Football, Fanwear and Fashion

Words: Jacqui McAssey

Fifty years on from Admiral's production of its replica shirt, football fanwear is currently very much 'in fashion'. The viral trend for wearing football jerseys, or to give it its correct term, 'Blokecore', has spread exponentially across social media platforms, particularly TikTok, where digital creators invite viewers to 'Get Dressed With Me' (#GDWM) as they translate one football shirt into five separate looks. Often oversized and worn with baggy jeans, along with the ubiquitous pair of trainers adidas Samba, football shirts have become a global, gender-neutral uniform for younger fans of football and fashion (or in many cases, just fashion). This old-but-new aesthetic is an amalgamation of how a match-going supporter would dress in the 1980s and 1990s, but this trend has a global reach.

Be it a rare shirt, or one designed for a grassroots women's team, no kit is seemingly off-limits. With a 30-plus-year archive of pre-loved shirts to explore, anyone looking to buy into the trend can easily find one on resale sites, or hunt for a second-hand bargain on Vinted.

Increasingly, more experimental or upcycled garments are emerging, the football shirt capturing the imagination of a new wave of young designers, as well as the mega brands wanting to collaborate with them to help decode the Gen-Z fashion scene. Designer Sophie Hird's Dolly Parton-esque Bury FC shirt springs to mind, commissioned for Zoe Hitchen's 'We Are Bury' exhibition in 2019, after the expulsion of the club from the English Football League. Replica shirts laid the foundations of this trend, but what happened in between?

Admiral's replica shirt for children, launched in time for Christmas 1973, was only the start of a broader shift in lifestyle changes that shaped how people dressed for leisure activities. A boom in jogging (a slower running style) crossed from the USA to the UK, and the recreational athlete began to take on the uniform of real athletes. Admiral's Training Suit of the early seventies, was also originally produced for children but the iconic two-piece, worn by martial arts film star, Bruce Lee, and singer Bob Marley, became a firm off-field look.

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The women's rights movement and the availability of birth control gave women greater independence and more leisure time during this decade. The influence of celebrities, coupled with advances in audio visual technology, instigated further fitness trends. Families could jog outdoors, women could 'feel the burn' with Jane Fonda's aerobic at-home workouts played on Video Home System (VHS) machines. Children could cruise around their neighbourhoods on BMX bikes or wearing pastel-coloured roller boots. Personal exercise was becoming more commercialised, which only stimulated the demand for new styles of leisurewear further.

Technological advances in fabric also changed the feel of leisurewear in this decade. The addition of Lycra, (by DuPont) meant that the relationship between sport, fitness and fashion took on a closer, figure-hugging relationship. This fabric was designed to enhance the look of toned bodies.

The story of leisurewear continued to develop until celebrity and athlete-led trends gave way to a counter-cultural movement, defined by sports fans themselves. This era marked a new chapter in the history of football and fashion.

Although leisurewear was beginning to flourish, the replica football shirt was not a staple of the football crowd. Another trend, but this time in football violence, increased from the 1970s to the 1980s and wearing obvious team colours only made fan groups more easily identifiable. Territories were fought for along transport routes, in pubs, outside grounds or inside the stadium itself by male football fans, who would actively avoid, or look for, encounters with opposing supporters. None more so than between fans of teams in the North and South, or at derby games or matches against bitter rivals. For that reason, the football shirt was out.

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'Casual' culture, widely documented as a significant moment in the history of football fashion, originated because of the success of top-flight English football teams in Europe. With each visit to the continent, contemporary sportswear with slick silhouettes and fabrications was brought back by fans to be worn in their home stadiums. This was especially so for Liverpool FC supporters, whose continental travels in the late 1970s and early 1980s had ensured exposure to leisurewear brands in France, Italy and Germany. Known as 'Scallies' in Liverpool and 'Perry Boys' in Manchester and Salford, (their fierce rivals) as European campaigns progressed from city to city, new clothing styles were introduced back home on football terraces. It was a smart look, but with swagger, its roots in Mod culture aligning perfectly with the elegance of continental brands.

Football casual culture fell out of fashion in the late '80s when another youth-centric movement, rave, bounced onto the scene. Expensive jackets and knitwear served no purpose for 24-hour party people perspiring across the dancefloors of the clubs, or fields, of the UK.

Soon after, small football club souvenir shops gave way to more commercialised business, as clubs designed their own fanwear collections, buoyed by the new global market created by the Premier League. Mail order catalogues, full of football-crested fashion (and bedding, jewellery, crystal whiskey glasses, etc.) meant you could achieve a sense of belonging without ever visiting the stadium of your favourite team. The manufacture of football merchandise began to mimic the high-speed model of the fashion season with home, away, third, goalkeeper options, retro kits and limited collections for adults and children.

The viral football fashion trend of football shirt plus 'Scally' or 'Perry Boy' flair has successfully broken through the digital noise and a new appetite for football-led fashion has been amplified by the clubs, brands and the players themselves; 'training day fits' are a particular source of current fashion inspiration on social media. The success of women's football, banned by the FA from 1921-1971, and the response to the Lionesses' Euros win in 2022, has also driven a demand for women's football fanwear, as well as women-run brands. This new market will evolve and define its own fashion culture as the women's game and fanbase matures. Wearing a football fashion, with its explicit sense of community and self-expression, will ensure that the 'ins and outs' of fashion are universally discussed for another 50 years at least. ●