

Of fashion statements

INTERNET, undated

Ever brighter, ever tighter - hot pants for the sprints, ringed socks for the long jump, "whole-body condoms" for swimming. You'd think the Olympics were a fashion, not sports, show. Just about everyone wears as little as possible. The flapping shorts and sloppy tops look is for ball sports only, apart from the volleyballers.

Ah, the volleyballers - especially those on the beach. The girls' bikinis just get tinier and tinier, while if they had their way the boys would play their version of the sport bare-chested.

"Trouble is, there'd be nothing left to throw into the crowd but your shorts," says German beach volleyball player David Klempner.

The tightest-of-tight-fitting high-tech swimsuits might look like the athletes are poured into them, but in fact they take 15 to 20 minutes to struggle into before each race.

That might explain why some of the men prefer the topless knee-length version.

"When I started, I used to wear a costume for 100 old German marks. Now these high-tech racing suits cost 500 euros," says former German swimming star Franziska von Almsick.

The sleek one-piece suits might be good for setting world records, but they are not too flattering. "You look like a flatfish, or a skeleton," says sprint double gold medallist Britta Steffen.

The ones who really go over the top are the synchronised swimming competitors with their wildly patterned, sequined swimsuits and their waterproof make-up.

Chinese model Mo Wanden has just been showing the most expensive swimsuit in Beijing - a little black number with a honeycomb pattern recalling the architecture of the Water Cube and featuring hundreds of crystals by the legendary Austrian Swarovski company.

Designer Huang Yinyan hopes the 117,647-euro garment will enter the Guinness Book of Records. It's due to feature in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne once the Games are over.

Then there is all the fastidious

attention to detail that many athletes indulge in - US heptathlon contender Jackie Johnson's sky-blue detachable sleeves, or Samoa's Shanahan Sanitoo clocking the worst time in the 100m heats in a pink dance costume.

There are more birds of paradise flapping away in the athletics sandpit. Panama's Irving Saladina leapt to gold in one blue and one red lacquered shoe.

South Africa's Khoto Mokoena took silver in bright red knee-length socks, while those of Senegal's Ndiss Kaba Badjiaus featured brightly-coloured rings.

It has even reached as far as the conservative hockey women. They might still be sticking to their classic skirts, but at least the tops have moved on. They are now tight-fitting, with narrow shoulder straps.

For his dead wife

INTERNET, undated

Germany's Matthias Steiner on Tuesday held a picture of his deceased wife Susann as he was presented with the Olympic gold medal for the men's 105kg and above weightlifting division. Steiner, who was born in Austria and competed for them in Athens four years ago, applied for German citizenship after marrying his wife Susann in December 2005.

She died in a car accident in July last year - a few months before Steiner was given German citizenship.

Steiner, who was one of the favourites for the gold medal, looked as if he would be beaten by Evgeny Chigishev, but lifted 258kg on his last attempt in the clean and jerk, for a total of 461kg to beat the Russian by 1kg.

World champion Viktoriia Scerbatis, who won the silver in Athens, had to be content with the bronze medal with a total of 448kg.

At the medal ceremony, Steiner held a photograph of his wife in his hands. He kissed it before receiving his medal and then placed it on the podium as the national anthem was played.



USA gymnast Nastia Liukin balances on the uneven bars during her routine in the final of the artistic gymnastic event of the 2008 Beijing Olympics yesterday. Liukin had to settle for silver, as her compatriot Shawn Johnson won gold and China's Fei Chang the bronze.

Phelps the 100 million dollar man

INTERNET, undated

Olympic medal record-holder Michael Phelps could earn 100 million dollars through endorsement and sponsorship deals, his agent told the Wall Street Journal in an interview published Monday. Phelps, who won a historic eighth gold medal Sunday, currently earns an estimated 3 million to 5 million dollars - a huge amount for an athlete in a niche sport that's only shown on mainstream US television during the Olympics.

As Phelps started accumulating gold medals at the current games, his agent Peter Carlisle began receiving a growing torrent of offers for business opportunities - with more than 50 business proposals a day coming in over the weekend.

"What is the value of eight golds in Beijing before a prime-time audience in the US?" asked Carlisle. "I'd say 100 million dollars over the course of his lifetime."

Phelps, 23, already has contracts with swimwear firm Speedo, Hilton Hotels and watchmaker Omega.

An unreachable goddess

ATHLETICS

INTERNET, undated

A night at the pole vault with Yelena Isinbayeva is like a flirt with an unreachable goddess on a world stage. If 100m world record holder Usain Bolt is called "The chilled out flying machine" then Isinbayeva has every right to be called "The attention-craving vaulting queen."

The Russian has not only redefined gravity as she moves higher and higher into orbit - she also had the whole of China wrapped around her finger as she soared a world record 5.05m for Olympic gold in Beijing on Monday night.

But first the 26-year-old blew kisses into the camera and showed off her dark red fingernails at the pre-competition presentation. That alone drew the biggest roar of the day.

Isinbayeva then disappeared for an hour or so while 11 others engaged in a supporting act, the fight for silver and bronze.

She eventually jumped 4.70m to join three others left in the field and was gone again.

She even brought her own blanket under which she buried

herself. The crowd may have feared it was being teased but Isinbayeva said it was to enable her to concentrate.

"I like it and want to keep it. I try to keep my concentration," she said of the almost duvet-like cover.

If the blanket got too warm she simply pulled her baseball cap deep down into her face. She also covered her face with a towel.

Her next height was 4.85m and she cleared it right away. There was a big smile which soon became even bigger when her last rivals were eliminated and Isinbayeva was assured of another major title.

By now the crowd was on its knees, begging for more.

Isinbayeva obliged, of course she did. But not the world record, came first - for maximum suspense it was a jump of 4.95m.

The crowd went into raptures when the gold medallist finally cleared that height on her third and final try.

With only the world record left, Isinbayeva had the entire stadium at her feet. After all, the clever 4.95m detour assured her that all the other events had finished by then.

The first attempt was not good, the second slightly better, and the final one brought the record.

Isinbayeva yelled out her delight and the crowd roared its approval as she blew kisses on her lap of honour, wrapped in the Russian flag.

Isinbayeva then disappeared for an endless TV marathon as the curtain finally came down.

The Chinese were happy again a few hours after the disappointing withdrawal of their hurdles star Liu Xiang.

"I was trying to do my best for the crowd. It makes me happy, so happy. I felt that I could not go out without the world record because of the support the crowd gave me."

"I love to be alone at the top. It is cool and I want to keep it as long as possible," she said.

Monday's was the 24th world record for Isinbayeva and she needs only 12 more to break the 35 records mighty Sergei Bubka achieved in the men's pole vault. Isinbayeva set no record in 2006 and 2007 but is now back on track with the third record alone this year.

"Yes I will do it. I have just 12 more to go. Life would be boring without world records so I want to continue forever."

"Only the sky is my limit," she said, beaming her famous smile.

Nike denies Liu allegations

AFP, Beijing

Nike on Tuesday issued a strong denial of Internet rumours that it forced Chinese athletics hero Liu Xiang to pull out of the Olympics, adding it had asked authorities to investigate the posting.

The posting is a malicious rumour, and has not only misled netizens, but also seriously damages the company's reputation," Nike, one of Liu's major sponsors, said in a statement emailed to AFP.

"We have immediately asked relevant government departments to investigate those that started the rumour."

A person claiming to be close to Nike posted a long article on the Internet shortly after Liu dramatically pulled out of the 110m hurdles race on Monday due to a foot injury, saying the US sporting firm had forced him to do so.

The posting claimed Liu -- a marketing phenomenon in China and its biggest hope for men's athletics gold in Beijing -- had recovered following an earlier injury, but had not regained enough fitness to win the Olympic title.

As such, it went on, he was unlikely to defend the title he won at the 2004 Athens Games.

"If Liu Xiang did not win the competition (or even win a medal), his value would definitely drop enormously, and we could never make a return on Liu's huge fees," the posting claimed.

The anonymous person said Nike therefore decided to force Liu to pull out of the race, feigning injury.

"That would preserve Liu Xiang's face, and as his sponsors, we would not make too many losses," the posting said.

Nike's European spokesman, Massimo Giunco, who is in Beijing for the Games, said the company had responded to a rumour by an anonymous person because the allegations had been posted on a popular Chinese website.

It is not the first time Nike has been the subject of rumours and speculation over its influence on a major sporting event.

The sports giant was accused of forcing Brazil to field football superstar Ronaldo in the 1998 World Cup final against France even though he had suffered a mysterious fit hours before the game.

When France won the final Nike was caught up in angry recriminations linked to its huge sponsorship contract with Brazil, although it was later cleared of any wrongdoing by a Brazilian parliamentary commission.

China overpowers rivals

ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS

AFP, Beijing

China completed the most dominant Olympic gymnastics performance from any nation for 20 years here Tuesday after yet another judging controversy involving the home nation.

China's Zou Kai won the men's high bar and Li Xiaopeng the men's parallel bars to take the host nation's gymnastics gold medal tally to nine out of 14, the most since the Soviet Union won 10 in 1988.

US gymnasts Shawn Johnson and Nastia Liukin ensured the final night of gymnastics competition did not all go China's way, snaring a one-two finish in the women's balance beam.

Zou won his second individual gold of the Games ahead of Jonathon Horton of the United States and Fabian Hambuechen of Germany.

Reigning world champion Hambuechen opened the final with a solid 15.875 but it was not enough as Zou followed him soon

after with a routine featuring spectacular release and grab movements that scored 16.2.

The crowd thought Horton had bettered him as he went for broke with a dynamic performance and sustained booing erupted when the American was awarded 16.175, broken only by isolated cheering among some Chinese fans.

The same occurred when defending Olympic champion Igor Cassina of Italy performed the last routine of the night, spinning around the high bar on only one had but receiving only 15.675 and fourth place.

There was controversy on Monday night when China's He Kexin won gold on the women's parallel bars under a complicated tiebreak system, even though US gymnast Liukin received exactly the same score and had to settle for silver.

On the men's parallel bars, Li added a Beijing gold to the one he scored at the Sydney Games in 2000.

Li beat South Korea's Yoo Won-chai and Anton Fokin of Uzbekistan to snare his fourth career Olympic gold, including the Sydney and Beijing team

golds.

China's most decorated gymnast needed to better Yoo's 16.25 in the last performance of the night on bars and dis so with style, scoring 16.45 from the judges for his near-flawless routine.

Li's gold gave him 18 Olympic and world titles in his career making him the most decorated Chinese gymnast ever and well ahead of Li Ning's 14 career championships.

Johnson finally claimed gold after winning three silver medals in Beijing, with Liukin taking silver and China's Cheng Fei winning bronze.

It was a narrow victory for Johnson, who scored 16.225, just 0.2 ahead of the 160.025 posted by Liukin, the reigning world champion on the apparatus.

China's Cheng Fei made two wobbles during her routine and stepped on landing but still shot to an early lead with 15.95.

She stayed top until Johnson's breathtaking routine, in which the tiny American somersaulted and flipped along the 10cm wide wooden beam with absolute confidence.

Faith no hindrance

ATHLETICS

AP, Beijing

Roqaya Al-Gassra is adding a distinctive touch to the 200 meters at the Beijing Olympics.

While most attention in the event is on the duel between the Jamaican and American sprinters, Al-Gassra has qualified for the semifinals wearing a neck-to-ankle suit and hijab, a full Muslim headscarf.

The 25-year-old Bahraini sprinter won the second of four second-round heats Tuesday in 22.76 seconds, beating Muriel Hurtis-Houairi of France and Sri Lanka's Susanthika Jayasinghe.

Jamaica's Veronica Campbell-Brown edged American Allyson Felix in the first heat, Russia's Yuliya Chermoshanskaya won the third heat in 22.63 from Jamaica's Kerron Stewart and another Jamaican,

Sherone Simpson, beat U.S. sprinter Muna Lee in the fourth.

Wearing the white hijab and the red full-length suit, Al-Gassra is used to drawing attention she made her Olympic debut in the heats of the 100 at Athens four years ago, is the reigning Asian Games champion and has competed on the Golden League circuit.

Her Olympic profile reports she was the first woman to win an athletics race at the West Asian Games in the 100 at the 2005 edition. Women had not competed in the two previous regional meets.

In the past, she has said her hijab does not bother her, or anyone else.

"Wearing traditional Muslim dress has encouraged me. It's not an obstacle quite the opposite," Al-Gassra said after winning the 200 at the 2006 Asian Games in Doha, Qatar.

Other sprinters have competed in full-length running suits that also cover the head. Australia's Cathy Freeman wore similar in the 400 at

the Sydney Olympics but the aim there was to be more aerodynamic than conform with religious or cultural trends.

Al-Gassra has borrowed from both approaches.

The headscarf is traditional in spirit, but the fabric is clingy and stretchable and her headwear has included a sponsor's trademark.

Al-Gassra says her outfit is a personal choice, although custom weighs heavily. While other Bahraini female athletes compete in the clothing more typical of their sports, many are naturalized Bahraini citizens.

"Wearing the hijab shows that there are no obstacles," she said at Doha. "I've set my best times wearing the hijab."

Felix, who wears the typical briefs and singlet top for female athletes at the Olympics, was focused on Al-Gassra as competition rather than anything else.

"She's really strong. She's been doing really well here, Felix said.



Argentinian cyclist Walter Fernando Perez is ecstatic as he kisses his country's flag following their triumph during the men's cycling Madison final at the 2008 Beijing Olympics on Tuesday.

British rule the roost

CYCLING

AFP, Beijing

Britain confirmed their status as rulers of the Olympic velodrome Tuesday, claiming two of the last three track cycling gold medals on offer to finish with seven out of 10.

On a day that Australian blazes were saved in timely fashion by Anna Meares' sprint silver, giving the team that dominated in Athens just one medal, Britain were celebrating a total of 12 out of 30 medals awarded in Beijing.

They medalled in eight of the 10 events, only failing to claim a medal in the women's points race and the men's Madison.

Flying Scotsman Chris Hoy brought the curtain down in dramatic style when he equalled a 100-year-old British Olympic record on his way to winning his third gold medal of the Games in the coveted sprint event, ahead of England's Jason Kenny.

That handed Hoy a first Olympic sprint title, to go with his victories in the team sprint and keirin.

Kenny, a 20-year-old from Bolton who is competing in his first Olympics, picked up the silver and

will go home with two medals having won gold in the team sprint with Hoy and third team member Jamie Staff of England.

"It's pretty special," said Hoy, who becomes the first Briton to win three Olympic golds in a single Games since swimmer Henry Cotton in 1908.

"When I think multiple medals I think about (rower) Steve Redgrave and (swimmer) Michael Phelps."

"Although I haven't quite matched up to their medals, it's a great achievement to have three gold medals around my neck."

Britain's record tally of medals was completed by Victoria Pendleton, who maintained her unbeaten momentum throughout the tough three-day sprint tournament to claim her first Olympic crown.

"It hasn't sunk in yet, this whole week has been unreal," said Pendleton, who admitted that her biggest sporting legend was the man with whom she has been training on a regular basis.

"Chris (Hoy) is a legend. He's my hero, and he's even more of a legend now."

She added: "I keep pinching myself thinking I'm going to wake up. It's very emotional watching the races in the Olympic village. It's a

dream come true."

The 32-year-old Hoy, who was born in Edinburgh, now has a total of five Olympic medals, four of them gold.

In Athens he won the kilometre time trial crown on its last Olympic appearance and in Sydney four years earlier he claimed silver in the team sprint behind France.

It was after the kilometre was axed from the Olympic programme that Hoy turned his attention to the speed events.

That has turned out to be a blessing in disguise, leading him to win a first keirin world title in 2007, and defending it in 2008 - when he also won the world sprint crown for the first time.

After his displays in the keirin and team sprint at the Games, in which he was unbeaten, Hoy went into the final against his younger teammate as the big favourite.

Kenny, one of the revelations of the track here, gave Hoy a run for his money in the first match before Hoy proved his gold status with a more dominant display in the second.

Kenny could be a main feature of the London Games in 2012, but Hoy said he plans to stick around.

"London? What more motivation do you want," he said as he stood clutching his three gold medals.



Panama's Irving Saladino Aranda lands on his final jump to win the men's Long Jump final of the Beijing Olympics 2008 at the National Stadium on Monday. Irving Saladino Aranda won gold.