Pat Riley thinks a suit makes a more effective leader. He might be right

Pat Riley coached the Lakers, Knicks and Heat, usually in an Armani custom-made suit. Illustration: Dan Goldfarb / The Athletic; Jonathan Daniel / Getty Images

By **Rustin Dodd**

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This story is part of Peak, The Athletic*'s desk covering the mental side of sports. Sign up for Peak's newsletter here.*

The suit had a classic name: the Clark Gable. Navy blue and cut just right, it was the creation of Giorgio Armani, the legendary Italian designer.

It was the piece that made Pat Riley, the legendary NBA coach and executive, believe in the power of style.

Riley met Armani in Milan in 1978, just before his coaching career began. Armani was building an empire, revolutionizing men's fashion and producing the signature look for the 1980s. When Riley became coach of the "Showtime" Lakers in 1981, he started wearing the Clark Gable on the

sideline.

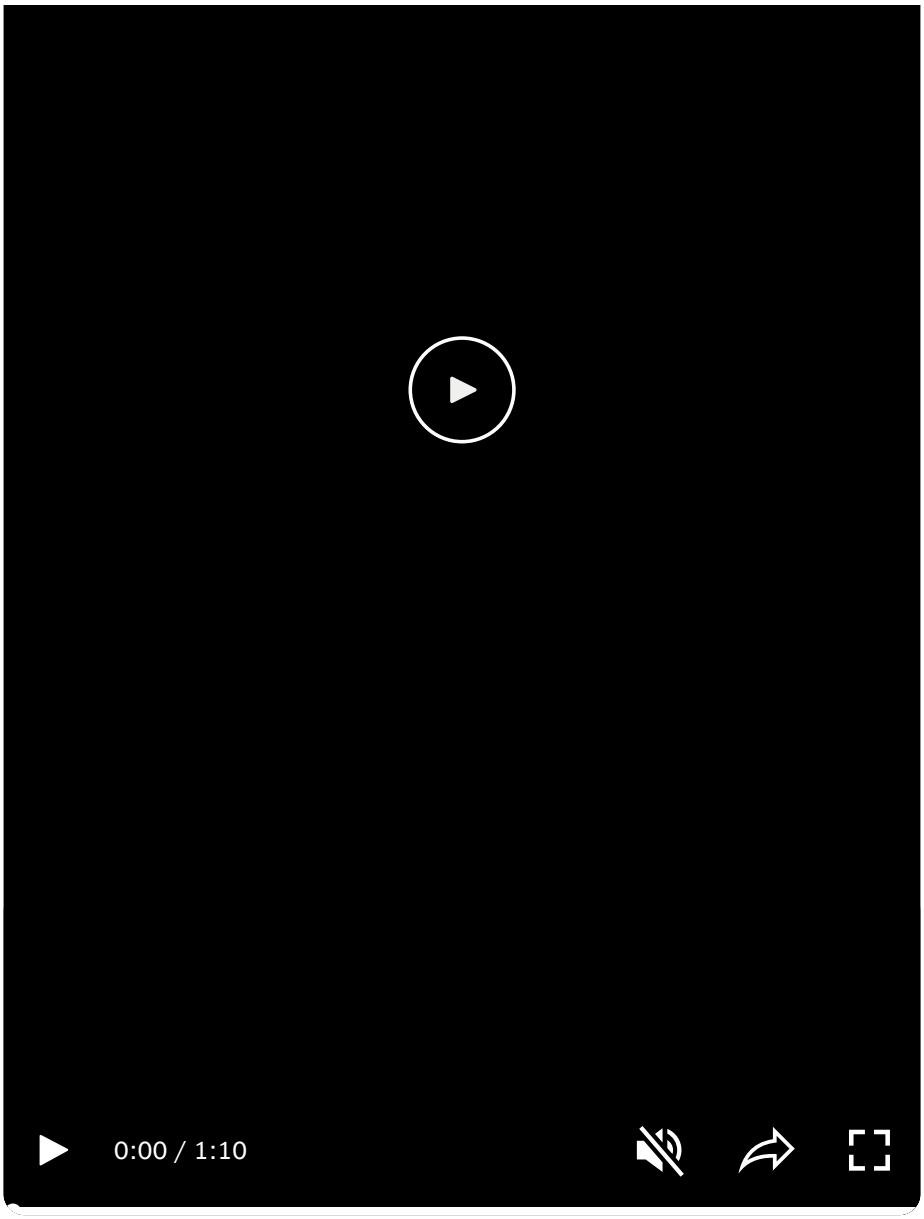
The relationship lasted decades, through stops in New York and Miami, and spawned an enduring image of Riley on the sidelines: one of the NBA's best leaders, always in a designer suit.

The connection also underscores one of Riley's strongest beliefs, one expressed last week as he was honored with an Armani-clad statue in Los Angeles: NBA coaches need to return to wearing coats and ties on the sidelines.

"I think an audience wants to see somebody on the sidelines who looks like a leader, dresses like a leader, acts like a leader," Riley said.

It sounded like a bold claim. Sure, a business suit is undoubtedly nicer than the casual "athleisure" look — team-issue polos and pullovers — that NBA coaches adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. But can a coat and tie really make someone more of a leader?

"It's a perfectly reasonable thing to think," said Abe Rutchick, a professor of psychology at California State University, Northridge. "Which is the idea that the clothes we wear have psychological meaning. We put something on, it's not just clothes. It means something."



In the early 2010s, during the rise of casual attire, Rutchick and his colleagues examined a similar question and found something intriguing: Wearing formal attire might actually make a person think and act like a leader.

The researchers, using a variety of cognitive tasks, found that wearing formal clothes caused participants to shift from a concrete mode of thinking to a more abstract mindset — they thought of the big picture and looked further into the future. In other words, they thought like someone

who was in charge.

“It’s not better or worse,” Rutchick said. “You need both things. But the idea is that putting on clothes that are more formal tilts you more towards that abstract side. Why is that? Well, we think that wearing those formal clothes makes you more like a leader; it makes you feel more powerful.”

The paper, published in 2015, came a few years after another group of researchers found that people who wore a doctor's white lab coat — and understood its symbolic meaning — had an increased ability to focus and pay attention. A more recent 2023 study from Temple University researchers found that employees who dressed more nicely than usual experienced a boost in self-esteem and social interactions and performed better on tasks.

"Wearing something that's going to make you be treated a certain way is going to have a massive effect," Rutchick said.

In other words, the research gave credence to an adage about the power of clothing, a relationship perhaps best captured in the HBO show, "The Wire." When Avon Barksdale, a Baltimore drug lord, sees fellow drug dealer Prop Joe wearing a suit to an outdoor basketball game in 85-degree weather, he chides him for "trying to be like Pat Riley."

“Man,” Prop Joe responds. “Look the part, be the part.”

For Riley, the suit was an extension of his personality. In practice, he was maniacal and exacting, demanding perfection from his players. In games, he put on a suit and became steadfast.

“He was a different coach during games,” said Dwyane Wade, the former Miami Heat star. “A lot of times as a player, your mind, your emotions, your anxiety are all over the place. You make a couple of mistakes, and you start overthinking. He was that calm factor.”

Of course, the social meaning of clothes can and does change. According to Deirdre Clemente, a fashion and culture historian, the emergence of the suit as the standard for men in the 18th and 19th centuries was itself a rebellion against the ornate, flashy and colorful clothing associated with aristocracy. Yet by the 20th century, it had become the default for powerful leaders, worn by presidents, CEOs and even coaches.

In the NFL, coaches like Vince Lombardi and Hank Stram wore coats and ties throughout the 1960s, while Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry maintained his suit-and-fedora look until he coached his last game in 1988. ("The way you look is a perfect indication of what you represent," Landry once said.)

In time, the NFL mandated that coaches wear team-issued apparel, paving the way for the era of cut-off hoodies, dry-fit shirts and joggers. When NBA coaches embraced the quarter-zip during the pandemic, it left a handful of college basketball coaches as the only formal fashionistas remaining. At age 73, St. John's Rick Pitino has maintained his tailored fit. Alabama's Nate Oats wears a blazer with no tie. Missouri's Dennis Gates has said a suit is what he imagined himself wearing when he dreamed of being a coach.

Lauren A. Rothman, a style strategist and speaker, specializes in what she calls "executive presence," consulting business leaders and CEOs on what to wear. The rise of business casual and the pandemic disruption has left executive style in what she calls a "recalibration moment."

"What I love about this era that we're in is that there is opportunity for personal presence that reflects authenticity," Rothman said. "Whether that's a signature color you enjoy wearing or it's a signature fit that you wear over and over again. I try to actually customize those for my clients, as opposed to saying, 'This is what the new leader wears.'"

That may offer comfort for NBA coaches who have embraced athleisure.

According to Indiana Pacers coach Rick Carlisle, Riley's campaign is unlikely to succeed. When head coaches and assistants were polled on the

issue, more than 80 percent endorsed the casual style. The suit may make someone look — and think — like a leader. But daily comfort has its benefits, too.

“It’s a tough one because quarter-zips are so comfortable,” Milwaukee Bucks coach Doc Rivers told reporters this week.

In fact, Heat coach Erik Spoelstra, who replaced Riley on the sideline in Miami, has debated his boss over the issue for years.

Sure, Riley looked incredibly sharp.

“But he wore suits differently than us mortals,” Spoelstra said. “We just didn’t look the same as the way he looked. That was an iconic Armani look.”

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