

## Frequently Asked Questions About Kathrine Switzer

*Note: If you use this material, please quote Kathrine Switzer.*

### **How long is the Boston Marathon?**

All marathons are 26 miles, 385 yards (or 42.2 Km) long. Any distance less than that is not a 'marathon'.

### **Why is a marathon called a marathon?**

It is named after a small seacoast town in Greece, called Marathon. This is where an important battle took place in 490 BCE. After the battle, a messenger ran to Athens with news of victory. The distance was about 25 miles. The old legend said that the messenger ran so hard that after he delivered the news he fell down dead. The Greeks loved this story and the messenger became a heroic figure in Greece. It was not until a thousand (!) or so years later, in 1896, that the marathon became a running event for sport. The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896 and organizers decided a special run from the town of Marathon to the Olympic Stadium in Athens would create public interest. They called the race the Marathon Race, and indeed, it created great excitement. After this, organizers began organizing other 'marathons' and the event became a permanent fixture in the Olympic Games. The word 'marathon' therefore now is also used as an adjective meaning 'long lasting'; so, a marathon phone call, for instance, means a lengthy phone call.

### **Why did you start running and how old were you when you started?**

I started running at age 12 when my father encouraged me to run a mile a day so I could make the field hockey team in my high school. (There were no intermediate schools in those days; I began high school at age 12).

### **How old were you when you ran your first marathon?**

I was 20, and my first marathon distance was run in practice; my first marathon race was the 1967 Boston Marathon.

### **Why did you want to run the marathon, and the Boston Marathon, in particular?**

I discovered early that running always made me feel powerful, free and fearless. The longer I ran, the stronger I felt so the 26.2-mile distance intrigued me. The Boston Marathon, which was founded in 1897, was the most famous race in the world to me next to the Olympics. Yet unlike the Olympics, it was supposedly open to anyone who wanted to try to run. I felt thrilled by the prospect of running 26.2 miles in a race where supposedly anyone could run in the same race as the greatest runners in the world. There was no other sports event like that! (For instance, you cannot just go out and play baseball with the New York Yankees). Plus my coach Arnie Briggs had run the Boston Marathon 15 times and he used to tell me stories about this race and they inspired me.

### **Did you train for the race?**

A lot! My coach didn't believe that a woman could do the marathon distance but promised to take me to Boston if I showed him in practice that I could do it. We trained hard and one day ran 31 miles, and he was amazed, and also proud. True to his word he helped me enter the race.

**Were you trying to prove anything or make a statement when you first ran the Boston Marathon in 1967?**

No, I was just a kid who wanted to run, and was there as a reward from my coach who didn't believe that a woman could run the distance. I had heard that other women had run marathon distances and that one woman in 1966 ran the Boston Marathon but without a bib number, so I wasn't trying to break any barriers. It wasn't until a race official attacked me during the run did I become determined to finish and speak out on behalf of all women.

**Why did the official attack you?**

The official claimed the race was a men's only race and that I was not allowed to run. He was very angry that I had obtained an official bib number, and he lost his temper.

**Why was the Boston Marathon a men's only race?**

Nowadays, that is an interesting question, as there were no real rules in 1967 stating that the Marathon was for Men Only. Nor was there anything indicating gender on the entry form. But almost all sports were for men; women rarely participated. Most people assumed that women could not run the marathon distance and if they tried they would hurt themselves. Most women themselves were not interested in running for the same reason, and many people also believed that difficult sports made women masculine. In 1967 the longest event in the Olympic Games for women was 800 meters on the track, and cross-country races for women were 1½ miles.

**How did you enter the race if it was for men only?**

First, there were no rules written saying it was a men's only race. Next, there was nothing about gender on the entry form. Third, my coach told me it was OK for me to enter and in fact I must enter the race properly for my run to count. Lastly, I sign my name with my initials, K.V. Switzer. So the officials probably thought K. stood for a man's name.

**Why do you sign your name with your initials?**

Because my name Kathrine was miss-spelled on my birth certificate and around age 12 I got tired of it being mis-spelled all the time. I also wanted to be a writer and admired authors like J.D. Salinger and e.e. cummings, so I thought using my initials was a cool, writer-ly kind of thing to do.

**In 1967 you had to take a pre-race physical attesting to your fitness to run Boston. How did you pass this unnoticed as a woman?**

The race application recommended that runners submit a letter in advance from a physician certifying we were fit to run the marathon. My doctor examined me and wrote the note saying I was fit, and I mailed it with my entry.

**Did you disguise yourself as a man?**

Absolutely not! I was very proud of being a woman. I had long hair, wore lipstick and eyeliner to the start line. All the men around me knew that I was a woman. But the morning of the race it was snowing and very windy and cold, and everyone looked alike in their baggy grey sweatsuits—including me. So perhaps officials didn't notice me then. If it had been a hot day, and I was only wearing shorts and top, history might have been changed.

**At what point in the race did the official attack you?**

At about the 2-mile mark, so I still had 24 miles to run.

**What were you thinking when the official attacked you?**

I was very frightened and was just trying to get away from him.

**Why didn't you drop out?**

Because I knew if I did that no one would believe women could run distances and deserved to be in the Boston Marathon; they would just think that I was a clown, and that women were barging into events where they had no ability. I was serious about my running and I could not let fear stop me.

**What did the men around you do in the race?**

They were shouting at the official to leave me alone and tried to push him away but he was very determined. Then my boyfriend, who was an ex-All American football player, gave the official a massive body block and sent him flying out of the race.

**Did you bring your boyfriend along to Boston to protect you?**

No, my boyfriend originally came to Boston because he thought if a girl could run the race, he could run it, too.

**Did you finish the race?**

Yes.

**Was it difficult?**

For a while, it was difficult because I was very worried and nervous, and had lost a lot of energy. But by the end, I was feeling pretty good.

**Did you ever have any doubt that you would finish?**

No, I was determined to finish no matter what.

**There are famous photos of the official attacking you. How did they take those photos?**

The photo truck was right in front of us and the press and officials' bus was alongside of us, working their way from the back of the race pack to the front. The official jumped off the bus and attacked me...right in full view of the photographers taking pictures from the back of the truck. It was very bad timing for the official, but it was very good timing for women's rights. The photo of the incident was flashed around the world and is now in Time-Life's book, "*100 Photos that Changed the World.*"

**What else happened in the race?**

Just about everything, because a marathon teaches you so much. Most of all for me, I got my energy back, and became both radicalized and inspired by the incident with the official to create opportunities for other women in running. When I finished, I felt like I had a Life Plan, and in fact, I did!

**Did you get in trouble for running the Boston Marathon?**

Yes, the official who attacked me had me disqualified (DQ'd) from the race and then expelled from the Amateur Athletic Union, the sport's governing body, for a whole list of reasons, one of which was running with men. Plus there was a lot of negative press reports and plenty of hate mail.

**Was there any good news?**

Sure! Almost everyone was on my side and thought the sports officials were old fogeys. Most journalists loved the story and became positive about me, and other

women runners after talking to me. I got invited to a lot of races. I got more fan mail than hate mail. And I learned a lot about people.

**Did the official get in trouble for attacking you?**

Not serious trouble, although what he did was very serious. But he received a great deal of bad publicity also.

**Did the official ever apologize?**

Not really, but he did give me a kiss six years later on the starting line of the 1973 Boston Marathon and we eventually became good friends.

**What was your time in that first marathon?**

4 hours and 20 minutes.

**How long did the Boston Marathon remain a men's only race?**

For 76 years, until 1972, and in that year women who could run the marathon in 3 hours 30 minutes or faster were admitted to the race officially. But for some of those intervening years, several of us women ran Boston anyway without numbers and worked to convince the governing bodies of the sport to allow us into the race as official athletes.

**How did the men runners feel about women in the marathon?**

Most of them loved having women in all running events. They admired us for being serious about our running, running such a difficult race and really supported our efforts for inclusion. I have never received a negative comment from a male runner. I believe that one reason women are so advanced in running as compared to other sports is because male runners have been so supportive and positive.

**How has the Boston Marathon experience changed your life?**

In just about every way because by the time I finished the race, I was inspired to both become a better athlete myself and create opportunities for other women in running. All this led to several interesting careers, almost all of which I designed for myself and are connected to running and social change. The Boston Marathon also told me I could persevere over anything. And it helped me to be pretty fearless in other ways, too. (Mostly, anyway!!)

**What was your best marathon time ever and when and where did you run it?**

My best time was 2 hours 51 minutes 37 seconds, in the 1975 Boston Marathon. I placed 2<sup>nd</sup>; it was my seventh Boston Marathon.

**What is your biggest victory?**

My biggest running victory was winning the 1974 New York City Marathon. But my biggest Life Victory was being a major part of getting the women's marathon accepted officially into the Olympic Games in 1984.

**What was your biggest contribution to getting the women's marathon into the Olympic Games?**

For many years, I created and organized a global series of races, called the Avon International Running Circuit—400 races in 27 countries for over a million women—that demonstrated women's capability and also had enough international representation to convince the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that the women's marathon should be included in the Olympics. In some countries, these races were often the first sports events of any kind for women.

**Why was it so important to get the women's marathon into the Olympic Games?**

Because I knew when the world saw women in the most difficult of all running events, competing in the most important and prestigious sports event—the Olympics—it would change world attitudes about women's capability. Everyone everywhere understands that 26.2 miles (or 42.2 km,) is a long way to run, and when they see women doing it they know that women can do anything and should be allowed to participate.

**When was the first time a women's marathon was introduced into the Olympic Games?**

In 1984, in Los Angeles.

**Who won it?**

Joan Benoit Samuelson, in 2 hours 24 minutes 52 seconds. It was a fabulous performance!

**Were you sorry you didn't run in it?**

Not at all! I always knew I was never a particularly fast runner, and knew when we made the marathon an Olympic event, many talented women would seize the opportunity, train, and run much faster than I ever could. I was always more interested in creating the opportunity than being a competitive athlete anyway.

**Where were you during the first women's Olympic Marathon?**

In the broadcast booth, doing commentary for ABC-TV Network sports.

**Has having the women's marathon in the Olympics changed the world?**

Absolutely! The Olympic Women's Marathon opened the door for many other women's events and helped increase the number of women participants in all sports. Additionally, the women's marathon opened doors for new Olympic events for both men and women. Maybe most importantly, people around the world have been inspired by the women's Olympic marathon and now embrace a healthy and productive running lifestyle.

**Is it true that there are now more women runners in the USA than men? Why has this happened?**

Yes, 53% of race participants are now women in the USA and this is also probably true in Canada. Running gives women fitness, self-esteem and empowerment they may never have had before. Also, running is time-efficient and inexpensive, and women can fit it into a busy day which may also include organizing a job, children and home. Interestingly, I see this trend happening now in Europe, and predict that it will have a global impact.

**How important has Title IX been for women runners?**

Title IX has changed the landscape for all women, not just women runners. This is the 1972 amendment to the U.S. Constitution that mandates equality of education in any federally funded school in the USA. Which is just about all of them! The equality requirement not only applied to academic opportunity, but also, as it turned out, to sports. This has revolutionized opportunities everywhere for women, especially in sports and education. Now there should not be a young girl in the USA who grows up with a sense of limitation.

**What more can be achieved for women's running?**

So much! We've only just started! Men have been running seriously for 3,000 years; women only seriously for 40 years. Women have natural strength in stamina and

endurance and they will be increasingly competitive in ultra marathons. As the sport changes and embraces very long distance and combines with other women's strengths such as flexibility, balance, ability to withstand the cold, then we will open a new era. But the critical thing is that right now we need to work on opportunities for many oppressed women in Africa, South America and the Middle East. Talent is everywhere. It only needs an opportunity.

### **Is there anything else to be done for women in sports?**

A lot yet needs to be done. There are many countries in the world where women are not allowed out of their houses alone, not allowed to drive cars, get an education or participate in sports. So getting the opportunities to these women will not be easy. We are working on ways to reach them, especially using technology and starting our new 261 running clubs (261 is my bib number from the first Boston Marathon). Also, many women are poor and don't have opportunities—that is why running is good, because you don't need to be rich to run. Consequently, many poor women in Africa are excelling in running and taking their empowerment and prize money earnings to change the lives of other women and children in their communities. This has become a social revolution.

### **Why do you like running so much?**

There are many reasons, but the biggest are because running is simple and only requires a pair of shoes; it is time efficient and convenient and gets a person fit quickly. It reduces stress, puts me in touch with my own thoughts, and helps me be creative.

### **How old are you now and are you still running?**

I am now 66 and yes, I am thrilled and lucky to be still running—for 53 years!

### **How many marathons have you run?**

39 and still counting! My last marathon was the BMW Berlin Marathon, 2011. In 2010, I fulfilled a lifetime ambition of running from Marathon to Athens in the Athens Marathon, held on the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous messenger's run in 490 BCE.

### **How many races have you run and miles have you covered?**

I have no idea! Hundreds of races, thousands of miles.

### **What is your favorite marathon?**

Boston is my favorite; I like the rolling course and the narrow streets that are very crowded with spectators who know a lot about the marathon.

### **What is your favorite race of any distance?**

It's still the Boston Marathon! My second favorite race is The New York Mini 10K, held every June in Central Park, New York City. I was a founder of this race in 1972 with legends Nina Kuscsik and Fred Lebow. It was the first ever women's only road race and has been held annually for over 40 years. It was this race that gave us the idea to create women's only road races that are so popular now.

### **Who is the runner you most admire?**

Emil Zatopek, who won three gold medals in the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games, among many other accomplishments and kindnesses.

**Who is your greatest woman sports heroine?**

Billie Jean King. On the other hand, I have many unknown women sports heroines—they especially include women who had low self-esteem and were overweight, poor, hopeless or from the ‘wrong tribe’ but started running and changed their lives. THEY are fabulous!

**How many books have you written and what are they?**

I have written three books. They include: my memoir *Marathon Woman* which is about my life and overcoming the impossible, written in 2007. *26.2 Marathon Stories*, which is co-authored with my husband Roger Robinson, is about the marathon, what motivates us and compels us to run it, who and how they made the race history, written in 2005. My first book, *Running and Walking for Women Over 40* is a book for people (women especially) who are beginning to walk or run, and deals also with the uniqueness of aging and running, written in 1998. This book is now a best-seller.

**What do you like better, writing or doing television broadcasting?**

Definitely writing. I guess I’m a marathoner, because I prefer long-term projects. I have broadcast hundreds of races, and even the marathons are over too quickly for me to feel I’ve said everything that needs to be said. Writing books and articles give you time for more reflection. But for sure when you are on a motorcycle flying along next to the greatest runners in the world in an event with millions of screaming spectators, it is a very thrilling privilege. It’s also thrilling to see thoughts you have worked hard to put into words come to life between the covers of a book, and ultimately, that thrill lasts longer. In fact, it lasts forever.

**What do you like doing best, besides running?**

I just love public speaking. I love to talk to people about the joy of movement, accomplishment, of changing people’s lives with opportunity and of motivating people to become a person they want to be by empowering them. I love to bounce ideas off people about how we can change the world.

**What is your advice for a person who wants to start running?** Don’t dream about it; do it. Make a commitment to go out everyday, write it down, and start walking and add small jogs. Get a good pair of shoes from a store where the sales people run, so they will fit you properly. Read! My book *Running and Walking for Women Over 40* is a great beginner’s book even for men and children, I tell them they can skip the chapter designed for older women! Then, make a goal of running a small 5km race in your neighborhood in about 2 months’ time. A goal gives you a focus. It will grow from there.

**What do you think about when you run?**

Only non-runners ask that question! Running is very creative; the mind is occupied with a million thoughts. It is a very good time to get good thinking done and feel peaceful.