

Kingsize, Not Queen: Some Men Have Taken To Wearing Pantyhose

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Mainstay for Cross-Dressers Is Boon to Athletes and Guys On Their Feet All Day Long

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Robert Rodgers used to carry into stores a list of items such as milk, eggs and pantyhose, hoping others would think he was shopping for a wife or girlfriend. But he is no longer hiding the truth. "The pantyhose are for me," says Mr. Rodgers, a 34-year-old San Francisco financial manager for an entertainment union.

It's not news that some men like to wear women's clothing. But a different sort of man is discovering the virtues of ladies' hosiery. No cross-dresser, he wears hose for warmth, comfort or the compression they provide as a possible antidote to circulatory problems or varicose veins. How his pantyhose look — or what other people think of them — becomes moot once he puts on his slacks. "I don't broadcast what I wear under my pants," says Steve Newman, an Ohio engineering-firm manager who wears L'eggs Sheer Energy Active Support under them, among other brands.

Determining the amount of hosiery hiding beneath male trousers is impossible because store cashiers don't usually record the buyer's sex. But statistics online, where a man can buy hose without raising eyebrows, point to an authentic niche. At Shapings.com, a lingerie Web site offering European brands, about 85% of women's-hosiery sales go to males, many of whom place two orders — large sizes for themselves and smaller ones for their wives. A "small" percentage of sales of the No Nonsense brand go to men. Based on communications with these customers, parent Kayser-Roth Corp. estimates that 40% are cross-dressers, and most of the rest are men who simply like or need to wear pantyhose.

A generations-old wholesaler of women's hosiery called G. Lieberman & Sons has restructured itself into a manufacturer and online purveyor of pantyhose made exclusively for men, called Comfilon. "There's a whole underground culture of normal, mainstream guys who wear hose," says Chief Executive Steve Katz. Most buy women's brands. Mr. Katz says he sells hundreds of thousands of dollars a year worth of three-year-old Comfilon, which has male-specific features such as a fly in front. The company's motto: "Comfilons are not your mother's pantyhose."

Men working outdoors sometimes find that nylon, unlike thermal underwear, provides warmth without bulk and without absorbing perspiration. For that reason, professional football players occasionally wear pantyhose during cold games. Men whose jobs require long hours of standing say that pantyhose can reduce leg pain, swelling and fatigue. Increasingly, doctors recommend that long-distance fliers wear tight-fitting hosiery or socks, to prevent getting blood clots in their legs.

Men's sense of freedom to wear pantyhose is growing at the same time that women feel freer not to wear them. It is much less common these days for companies to prohibit bare legs. A big problem for the hosiery industry is that many young women now eschew pantyhose even when wearing skirts.

The industry sells \$1.4 billion a year in pantyhose in the U.S. alone. But unit volume has been declining. At Sara Lee Corp., the largest player through its L'eggs and Hanes brands, unit volume of sheer hosiery fell 8% in 2001, "reflecting the continuing decline in the global sheer hosiery market," the company said.

The prospect of a whole new customer base would be enticing — if not for the decades-long promotion of pantyhose to women, based on sex appeal. That old slogan, "Gentlemen Prefer Hanes," didn't mean they liked it on their own legs. The idea of pantyhose on men was so unthinkable that quarterback Joe Namath got a big laugh by donning them for a television commercial in 1973 for Hanes's Beauty Mist brand.

If the industry suddenly tried marketing to both sexes, would it alienate women in greater numbers than it attracted men? Sara Lee has no plans to market to men. At Kayser-Roth's No Nonsense, Vice President of Development Diane Warren notes that the potential problems extend beyond marketing. "It would be difficult to get a retailer like Wal-Mart to devote shelf space to a pantyhose for men," she says.

Still, it isn't a big jump to pantyhose from nylon running tights, or cycling pants of the sort that are increasingly popular among men eager to look like Lance Armstrong. Also bridging the gap are support hose prescribed to men with phlebitis or a history of blood clots. Although over-the-counter pantyhose don't provide sufficient compression to combat serious vein or circulatory problems, support hose can help minor cases, doctors say.

But whether the incentive for pulling on that first pair is athletic performance or improved circulation, many men keep wearing women's hosiery because it feels good. Mr. Rodgers, a former college athlete, substituted his girlfriend's pantyhose for his running tights one day as an experiment. A decade later, "I wear them every day under my clothes to work," he says, praising not just their comfort but efficiency. "It combines underwear, socks and thermals all in one."

For the industry, a key to marketing to such men might be the naming of the product. So many men were buying women's brands at Wolford AG, the luxury hosiery company based in Austria, that four years ago it started offering male products. Its tights for men — a \$90 cotton velvet offering — aren't called tights. They're called the Waistsock. Amid last year's recession, Wolford America posted double-digit sales growth in that category. "There's nothing feminine about our men's products," says Karen Schneider, Wolford's chief executive officer.

But Waistsock doesn't seem sufficiently macho to Rob Safko. A construction contractor in Ontario, Mr. Safko has such severe varicose veins that a doctor ordered medical support hose. He wears them as prescribed during long-pants season — but not under shorts in the summer. "I can't see the guys being too understanding about that," he says.

Mr. Safko has given considerable thought to how the pantyhose industry might market a product for guys, and not only because he uses them himself. His wife, Nicole, founded Shapings.com, and he moonlights as her assistant. In selling women's brands online to other men, he has learned that many wear hosiery during athletic endeavors, such as cold-weather cycling. Thus, Mr. Safko asserts, the industry should devise a name that suggests strength and endurance. He would choose "Men's Power Skin," he says.

Legwear purveyors contend that men wearing pantyhose belong to a tradition dating back to European aristocracy. "There are portraits 200 years ago of royalty who wore exactly this garment," Mr. Katz says of his Comfilon male pantyhose.

But since most people don't regard male pantyhose wearers as conventional, let alone traditional, many men hush it up. Larry Sobczak, a Michigan journalist and avid cyclist, secretly has worn pantyhose for a decade, without mentioning it even to his brothers. The stigma bothers him. "I once had a girlfriend steal a pair of my boxers," he says. "Why is that OK — women wearing men's boxers — but it's a big problem if I steal a pair of her pantyhose?"

Many guys say their wives or girlfriends have no problem with it. "I had a girlfriend who liked to help me pick them out," says Mr. Rodgers.

A few men wear pantyhose publicly. "I'm 57 and don't care what anybody thinks," says Ron Torgeson, a buyer for an Indiana mechanical contractor.

A pantyhose user for medical reasons, Mr. Torgeson wore them under his shorts last summer on a fishing trip with a buddy. "When he came down to the boat, my friend noticed my hose and asked, 'Do those help?' And I said, 'They do.' Then he started asking me about hosiery. He seemed quite interested in it."