

Some commentators say they've had their time. How wrong they were. The footballers' wives still matter — and they'll be back with a vengeance at the World Cup

BY JESS CARTNER-MORLEY
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Every cultural tribe has its day on the front pages, its moment in the full unforgiving glare of being where-it's-at. The hippies had Woodstock in 1969; the acid house generation had the summer raves of 1988 — and the Wags had Baden-Baden in 2006, when the wives and girlfriends of the England football team stole the attention of the entire British media from right under their spouse's noses.

It ended badly, both for the footballers and for their better-looking halves. The term Wag, previously an innocent acronym of “wives and girlfriends,” became a totem of a shallow, consumerist and celebrity-obsessed culture. Four years on, as he names his provisional World Cup squad, Fabio Capello has made great show of sidelining the Wags, the implication being that Alex, Coleen, Carly et al wrecked their boys' focus and fitness in 2006, presumably by clattering into their hotel rooms giggling and tipsy on their Louboutins and then disturbing the athletes' beauty sleep by wanting to hold late-night marital conferences about what best to wear to brunch with the girls the next day — an analysis which strikes me as both far-fetched and misogynistic, but never mind. This time, the Wags are apparently to be accommodated in a sort of holding pen out of harm's way, possibly in Mauritius, and only allowed to visit the players for one day after each game.

But against all the odds, the Wags are back in the fashion game. Those who assumed Coleen Rooney, Abbey Clancey and other footballers' partners would be happy to while away the rest of their lives spending their mornings at the gym and the afternoons at the beauty salon, treading water in the back pages of the trashier gossip weeklies while real life moved on without them, have been proved wrong. In the four years since the last World Cup, they have regrouped, adjusted to the new cultural terrain, dialed down their aesthetic to suit a sobered world and are back where they belong — setting trends.

The lure of Wag fashion

Like it or not, the Wags matter. They are far and away the best style bellwether we have, because they occupy the strategically important territory between cutting-edge fashion and the mainstream. Yes, their look is derivative, but that's the whole point. Lady Gaga's stage wardrobe and the more outre output of Paris fashion week do influence what you wear, but they have to go through a whole sequence of filtering processes along the way. What makes the Wags important for fashion-watchers is that they have an appetite for new trends, but that this is always tempered by a strong sense of vanity. Unlike, say, Agyness Deyn, they will never even consider wearing a dress that does not enhance their cleavage, or shoes that are anything but leg-lengthening. Unlike the fashion avant-garde, their status is dependent as much in looking attractive as in looking on-trend, and this makes them a truer reflection of real women's concerns.

The Wag look of 2010 is a far cry from the teeny hot pants and enormous handbags of the old days. For a start, the new Wag is often to be found in trousers. This is an extraordinary turnaround, since trousers — with the exception of super-tight designer jeans and velour tracksuit bottoms for the gym — were conspicuously absent from the Wag wardrobe a few years ago. This spring, within a time period of a few weeks, a Wag icon, an ex-Wag and a current Queen Wag — Victoria Beckham, Cheryl Cole and Abbey Clancey — were all photographed not just in trousers but in a peg-leg trouser shape, loose at the hip and tight at the ankle.

On the fashion desk we're calling the look for summer 2010, which the Wags have nailed, Daytime plus. Daytime plus is a pair of harem-ish or skinny trousers, with very fashion-forward shoes: either chunky platform heels, or ankle boots, or a cut-out hybrid of the two. On the top, this is paired with a tailored jacket, a new arrival in the Wag wardrobe which projects a sober, I'm-on-the-school-run-just-like-you message. Under the jacket will be a loose, very fine-weave Alexander Wang-ish vest top. This is important because (a) the filminess of the vest layer is essential for showing a bit of breast curvature, an aesthetic to which the Wags are wedded and (b) those filmy vest layers are surprisingly expensive, but are a status symbol which only those who spend time flicking through the rails in *Cricknet* or *Matches* will clock. For slightly more dressed-up occasions, the Wag look once revolved around Herve Leger dresses which were not so much body-conscious as anatomically accurate, and supersized blow-dries. For summer 2010, the Wags who are nailing it — see Stacey Giggs at the Manchester United Player of the Year Awards — have updated the look with looser, cooler dresses and hair given edge with great accessories.

The Wags may not be allowed out on the tiles in Cape Town this summer, but if you think that'll keep them out of the limelight, you're dreaming. I'm backing the girls to win.



The wives and girlfriends of prominent English footballers, aka Wags, such as Coleen Rooney, above, and Victoria Beckham, right, set trends because they occupy the strategically important territory between cutting-edge fashion and the mainstream.

PHOTOS: EPA AND AFP



Tokyo's samurai women put fat to the sword

Takafuji Ukon targeted men when he introduced the swords in an exercise class, but instead found women enthusiastically flocking to the martial workout

BY MIWA SUZUKI
AFP, TOKYO

Japan's ancient samurai swords were once used to slice apart enemies, but in a new fitness craze they serve to slash away at extra kilograms and cut down on modern-day stress instead.

“Cut down!” a sword-wielding instructor shouted during a recent “Samurai Camp” gym session in Tokyo as a squad of sweat-drenched women warriors followed suit, slashing the air with their shiny blades.

“Put your right foot forward, cut down straight, thrust out your chest, no bending of the back,” the instructor yelled to the sound of a techno dance beat and swooshing weapons. “Punish the extra fat with this!”

To avoid turning the health workout into a bloodbath, the swords are made of wood and urethane foam, but the determination of the participants is steely: the goal is to shed 5kg in about a month.

The popularity of the course, which comes amid a resurgence of interest in Japan's medieval warrior class, surprised even its inventor Takafuji Ukon, a 31-year-old choreographer, dancer and fitness expert.

Last year Ukon initially targeted men when he introduced the swords in an exercise class in his mirror-walled aerobics-style studio — but instead found women enthusiastically flocking to the martial workout.

“I thought swords are for men and fans are for women. That was wrong,” he said in an interview in his studio, where more than 100 women have signed up for classes that cost about US\$20 per hour.

Ukon has no martial arts training but is a master of sword dancing, which is believed to date back centuries with roots in dances performed by samurai warriors to pacify the souls of the dead.

“I thought it would be great if I could bring



Takafuji Ukon leads students during a fitness lesson at his studio in Tokyo.

PHOTO: AFP

exercise and Japanese traditional performing arts together to help people have fun and lose weight,” said Ukon, whose mother is a teacher of traditional Japanese dancing.

“This allows women to be someone they thought they could never be. I think what made them become so absorbed in this is that they can look at themselves in the mirror and feel ecstatic about becoming someone with a sword.”

During the recent session, chuckling students advised each other: “Say sorry if you hit other people,” and “Don't retaliate.”

Ukon told them: “You'll learn four basic patterns first — the body slash, frontal cut-down, slant cut and reverse slant cut — and then we will proceed to their combinations.”

Samurai may have been famously stoic and hardened fighters, but Ukon's advice was more New Age — he told his charges to visualize their enemy as body fat and as the negative emotions and impulses in their minds.

“We don't live in an era of slashing people,” he said. “What we cut down is the negative things in ourselves.”

One of the students, 20-year-old publishing employee Midori Ito, said afterward: “I sweated and twisted my waist a lot. Swords are fun.”

Another enthusiastic student was Kazuko Ueda, a 40-year-old manager at an information technology company and confessed aerobics class dropout.

“Holding a sword is very original. It's also fun to get in touch with Japanese culture a bit, and flinging a sword and cutting makes me feel good.

“I feel like I'm slashing evil people, as if I had become a samurai or a hero in a period drama.”

Another student, a 33-year-old pharmaceutical lab assistant, said it was hard to keep up with the instructor “but it was fun to hack away.”

If the exercise were a real battle with metal swords, she added, “I heard we would be slashing a thousand people or more in one lesson.”