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NONSENSE

Wearing Pantyhose Is Serious Business For Some Guys

By **SHELLEY PRESTON**
The Ledger

Real men wear pantyhose. Really, they do. Just ask Bobby, a 40-year-old Polk County truck driver. Bobby is not a sexual fetish, he simply likes the way hose support his legs during long hauls and how they helped stabilize a knee injury recently. But mostly, he likes them because the silky fabric is a little bit of luxury.

"It's just like wearing a pair of silk boxers," he says. "Nothing wrong with that. I just like the way pantyhose feel."

As a married father of one, Bobby's family stands by his choice to wear pantyhose, but he still asked that we not use his last name for fear his friends and colleagues might make fun of him, or worse, consider him to be some sort of weirdo.

Bobby is not alone.

In an effort to get recognition for pantyhose as a genderless garment, online groups such as "Legwear as Unisex Fashion" and "Men Wearing Pantyhose for Health Reasons" exist for men who use hosiery as a functional piece of clothing. Those sites shun sexual content, and hundreds of men who contribute posts ask each other advice on what to tell their girlfriends or if shaved legs keep hose from slipping. Others give testimony on how hose helped them with restless leg syndrome or kept their legs feeling fresh after working on their feet all day.

Perhaps the man who best understands this niche group is Steven Katz, owner of Comfilon Activeskin Legwear of Granville, Ohio, an e-commerce site dedicated solely to selling pantyhose and tights designed for men. After inheriting a hosiery business that once made its bread and butter offering wares to small retailers, Katz searched for a new way to keep family business afloat. He and his wife, Constance Barsky, were surprised to discover an untapped market: men who resorted to buying women's pantyhose because there was nothing out there designed just for them.

Unlike women's pantyhose, many of Comfilon's products are designed with male anatomy in mind. Styles ranging from opaque tights to sheer nude pantyhose are made in man-sized proportions and come with fly fronts.

Hosiery manufacturers don't keep numbers on male customers, and some men feel embarrassed to go public, Katz says, so it is hard to say how many men enjoy wearing hosiery. All Katz knows is Comfilon has been going strong since he and Barsky started the company in 1999.



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CINDY SKOP/THE LEDGER (PHOTO ILLUSTRATION)

Men are wearing pantyhose, but not for the reasons you might think. Truckers are wearing them to support their leg during long hauls. Some swear by them in help with restless leg syndrome. Some say they can help stabilize knee injuries.



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With the success of his business, Katz jokes some men must be born with a "nylon gene." Some guys like the feel of silk, satin and nylon, while the rest are content to stick to cotton or wool.

"For women, it's no problem," Katz explains in a section of his Web site meant to address guys' fears of wearing hose. "They can wear either kind of fabric. For men it can be problematic. Men are supposed to be tough and macho in our society, so they can't have a softer side and like soft fabrics."

David Takeda, 44, of Alberta, Canada, is a Comfilon customer who has worn pantyhose daily for two years, is past worrying about what people think. "I have the 'nylon gene.'" says the father of three who works on a family farm. "I enjoy wearing pantyhose or nylons for both pleasure and leg support. (Knowing) about other men that share the same interest gave me the courage to wear openly and daily year round."



Lakeland Magazine



East Polk Lifestyles



CINDY SKOP/THE LEDGER (PHOTO
ILLUSTRATION)

For his part, Bobby, the Polk County truck driver, is familiar with hosiery designed for men, but through trail and error has found he likes the texture of certain brands manufactured for women best.

After years of wearing hosiery, he's brave enough to buy pantyhose in the open without decoys, such as his wife or a shopping list. He says talking to sales people at hosiery stores has convinced him he is far from the only man who has walked through the door. When he's on the road, he'll stop into L'eggs Hanes Bali outlets near Fort Myers to buy a pair or two. No one at the store would respond to a request for an interview about male customers, but Bobby says staff has helped him find styles that fit and have the right texture without batting an eyelash.

Bobby's wife accepts his nylons and even likes the way they look on him. He says he's found women tend to be more open to the idea of men wearing pantyhose than men who don't, which is why he still keeps things under wraps.

A few men from the forums said it took some convincing to get their wives and girlfriends to understand their fashion choice, but when they did, next thing they knew, their wives were helping them pick out styles.

Terri Barnes, a publicist for L'eggs Hanes Bali says she wasn't aware of a mainstream market for men. "I would be surprised if there was."

Her company may be missing out. Sheer hosiery sales for women have declined for more than a decade, according to NPD, a market research company. Current fashion has favored bare legs for women and they have abandoned nylons to gathering dust in their chest of drawers. But it seems certain men can't get enough of them.



CINDY SKOP/THE LEDGER (PHOTO
ILLUSTRATION)

It's hard to say how many men are wearing pantyhose, but the market is growing, with some men wearing them to support their legs during a long work day. Male pantyhose is not without precedent. Silk stockings were worn by men as far back as the Middle Ages in Europe and later became a fashion accessory must for noble men and gentry.

Mike Blackport, 38, of Grand Rapids, Mich., is moderator for the Delphi Forum site "Legwear as Unisex Fashion," and he has been a fan of hosiery for decades.

"I think they are the most comfortable article of clothing available, he says. "About 15 years ago, I decided that a man wearing pantyhose is not illegal, or even embarrassing, so I decided to come out from under my long pants and in the warmer months wear them with shorts. My family, friends and co-workers all know and honestly don't care what I have on my legs."

Male pantyhose is not without precedent. Silk stockings were worn by men as far back as the Middle Ages in Europe and later became a fashion accessory must for noble men and gentry. Charles Dickens described his character Mr. Lorry in a "Tale of Two Cities" as "He had a good leg, and was a little vain of it, for his brown stockings fitted sleek and

close, and were of a fine texture; his shoes and buckles, too, though plain, were trim."

Could another male hosiery renaissance be close?

Blackport said he hopes so.

"Today's woman wears many men's garments -- all we're saying is give us equal fashion rights," he says. "No, I don't want a skirt and high heels, I just want to enjoy the benefits of hosiery. And the thing is, equal hosiery fashion rights are already here. I am living proof. I wear them every day proudly."

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