

New York Times Magazine

JANUARY 31, 1988

Kick Off Your Heels

A FRIEND OF MINE, a sedate historian, allows how he used to sit in the library as a graduate student at Princeton trying to bury his thoughts in some thick tome. In those bad old days, when Princeton was all-male, the appearance of a female visitor would sometimes be signaled by a sound outside the window in the summer evening: the unmistakable click, click of high heels on the garden walk. Like the bell that made Pavlov's dog salivate, the mere sound of the walk triggered a physiological cascade. Such is the drift of the male brain that it can be drawn off course, for at least minutes, by the sound of a symbol of sexuality.

Yet consider what those heels do with the female form. The legs are slimmed and lengthened; this makes them what students of animal behavior call a supernormal stimulus — recalling, yet exaggerating the lengthening that occurs at puberty. (Pin-up drawings always exaggerate length.) At the same time, the feet are shortened — daintier? For some reason, both men and women seem to prefer smaller feet. Heels tighten the calves and make them prominent. The buttocks are thrown up and out (a distant echo, perhaps, of the sexual “presenting” of female mammals) and the bosom thrust forward, producing the S-curve for which women bustled and corseted brutally in time past. That certain something — not a ponytail — that sways when she walks (because women's hips are wider and not poised over the knees) sways more than usual. And she is hobbled. She is charmingly (to him) off-balance on her pedestal, and unable to flee. (A convicted mugger has said, “We would wait under a stairwell in the subway station and, when we heard the click of the wobbly spiked heel, we knew we had one.”)

The message is not unambiguous helplessness. The heels just about abolish the average male advantage in height. The points of the heels and the toes are suitable weapons. But regardless of ambiguity, they convey a message: Look at me; get close if you can — or, if you haven't the courage, try to go back to your book.

Courting creatures signal sex in myriad ways. Often the males do the strutting. The peacock spreads his magnificent eyed feathers, and antelope like the Uganda kob prance and clang great antlers against each other. Other species leave some posing to the female. In the 10-spined stickleback, a little fresh-water fish of the British Isles, the female flashes a bit of swollen silver belly and triggers the male's courtship dance. The female zebra finch, an Australian perching bird, sits on a branch and stretches in a horizontal posture. While the male watches nearby, she bends her legs, sleeks her gray feathers and

flutters her black-and-white tail. The female great crested grebe, ordinarily a graceful diving waterbird, assumes an even more awkward posture, sitting on the water with her wings spread and shoulders pointing down.

Humans are no slouches when it comes to sexual signaling. On the contrary, we take the signals nature has given us — an arched brow, a descending eyelid, a smile — and embellish them with every conceivable cultural brush stroke. Draping or painting or piercing or molding the body has gone on for millennia. New Guinea men paint themselves dramatically for dancing, and marriageable Papuan maidens bear elegant tatoos. Extensive, patterned scars variously signified femininity and manliness in many African cultures. Lip plugs, head molding, circumcision, ear stretching, tooth filing — the list goes on.

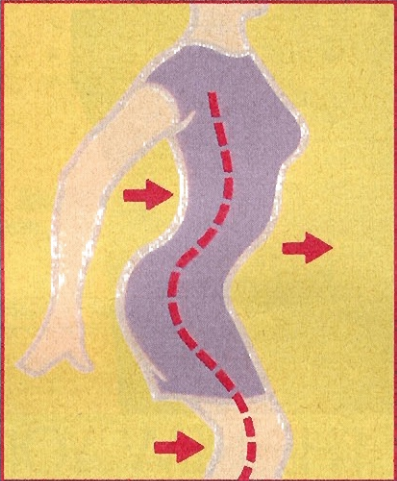
Fewer than a hundred years ago, Western women tied themselves in corsets that damaged abdominal organs and made them respiratory wrecks. At the same time, the Chinese were still practicing the extraordinary 1,000-year-old tradition of foot-binding. The resulting foot was shortened, with all toes but the first curled under and the arch drastically raised — essentially, high heels made of bone. This distortion was a matter of pride, a sign of nobility and allure.

How close do our own artificial high heels come to that old Chinese ideal? Not very, but there are similarities. Both signify sex and class, and achieve femininity. And both, to different degrees, result in impairment.

Orthopedists and chiropractors see the consequences in backache and knee problems. One orthopedics text-

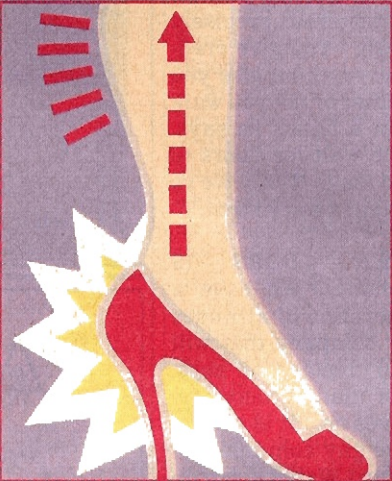
High heels have worked ‘their way into our sexual imagery.’ They have also been responsible for leg and back problems.

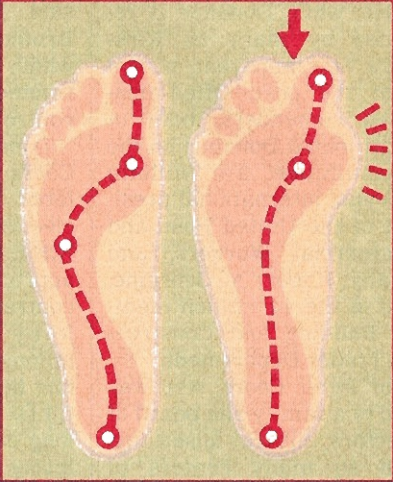
LOOKS, NOT COMFORT



THE S-CURVE
High heels throw the upper body forward, the lower torso backward. This can lead to a hobbling gait and physical damage to the lower back and legs.

A PAINFUL SHAPE
In high heels, the toes and balls of the feet bear too much weight in striking the ground, and they transmit a shock upward. Prolonged wearing can lead to a permanent contraction of the calf muscles and Achilles' tendon.





FOOT DISORDERS
Instead of distributing weight equally on the bottom of the foot (above left), high heels shift weight directly from heel to toe (above right). The shoe can bend the toe and lead to painful bunions.

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book describes the gait in such shoes as "ungainly" and "mincing," and notes that the normal cushioning is lost. Authorities agree that the toes and balls of the feet in high heels must bear too much weight in striking the ground, and that they transmit the shock upward. After prolonged wearing of high heels, the calf muscles and the Achilles' tendon may permanently contract. Robert Donatelli, a physical therapist, says shortened calf muscles may cause the knees to be slightly flexed; this in turn may cause chronic flexion of hips. The ultimate result may produce a shape of buttocks suggestive to the male, but at the cost of increased lumbar lordosis, harmful pressure on the lumbar discs that can cause low-back pain.

RICHARD BENJAMIN, A PODIATRIST at the Greater Southeastern Hospital in Washington, says, too, that throwing the weight on the ball of the foot diminishes the normal roles of both heel and big toe. Incorrect turning of the foot throws the knee out, affecting the hip and back. Like the S-shaped stance, the exaggerated pelvic sway provides allure at a cost in physical damage.

Podiatrists do see several times more women than men, primarily because of high-heeled shoes with pointed toes. Pain in foot bones is almost inevitable, but this is only the beginning. Abrasions, calluses, bunions (*hallux valgus*), tendinitis, ingrown toenails and serious bone deformities such as hammer toes and "pump bump" — a bony enlargement of the heel where the shoe rim bites into it — are frequent. Bunions can be serious; they can force the joint between the big toe and the adjacent metatarsal bone to become so bent for so long that calcium buildup renders it permanently and painfully deviated. The ratio of women to men who have this disorder is estimated to be 40-to-1. High heels also cause abnormal thickening of skin and bone at the ball of the foot, and this can force the small toes under the foot, crushing them, in some rare cases. Sheldon Flaxman, a foot surgeon, concludes: "These shoes should be worn for special occasions only." Even then, he says, they should not be pointed and the heels should be as low as possible.

High heels are, after all, relatively new in Western tradition. In the 16th century, the elegant — men and women alike — began to like upward-tilting footwear. Before the Elizabethan period in England, flatness in shoes was consistent with both elegance and sex. One will search in vain in earlier paintings and sculpture for evidence of shoes that lever people off the ground. By the mid-18th century, men's shoes had returned to normalcy, but women were stuck on their awkward platforms, and there they have remained. The most extreme form — the stiletto of the 1950's — was often banned, to prevent damage to floors. No laws, written or unwritten, prevent damage to feet — or to women's sense of freedom.

Why do we have such an attachment to this hurtful fashion? The Freudians have had a field day with it, *likening it to a mild version of the condition in which a fetishist (always a man) can be aroused only by a shoe.* They even invoke sadomasochism as well, and in this explanation the pain and harm are no longer incidental. As I get older, the pain is what I most often see. But I have to admit that a woman will sometimes take me by surprise — dressed to the nines, high-heeled shoes and all.

I'm fighting it though, the part of it that comes from bad shoes. I expect to win. I think of adjectives that apply to women in flat shoes: lithe, graceful, earthy, athletic, sensible, fleet, dancing, practical, fresh, nimble, strong — and sexy, definitely sexy. (Don't look for logic here, we're talking about hormones.) I think of the women depicted by Greek and Roman art — they didn't need to be hobbled to interest men. I think of the polka and the hora instead of the waltz and the tango — and as for whatever it is we do to rock music, that works just as well in flats.

Still, it's hard to visualize a great formal party without stylish women kicking up their high heels. Like some of the other indulgences of that and like occasions, they're probably O.K. in moderation. But for everyday wear they make as little sense as a three-martini lunch. They're a relatively recent innovation. They've wormed their way into our sexual imagery. But it's hard to see why they have to stay there. ■