# The jockstrap: a history



[Picture from bikeathletic.com current catalogue]

The jockstrap, a garment initially designed for practical purposes in the sporting world, has evolved significantly over more than a century, carving out a distinctive place in various cultural contexts, particularly within the gay community.

The jockstrap was invented in 1874 by C.F. Bennett for the Chicago sporting goods company, Sharp & Smith. The design featured a supportive front panel and two elastic straps that wrapped around the legs, a solution crafted to provide comfort and protection to male bicycle jockeys navigating the cobblestone streets of Boston on penny-farthing bicycles. This innovative undergarment quickly garnered popularity beyond cycling and was adopted by football and rugby players by the early 20th century, with additional design enhancements such as hard plastic cups for extra protection.

The mass production of jockstraps took off in earnest with the founding of the Bike Web Company by Bennett in 1897, later becoming the Bike Athletic Company. Widely regarded by aficionados, Bike jockstraps developed a cult following within the gay community starting in the 1970s and extending to today. Alex Angelchik, who revitalised the company in 2019 with a team of investors, noted that around 70% of Bike's customers were gay men, a testament to the garment's enduring appeal.

The jockstrap’s transition from utilitarian sports gear to a symbol of queer hedonism saw a significant shift during the mid-20th century. The 1950s and 1960s were transformative decades, with the jockstrap becoming emblematic of a burgeoning gay ethos that celebrated hypermasculinity. Influential figures within the gay community, such as Tom of Finland and renowned muscle magazines, immortalised the jockstrap within queer culture. This trend persisted into the 1980s, even during the height of the AIDS crisis, where it served as a symbol of defiance and resilience.

High-end fashion brands soon took notice. Today, major labels including Tom Ford, Versace, and Calvin Klein feature jockstraps in their collections. The jockstrap also made notable appearances on the runway and in high art, with designers like Thom Browne and John Galliano incorporating them into their shows and artists such as Andy Warhol and Bruce Weber celebrating their aesthetic in paintings and photography.

Yet, the jockstrap's place in gay culture was further cemented by brands such as Nasty Pig, founded by David Lauterstein. The brand introduced a more flamboyant and varied range of jockstraps in multiple fabrics and colours, tailoring them specifically for the gay market, and establishing them as a staple within the community.

Beyond fashion and sex appeal, the jockstrap has maintained its roots as functional athletic wear. Its rugged, practical design continues to evoke an archetypal American masculinity—sexy, sweaty, and unapologetically bold.

Recent cultural shifts have seen the jockstrap embraced beyond traditional gender norms. Kristen Stewart appeared on the February cover of Rolling Stone wearing a Bike jock, highlighting its versatility and appeal within queer-coded fashion. High-femme variants featuring silk, rhinestones, and lace have also emerged, challenging and expanding the jockstrap’s traditional, hypermasculine image.

Even the art world has embraced the jockstrap, with companies like Pansy Ass Ceramics crafting porcelain jockstrap vases and sculptures, underscoring its complex interplay between masculinity and vulnerability.

In summary, the jockstrap's journey from practical sportswear to a nuanced symbol within queer culture underscores its profound and multifaceted significance. It remains an enduring motif of sexual liberation, hypermasculinity, fashion evolution, and community identity.