it was some sort of revamped version, perhaps more suitable for a night of club dancing than a morning of push-ups.

For women of a certain age, let’s say middle age, school gym uniforms were a fact of teenage life as traumatizing as SATs, chin zits and first crushes. So when my fashion-forward daughter told me, with an obligatory roll of her eyes, that the item in question was called a “romper” and was “in style now,” I had to laugh. If there was ever a fashion trend that deserved to rot in obsolescence or, at best, had earned a display case at the Smithsonian, it was the girls’ gym uniform.

Figure Unflattering

Cinched with elastic at the waist and adorned with a series of cold metal snaps running from neck to crotch, the uniform was designed to make everyone look, well, uniformly bad. It was essentially an infant’s onesie reconfigured for an adolescent female.

No matter if you were short and curvaceous or a big-boned athlete, or even a willowy 5’9 like my daughter, the gym uniform would cut you down to size. It was the great leveler, which maybe was its purpose.

When I was 15, I was 5’4, flat-chested, and skinny to the point of embarrassment. “She looks like an upside-down mop,” my dad would say of my stick-like figure and frizzy hair. “She has a fast metabolism,” my mom would counter, ever the peacemaker. All I wanted was to look like that pretty girl in my high school who reminded me of a raven-haired Marcia Brady. The last thing I needed was a pasty yellow onesie that made me resemble an ironing board.

Mixed Memories

Unlike me, my daughter loves to shop, hence, her knowledge of things like rompers. I hear “romper” and all that comes to mind is Romper Room, a popular TV show from the 1960s that took place in a nursery school. Those innocent five-year-olds didn’t yet know about ill-fitting gym uniforms or about sitting at the wrong lunch table in the school cafeteria or about having a crush on a guy who was not only cool but smart, whose straight brown hair swept across his forehead like a rock star, but who was so aloof he didn’t even know you existed even though you sat one row away from him in social studies class.

Give the adorable Romper Room girls another decade and they, too, would suffer those indignities and more, and the misery of gym uniforms.

The Great Leveler

My daughter didn’t know of gym uniforms. Perhaps they’d been banned, along with dunce caps and corporal punishment. She got to wear a T-shirt and shorts of her choosing to gym class.

She tried on the romper. It was softer and more feminine than my old gym uniform, without the hard snaps and military angles. It was trendy and chic. Yet at its core, there was no hiding where it took its inspiration. Despite her model-like frame, it looked awful on her and, judging by the look on her face, she knew it. Forty-plus years ago, it would have looked awful on that pretty girl in my high school, too.

My daughter made a beeline for the dressing room to discard the unwanted outfit. And I had to smile. Call it a gym uniform or a romper or what-you-will, apparently every generation has its own great leveler.

Who remembers wearing...



...gym uniforms?

Credit: Pinterest | Courtney Timp



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