



If you are going to recreate outdoors during the cold months, long johns better be your base layer. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

Try some long johns for your outdoor activities



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Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Long johns, like most outdoor clothing, have come a long way. The old style of "longies" we used to wear are not only obsolete, but ineffective and possible dangerous in an outdoors situation.

The long johns I wore as a kid were the old waffle type. I think my grandmother called them "thermals" but they were far from that. My thermals

everyone knows cotton is a bad mix for outdoor clothing.

When I would trudge off into the woods, wearing my thermals, the snow would cake up on my pant legs. As the body heat would escape, this snow would melt somewhat, only to freeze later in the day. I then had a pair of matched frozen legs inside my long johns that made the rest of me frozen stiff.

One of the early sets of long underwear was called the union suit. The union suit was a full-body style with a button down flap for your rear end. These are the longies you see the old time cowboy wearing in the Norman Rockwell scenes. I never figured out the practicality of a rear

of the species, but rest assured I would not recommend them for outdoor people.

The term "long johns" has a more interesting history, but some of it may be urban legend. A boxer by the name of John Sullivan from Boston may have the claim for their name.

Sullivan was one of the last champions from the bare-knuckle boxing days, and later was the first champ of the modern style of glove boxing. He held the title from 1882 to 1892, and always wore his signature style uniform in the ring, a simple pair of long underwear. Sullivan bragged he "could lick anyone at any time." Modesty was not one of his strong suits.

When you are going to tackle the cold, layering your clothing is most important. The base layer, the long underwear, serves as the most important piece. The base layer serves as the foundation, the layer that touches your skin.

Long underwear comes in three different weights: Lightweight, mid-weight and heavyweight. Depending on your activity, choosing the correct weight is paramount. If you are going to be physically active, the light will probably do. Whereas if you are going to spend time sitting, probably best to go with the heavyweight.

If the temperature is going to be below the freezing mark, or there is going to be wind, the

choice. Remember that the base layer's job is to manage moisture by wicking it away from your skin, keeping you dry. The insulation that keeps you warm comes from the middle layer, so don't overdo.

The fit of your long underwear is probably the most important feature. My grandmother always bought me clothes two sizes too large, under the theory that "he will grow into them."

In order to wick moisture away from your skin efficiently, your base layer actually has to be next to your skin. You are looking for a comfortable, yet snug fit. I prefer the compression fit in most of my outdoor clothes. In order to be sure, try it on first.

When wearing a base layer in the warmer weather, some folks prefer a loose fit under the idea that the air will circulate better and allow them to cool faster. With a loose fit, you actually sacrifice wicking efficiency by spreading the moisture everywhere and not allowing the cloth to do its job.

Choose the material carefully for your long underwear. I have said it before, cotton may be America's material, but it is not your friend in the great outdoors. You will generally choose from synthetics, silk and wool.

One of the most common materials used in long underwear is the synthetics of polyester, nylon or poly-

ester. Many manufacturers add some spandex for comfortable stretch and snug fit without strangling you.

Synthetics are known to excel at their moisture wicking properties. The synthetics are also the most durable for extreme conditions. Some synthetics add a finish that inhibits the buildup of odor causing bacteria. If you are going to be out several days between washes, you might want to consider this feature (as well as extra deodorant.)

The next material to consider is silk. I have used silk and found it to be the most comfortable but the least durable. Silk has only minimal moisture-wicking qualities so don't push the envelope when wearing silk. Silk does not have an odor resistant material, so it must be washed daily.

I have found silk to be far too fragile for my activities. If you are going on a gentle fall hike, silk will be fine. If you are on a spring backpack trip, best choose something else.

The last material to discuss is Merino wool. Wool has come a long way over the years. I plan on doing a separate column about the advancements in wool in the near future. Wool can have other materials added, like spandex, to help improve comfort and fit.

Merino wool wicks moisture well, but will always feel wet. This will not chill you; it is the char-

acteristic of retaining moisture in its core. Wool takes much longer to dry out after wearing than other materials.

Wool is fairly durable for outdoor use. You can wear wool as an under layer or an outer layer, or both. If you want to increase the durability of a wool garment, look for a wool and synthetic blend.

I have worn wool for several days and would report that wool does not stink when it gets sweaty. Merino wool is highly resistant, and naturally resistant, to odor causing bacteria, making it a great material choice for physically active days outdoors.

Yes, gone are the days of my having to wear the waffle pattern, cotton long johns my grandmother got me, two sizes too big. They were really useless for keeping me warm outdoors. I have found that the shirts make a nice rag to buff with when I wax the truck, so it wasn't a total waste.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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