



Getting to the bottom of it

An old debate: boxers vs. briefs

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Underwear is hip. Boxers or briefs, judging by surveys that keep piling up on editors' desks everywhere, seems destined to be one of pop culture's eternal, wafer-light questions. When they hung a pair of John F. Kennedy's old boxers worn during his World War II Navy days in a Dublin shop window this summer, it drew big crowds.

Some public relations gurus threw a bunch of male and female models clad only in underwear on the streets of New York last month, and watched as garbage truck drivers and executives joined in showing off their skivvies -- all in the name of trying to get National Underwear Day on the calendar.

Agoura Hills resident and nouveau celebrity Erin Brockovich-Ellis said that she and her family got into a discussion about "tighty-whiteys" and other things down under coming home from a recent weekend waterskiing trip.

"It's funny you should be calling about this," she said.

Funny indeed. Whatever the reasons -- be it the need for something to talk about, constant string-pulling by marketers or underwear's ongoing rise as a fashion statement -- the boxers-vs.-briefs issue keeps coming back like some boomerang riding perpetual hot-air thermals.

The Big Bang for all this was when then-President Clinton was lobbed the question on MTV back in the '90s smack dab amid an election campaign (his answer: mostly briefs).

"We all thought it was outrageous to ask the president that," said Robert Thompson, a pop culture professor at Syracuse University.

That one moment, Thompson said, established boxers vs. briefs as "trivial pop quiche." It was no longer taboo. Suddenly, it seemed that your "unmentionables" were no longer that.

Boxers or briefs, Thompson added, also went straight to the top as "the king of ridiculously stupid questions."

Everyone agrees it's a stupid question; reaction to an informal Star local-newsmakers poll included laughter, brief silence and flat-out, "Are you serious?"

Yet, people still talk about it. Internet chat rooms are full of fervent believers on both sides -- along with those "kumbaya" types calling for peace on the topic, contending that everyone should respect one another's underwear choices, and others who say they don't care or don't think about it.

Why all the chatter? Because it's something amusing to talk about -- like Coke vs. Pepsi, cats vs. dogs, smooth vs. chunky peanut butter.

There's no right or wrong answer. It's rock candy for the brain, as harmless as talking about the weather -- though it's hard to imagine anyone being asked whether they prefer squall lines or occluded fronts.

"Everyone can form an opinion on this, and there's not a lot of feelings hurt or friendships lost, as opposed to Republican vs. Democrat, where you can have feelings hurt," Thompson said.

But Max Hernandez, owner and president of the How Ya Hangin'? online boxer underwear company in Baltimore, said people take it more seriously than that.

"It runs stronger than a Coke-or-Pepsi argument, because each side looks at the other as inferior," Hernandez said.

It's also similar to more serious things, such as political party preference or the abortion issue, in that the choice runs fairly even, said Eric Baird, founder and president of the vintage skivvies.com underwear business in Denver.

"It's always been basically split," Baird noted. "If it was skewed one way or the other, it wouldn't even be a topic."

Recent surveys show it is right down the line.

Freshpair.com, the same company that put the underwear-only models on New York streets, also commissioned a poll last year that showed briefs holding a slim edge over boxers among males, 31 percent to 30. In a similar Cotton Inc. survey released in 2001, boxers held a 40-39 percent edge over briefs.

In the Cotton Inc. study, about two of every three women said they preferred to see men in boxers, not briefs. Online, some women said they wouldn't bed a guy if he was wearing briefs, but others countered that briefs were sexier than boxers.

The Cotton Inc. poll showed a clear age gap -- men in their teens and 20s overwhelmingly wore boxers; it started getting even heading into the mid-30s, and those 35 and older were by far briefs fans. Hence, one reason why briefs still outsell boxers (boxers also cost more).

In the Freshpair poll, thongs were the third choice among men, at 21 percent. Sean Evans, public relations director for Freshpair in New York, said both thongs and the hybrid boxer briefs are gaining in popularity, along with a new version of trunks, which he described as a shortened version of a boxer brief, but more stylish and sexier.

Evans claimed he recently got a call from a gruff, manly sounding guy in Tennessee looking for underwear in size XXL -- thongs, that is.

No wonder Carson Kressley, the fashion guru on the summer smash hit "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," advises men to ditch the boxers.

Boxers, to many men, are too loose and have certain "gapping" problems, especially for athletes. But briefs, derisively called tighty-whiteys by the boxer crowd, are too constricting for many.

Briefs beat boxers, 44 percent to 37, in a survey of pro golfers done earlier this year by Sports Illustrated. No one was named, so we didn't find out what Tiger Woods wears.

One golfer said he wore briefs "because he didn't like freedom on the course," but one of every 20 golfers said they go commando (nothing under their slacks).

One wise guy said he wore a g-string. ... Don't laugh, because 45 percent of the men in the Freshpair poll said they'd like to wear one.

Local musician Jonathan McEuen (son of John McEuen, an original member of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) wears the hybrid boxer briefs but indicated he's not totally comfortable.

"They need to make the perfect combination," he said.

Such heightened fashion awareness, Brockovich-Ellis and others said, is another reason why underwear is talked about more. It's branching out in style, colors and design, as evidenced by the eclectic Joe Boxer line that's been so successful -- and is now found at the great melting pot called Kmart.

"The under part of your garments has become part of your sexuality, feeling frisky if you will," Brockovich-Ellis said. "And for women, some of the lingerie is just lovely."

Hernandez (of How Ya Hangin'?) said it's become vogue to show off your underwear, noting skateboarders and other Gen-Xers who have long worn their outer pants low.

"Before, no one could tell you were wearing Calvin Kleins or whatever unless they saw you in a locker room," he said.

Which brings us back to those underwear-only models on the streets of New York. The knee-jerk reaction is, "It's New York; who noticed?" But apparently some people did.

"We had people getting out of garbage trucks on Fifth Avenue and dropping their pants," Evans said. "We had businessmen dropping their pants and walking across 34th Street."

The Aug. 13 event got play on 79 TV stations nationwide, he said. He claimed that Freshpair.com is working with politicians, among them U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, to make Aug. 13 the official National Underwear Day.

They claim to have more than 500,000 signatures -- and yes, you too can sign the petition by logging on to freshpair.com.

"It's more than just a silly sales gimmick," Evans said. "We just want to give underwear a day where it is appreciated."

Like all good pop culture kitsch, underwear has its own urban legend. This one goes that briefs, because they are tighter, make men sterile. McEuen, for example, cited that as a reason why he doesn't wear briefs.

But a 1997 study by doctors from State University of New York at Stony Brook showed that underwear type didn't affect semen quality or scrotal temperature; it was almost a dead heat between cotton briefs and linen boxers.

The results still didn't sway McEuen. The fact that it was studied at all is more than enough.

Study underwear further and all sorts of gems pop up. King Tut reportedly was buried with 145 pairs of loincloths, supposedly to protect his jewels through eternity, which likely means that even after all these years, he's still only on his second pair.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of Speedos. On "Seinfeld," Jerry wore boxers and George wore briefs, and Kramer gave up Jockey briefs after being told about the sperm count legend but went commando after he couldn't adjust to boxers.

Perhaps a perfect subject for a show that was viewed as being all about nothing. Is all this talk about underwear another trip down life's amusing backwaters, or further evidence of the dumbing down of America?

Brockovich-Ellis leans toward the former. With all this world chaos brewing, "we need more humor like this," she said.

Hernandez said people are more open discussing the topic. He has taken his underwear samples to Baltimore Ravens football games, asking the crowd to try them.

"I've had 80-year-olds tell me that they still go commando, stuff that's completely against type," Hernandez said. "A guy will pull me aside to talk about their underwear and say, 'The problem I have is ...' and they start getting real graphic and I go, 'No, no, you really don't have to go there.'"

"Having been in this business awhile, you get a lot of strange, true confessions."