

The New York Times

November 16th, 2006

Online Shopper: Boxers or Briefs? It's a Mystery.

By MICHELLE SLATALLA

YOU think you know a man after 18 years of marriage.

I certainly thought so. But one day last week, while I was sitting at my computer, up popped an ominous onscreen window with an instant message from my husband: "I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE."

I wondered if he had quit his job. I wondered if he was leaving me, if his car had been towed or if, at the very least, one of the children had walked off again with his favorite hairbrush.

I typed (cautiously), "Is something wrong?"

He wrote: "I NEED NEW UNDERWEAR."

New underwear? I felt a certain sense of relief. There would be no tears, no recriminations and no unpleasant custody battle in which each parent tried to persuade a judge to send the children to live with the other.

On the other hand, did underwear really qualify as the sort of crisis that pushes someone to the brink? To my knowledge, there was nothing really wrong with the underwear in his dresser.

I phoned him. "Why are you typing in all caps?" I asked. "Are you also planning to issue an all-points bulletin concerning your socks?"

"My underwear is old," he said. "It is ratty. I tried to buy new pairs. I can't find any I like."

I offered to help because, frankly, shopping for men's underwear seemed like a no-brainer. Sure, there was a big shake-up in styles back in 1902, when the P. H. Hanes Knitting Company introduced two-piece underwear into the market. But in the ensuing decades? It seemed like the only question was boxers or briefs?

My husband said he wanted neither. Then he launched into the sort of impassioned speech that made me wonder how many men out there are keeping their underwear complaints under wraps. Itchy elastic waistbands, baggy boxers that bunch during long flights, tight briefs that ride up under pants — he had been living with it all, in secret.

"I feel like I don't even know you," I said.

"I want broxers," he said.

I was unfamiliar with the term.

"They're cut loose like boxers but made from the knit fabric you see in briefs," he said.

This sounded reasonable until I went online to look for them. That's when I learned that broxers, as a category of underwear, do not exist.

On the Internet, I saw plenty of boxers, including such seasonally appropriate styles as Snowflake Dot Boxers (\$10 at gap.com). I also saw plenty of briefs, including the Jockey seamless no-fly midway briefs at jcpenny.com (\$19.50 for a two-pack). I even saw variations on a hybrid called the boxer brief (cut long like a boxer, but snug-fitting like a brief) at sites like undergear.com (which featured 56 styles) and the aptly named mensunderwearstore.com, which had nearly 150 different styles).

None of them sounded like broxers.

I also considered, and eliminated, such trendy options as the Magic Silk G String (on sale for \$10 at freshpair.com) and the Hipster Air Raid Commando Brief (\$22.25 at aussiebum.com).

I had run out of ideas. So I turned to the people at Hanesbrands Inc., who have been studying the issue of men's underwear since the 1900s, when two brothers named Hanes formed two separate companies to manufacture socks and underwear.

If the Hanes team could invent an idea as radical as seamless women's hosiery, then surely somewhere among their 20 current styles of men's underwear bottoms was a pair that embodied the elements of a broxer.

"Broxer. Interesting name," said Jim Phelan, the company's vice president and general manager for male underwear.

"My husband said you can use it if you want," I said. "His concern is finding a pair that actually fits the description. He's kind of picky."

A lot of men are just as picky these days, Mr. Phelan said.

"Five years ago, only 60 percent of men purchased or influenced the purchase of their underwear," Mr. Phelan said. "Now it's 80 percent, and about 17 percent are what we call 'highly involved.' " In the old days, a man got up in the morning, put on underwear — boxers or briefs — and never gave it a second thought. But now, men see their underwear as a "situational thing," Mr. Phelan said.

"It's becoming very common to wear up to three pairs a day, driven by the use," he said. "They'll wear boxers to work, come home and put on a pair of briefs under shorts to work out, and then put on a third pair after a shower."

Men in focus groups speak freely about the same underwear issues my husband raised. The button fly, for instance.



PRESS COVERAGE

"On boxers, the gap on the fly that opens is something they don't like, but they are very uncomfortable with having to undo a button to go to the restroom," Mr. Phelan said. "Next spring, we're coming out with a fly that doesn't gap."

"But with no button?" I asked.

"No button," he said. "But it will eliminate fly gapping."

The No. 1 concern men have is how underwear feels.

"Men are very sensitive to that," Mr. Phelan said. "It has to feel like cotton, even if it's a blend. Knit boxers are a very large and fast-growing segment."

So what does Hanesbrands sell at hanes.com that most resembles a boxer? Mr. Phelan sent me test pairs, including some knit boxers, for my husband to review.

My husband said the knit boxers with a fabric-covered waistband in a cotton-polyester blend (three for \$9) were comfortable except for a fatal flaw: the button fly. ("I guess I could rip off the button," he said.) Ditto the fitted knit boxers. ("How could I wear these to a ballgame?")

I was sure he'd dislike the more fitted, Hanes Classic boxer briefs with ComfortSoft waistband (two for \$13). But he liked the feel of the 100 percent knit so much that he said he would consider wearing them to work out, but not to a ballgame.

"But they're cut narrow, like briefs," I said.

"They have no tag," he said. "Lowers the itch factor."

Even after 18 years, he's still a mystery to me.

About Freshpair:

Freshpair is a leading Internet retailer of men's and women's intimate apparel, offering hundreds of styles of bras, panties, t-shirts, boxers, briefs, socks, sleepwear, and more. From full-figure to petite, shapewear to thongs, boxers to briefs, and everything in between, we are the ultimate destination for intimate apparel shopping. Freshpair.com carries many of the major brand names including 2(x)ist, C-IN2, Calvin Klein, Wacoal, Chantelle, Le Mystere, and Bali.