

“Life is for Participating”

From the book *The Sprit of the Marathon*
by Gail Waesche Kislevitz
Published by Breakaway Books, 2002

Kathrine Switzer

Date of Birth: 1-5-47

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First Marathon: 1967 Boston Marathon, Boston, MA

Age at first marathon: 20

Every time a female runner enters a marathon, a small offering should be made to Kathrine Switzer. Through her tenacity, stubbornness and belief that women can too run 26.2, she scaled the male bastion of the Boston Marathon that barred women from its race and helped to open its doors to women, which it officially did in 1972. Switzer then put her degree in journalism and her love for running to good use and furthered the cause for women in sports through her work at Avon and RYKA shoes. When not traveling the globe promoting women's walking and running, Kathrine can be found taking her daily run through Central Park. Among her many citations and awards for her work to advance women's sports is the Runner of the Decade commendation from Runner's World magazine. She was also honored as a member of the inaugural class of the National Distance Running Hall of Fame.

"When I was twelve years old I wanted to be a cheerleader. Like many pre-pubescent girls I thought if I were a cheerleader I would be popular and boys would ask me out and I would end up dating the captain of the football team. When I told my dad of my aspiration he looked at me and said, 'You don't want to be a cheerleader. That's silly. Life is for participating not spectating. The cheerleaders lead cheers. You should play sports and have people cheer for you. You like to run and be active. Why don't you go out for field hockey?' I wasn't a tomboy, but I always thought a girl could do anything a boy could so I took his advice to heart. My mother was a great role model in that sense as she did everything. She worked a professional job, cooked the meals, tended a garden and raised us to believe there were no limitations on what we could do. My dad supported that and encouraged us to think beyond traditional roles.

With my dad's encouragement, I started to get in shape for field hockey by running a mile. No one ran on the streets back in 1959. The only runners I knew were the track and cross-country runners at school. But when I realized that running did in fact build my endurance, it became my secret weapon. I knew it would make me better at other sports. I didn't know anything about training or conditioning, but I knew that running was the key. By high school, I was up to 3 miles and felt like the cock of the walk. No girl I knew anywhere could run three miles a day.

I continued playing field hockey at Lynchburg College in Virginia but was somewhat disappointed in the skills and commitment of the other women. Most of them were not very dedicated to the sport and didn't care whether we won or lost. I cared deeply and

played hard, taking practice and the games very seriously. After practice I would run a mile. When the coach found out she got very angry, accusing me of not working hard enough at practice if I still had the energy to run a mile afterwards. What she didn't understand was that mile was my alone time, my solace. One day while I was finishing up my mile, the men's track coach approached me and asked if I would run a mile on the men's team. There was a big meet coming up and he needed another member on the team to qualify and I looked like I could do it. I had no problem with that and agreed. Well, all hell broke out when word got out that a woman was going to run on the men's team. Lynchburg was a small religious-affiliated school and I was doing something almost sacrilegious. On the day of the meet, the campus and field was swarming with local and national media to capture me, this woman, who dared run with men.

The media hype made me nervous and I knew I had to do well to uphold my athletic honor. I finished the mile in 5:58 and was pleased. But I wasn't thrilled with some of the hate mail I received over the incident, telling me God will strike me dead for running with men. I learned a valuable lesson that day. I was being judged not on my athletic ability but on being a woman. It dawned on me for the first time that there would be no sports programs for me after college. Either it just wasn't done or it wasn't available. Billie Jean King had just come out as a professional woman's tennis player and there were some female golf pros, but those sports didn't interest me. Since I loved sports but didn't feel I could participate on a professional level I decided to become a sports journalist and transferred to Syracuse University in 1966.

I was still serious about my running and wanted to continue it at Syracuse. Along the way, running had evolved from being my secret weapon to my first love. It was something I could do by myself, didn't cost anything, didn't need a lot of equipment and I loved being outdoors. I was also good at it. I knew that running was going to be a lifetime sport for me. I've often felt that if field hockey were an Olympic sport I would have stayed with it because I did love it and never would have become a runner. But those avenues were not available to women back in the early sixties. Women today have so many choices, from soccer to basketball to snowboarding, almost anything they desire. For me, it was running.

At Syracuse I went to see the men's cross country coach and asked if I could run on the team since there wasn't a women's team. He looked at me a bit startled and said, 'I've been coaching for thirty years and have never had a woman ask to be on the team. I can't let you run officially because it is against the NCAA rules but you are welcome to come and work out with us.' With that, I started running with the team but was miles behind them. That's when I met Arnie Briggs, who was the postman for the University. He finished his job at three in the afternoon and then worked out with the team. He did this for years until finally he became the unofficial manager of the team. He was also a marathon runner and had run the Boston Marathon fifteen times. When I met him he was fifty to my nineteen. He had a bad knee and all sorts of injuries but could still run slowly, which was faster than what my pace was. And of course, he still had the endurance for long runs. He was excited that a girl was with the team and sort of adopted me. Actually I think he felt sorry for me because as soon as the team headed out for their runs, I would lose sight of them and wouldn't know where to go. He took me under his wing and taught me about running.

In the winter when the team went indoors for training, Arnie and I stayed outside and ran in the cold and the snow. We were running six to ten miles a night and Arnie would keep me entertained with stories of the Boston Marathon. He'd tell me tales of Clarence DeMar, John Kelley the Elder, John Kelley the Younger, Tarzan Brown, all the legends. I was entranced and fascinated. Finally, one snowy night I said let's stop talking about Boston and just go and run the damn thing. He turned to me and said, 'Women can't run the Boston Marathon. Women aren't capable of running 26.2 miles. It's the law of diminishing returns.' I told him he was crazy, that if I could run 10 miles, why couldn't I run 26? He HAD to believe a woman could do it, because I had read in Sports Illustrated that Bobbie (Roberta) Gibb had run the Boston Marathon in 1966. She hid in the bushes until half the runners had passed and then slipped into the pack. She finished but her time was not recorded as she didn't wear a race number and was not officially entered in the race. When I told this to Arnie, he was enraged and didn't believe it. I was deeply upset at his reaction. I felt our friendship was at a crossroad if he truly didn't believe a woman could run a marathon after all the training and the long runs we had enjoyed together. He thought it over for a while and said that if any woman could run the distance, he believed it was me, and if I could prove to him that I could indeed run 26.2 miles, he would personally take me to Boston.

Now I had a coach and a goal and it was all business from them on. I trained consistently and bumped up the long runs from 15 miles to 17 to 18 miles and so on. It wasn't always easy. At my first attempt at 18 miles I hit the wall. But I kept going and finally we set the day to run 26.2 miles. I was hot to trot, so excited. It was an early April day with snow still on the ground. We mapped out about four 10K loops and as we were finishing up the last loop, Arnie turned and said, 'I can't believe you are going to make it. You are really going to complete a marathon.' It was such a big deal for me. All of a sudden I put on the brakes and said, 'What if we mismeasured the course and we're short of 26.2 miles?' I wanted to be absolutely sure of the distance and began to doubt we had measured accurately. Just to be totally sure, I wanted to add another 5 miles. Arnie was astonished, but said if I could do it, he could do it. During the last five miles of this now 31-mile run, Arnie began weaving back and forth, his legs like jelly. I put my arm through his and steadied him for the last mile. Back at the car, our finish line, I threw my arms around him and slapped him on the back screaming that we were on our way to Boston, and he passed out.

The next day he came over to my dorm with the race entry form. I knew that Bobbi Gibb didn't wear a number, so I somehow thought I'd just show up and run. Oh no, said Arnie, Boston is a serious race, you are a serious runner, you are a member of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), and you don't mess with Boston. You have to do it right and officially register. I wondered if it might be against some rule, remembering that I was allowed to run in the conference at Lynchburg College but not with the NCAA at Syracuse University. Arnie had anticipated the question and had the current AAU Rulebook with him. The book listed "Men's Track and Field Events," "Women's Track and Field Events," and then a third category, "The Marathon," which listed nothing about gender. We laughed that nobody would think about a woman running a marathon since only crazy men ran it anyway!

The application also called for a medical certificate. In lieu of that I could have opted to have an onsite physical exam at Boston, but Arnie didn't think I'd want to stand in a hallway with a bunch of naked men getting a physical. So I went to the Syracuse

Infirmery for my physical and got the medical certificate signed. Anyway, I filled out the entry, plunked down my \$3 entry fee, and signed my name, K.V. Switzer.

Now, the reason I signed K.V. Switzer instead of Kathrine is because I always signed my name that way. Ever since I was a little girl I wanted to be a writer and K.V. was going to be my signature name. It seemed to my young mind then that all the good writers used their initials like J.D. Salinger, E.E. Cummings, T.S. Elliot, W.B. Yeats -- so ever since I was twelve I signed all my papers K.V. Switzer, thinking I was totally cool. It was my signature.

Arnie sent my application in with the rest of the track guys from Syracuse who were also planning on running the marathon. Actually, I was the only one who had really trained. That night, I went out with my boyfriend Tom Miller, who was a graduate student and a hammer thrower. He was very amused with all this and would ask me how my 'jogging' was going. When I told him I was running the Boston Marathon, he fell down laughing. He said if I could run a marathon he could too and decided to sign up. He weighed 235 pounds but that didn't discourage him. He just felt if I could do it he could. To prove his point he went out and ran nine miles and declared he was ready. So we all go to Boston.

The day of the race was horrible. Sleeting, snowing, windy and cold. All the runners had on big baggy sweats with windbreakers and hoods. I wore my worst stuff because Arnie said when we got warmed up we'd throw away our old sweats and just leave them behind. As I pinned on my number, the other runners around me noticed I was a woman and got very excited and supportive. They thought it was great that a woman was going to run Boston. We all lined up to go through the starting pen and as I went through the pen, I had to lift my sweatshirt to show my number. Will Cloney himself, the co-race director, pushed me through the starting gate. More people were noticing I was female and congratulated me, all very supportive and excited for me. Arnie, my boyfriend Tom, John Leonard from our cross country team and I were in a little group. Our plan was to stay together for a while but if anyone wanted to split off we would meet at the finish. The race starts and off we go.

Four miles into the race, the media flatbed truck loaded with photographers came through and we all had to get out of the way to let it pass. A bus followed the truck with the journalists and on that bus were co-race directors Will Cloney and Jock Semple. The photographers saw me first and started shouting, 'There's a girl in the race,' and then slowed up in front of us and started taking pictures. By now, I'd thrown away my top sweatshirt and my hair was flying. I didn't try to disguise my gender at all. Heck, I was so proud of myself I was wearing lipstick! When the journalists saw me, they started teasing Jock that a girl had infiltrated his race. They looked up my number and saw K. Switzer and started heckling Jock some more. 'She doesn't look like a Karl,' they'd say. Their bus was still behind us. I was unaware what was going on behind me as we were waving at the photographers in front of us.

Jock was well known for his violent temper. He seethed for awhile, and then he erupted. He jumped off the bus and went after me. I saw him just before he pounced, and let me tell you, I was scared to death. He was out of control. I jumped away from him as he grabbed for me, but he caught me by the shoulder and spun me around, and screamed, 'Get the hell out of my race and give me that race number.' I tried to get away from him but he had me by the shirt. It was like being in a bad dream. Arnie tried

to wrestle Jock away from me but was having a hard time himself and then Tom, my 235-pound boyfriend came to the rescue and smacked Jock with a cross body block and Jock went flying through the air. At first, I thought we had killed him. I was stunned and didn't know what to do, but then Arnie just looked at me and said, 'Run like hell,' and I did as the photographers snapped away and the scribes recorded the event for posterity.

The rest is history. My infamous run at the 1967 Boston Marathon is recorded as unofficial and does not post a time, although it was around 4:20:00. Despite that the BAA wanted nothing to do with me, the fact that I ran with a number made headlines around the world. The New York Times reported the story but inadvertently said I didn't finish. I was furious and personally called the reporter to correct his mistake, saying just because you filed your story while I was still out running didn't mean I didn't finish! It was this incident as much as any other that made me determined to become a better runner, to prove I could also be a real athlete, as I certainly never was a quitter and even with all the dreadful stuff at Boston I would have finished that race on my hands and knees to prove that a woman could do it.

Afterwards, I decided to use this experience to insure that other women who wanted to run would not be subjected to the same treatment. I became an organizer and an outspoken proponent for women's physical capability. The first thing I did when Arnie and I got back to Syracuse was form The Syracuse Track Club and encouraged women to join. We staged regular meets with full opportunities for women. I felt the most important thing I could do for women was to create the forum for their acceptance in sports.

Back in Boston, Bobbi Gibb continued to run without a number, as did the other women who were coming on the scene as well. In 1969 three women including Nina Kuscsik, ran unofficially. I stayed away from Boston until 1970. That year, four other women also ran. This time they recorded my time, 3:34. By 1971, myself, Nina Kusicck and Sara Mae Berman ran Boston and afterwards we united our efforts to try and force the arm of the Boston Athletic Association (BAA) to officially allow women to run. We wanted to lift the ban in Boston as well as the exclusion of women running long distance in the Olympics, including the women's marathon.

Finally, in 1972, for the first time ever women were officially welcome to run the Boston Marathon. It was a big breakthrough - at last we could be ATHLETES. After this momentous decision, I continued fighting for women's rights in sports, but for awhile I moved my concentration on being an athlete to my first priority. I was 25 years old and knew I had a window of opportunity left and trained my brains out. I didn't want to get to be 40 and not have tried to go all out. I'd do a 20 or 27 miler every Sunday just to be ready for anything. Some years I did 7 or 8 marathons a year. Probably too much but guess what? I got good! I went back to Boston eight times, and ran a personal best of 2:51:37 in 1975. I also won the New York City Marathon in 1974. When I ran my 2:51 I was thrilled. I thought of the time I could only run a mile, then 3 miles, than ran my first marathon at 4:20 only five years ago and here I broke the three hour mark. I am constantly amazed at what the human body can do. Really, I felt if I could do it on my limited talent, I thought thousands of women could do it, and they really deserved the chance to try.

And after running the 2:51, I really wanted to concentrate on making that happen. I was hoping it could become my career, too, somehow. I parlayed my journalism and writing skills with running and set out on a career in public relations and sports marketing promoting races, doing sports writing which evolved into doing TV commentary of running events. I also created the Avon Running Global Women's Circuit, a series of running events for women in many countries. I am most proud of this program because it led in great part to the inclusion of a women's marathon in the 1984 Olympics Games. At the same time, the Avon program and the work I do with RYKA women's sports shoes has allowed me to introduce running to women in 30 countries around the world, giving them the tools, the motivation and the courage to run or walk a race. I've seen 400-pound women show up at a clinic with sullen faces of disbelief, wearing flip flops and eleven weeks later they are sporting smiles and a medal around their necks from their first race.

As an aside, Jock Semple and I became great friends. Five years after the 1967 event he had to welcome me, as well as all the women, as official competitors in the 1972 race and he was very impressed with our performances. We grew from there. For example, in the late seventies I was invited to Boston for a book signing on a book about his life, called "*Just Call Me Jock*". The promoters of the event thought it would be funny to surprise Jock during his talk by having me jump out from behind the curtains, wearing a gray sweat suit just like the one in the infamous 1967 marathon, and yell 'Get outta here, you're not official, give me that book.' He was certainly surprised and his first reaction was to bop me but when he realized it was a joke, he joined in and enjoyed himself.

I have been lucky in life. I had my parents and Arnie telling me I could do anything I wanted. As a female, I was never resigned to just playing with dolls or only being the cheerleader. Yes, I played with dolls and wore dresses but also climbed trees and played sports with a vengeance. After my experience in Boston, I realized there are plenty of women in the world who grow up without that support and without realizing the sky is their only limit. I wanted to reach those women and do something to change their lives.

All you need is the courage to believe in yourself and put one foot in front of the other."

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