

THE ART OF

SPORT

WITH KATHRINE SWITZER

When Kathrine Switzer registered for the 1967 Boston Marathon under her initials, her story had just begun. After fending off a race official who tried to force her off the course a few miles into the race, Switzer made history, becoming the first female to finish the all-male race as an official entrant. Since completing that race in 4 hours, 20 minutes, she has finished another 39 marathons – including the 2017 Boston Marathon this spring, 50 years after her historic run on the same course. The 70-year-old has also remained an advocate for women’s rights and recently founded the 261 Fearless foundation, a nonprofit organization that empowers women around the world through running. Last month, *Yankees Magazine* editor-in-chief Alfred Santasiere III spoke with Switzer over lunch at the Gilded Otter in New Paltz, New York.

YANKEES MAGAZINE: *What did you enjoy about running when you were a teenager?*

KATHRINE SWITZER: My dad encouraged me to run a mile a day because he felt it would give me the conditioning I needed to make the field hockey team. I wound up getting really empowered by running because it made me feel significant. I always said it was sort of like having a victory under my belt every day that no one could take away from me. It really set me up for my whole life.

YM: *When did you first run competitively?*

KS: When I was 18. I was at Lynchburg College in Virginia for my first two years of college, and I got recruited on the men’s track team. After that, I transferred to Syracuse University to study journalism. They didn’t have a women’s track or cross-country team, so I went into the cross-country coach’s office and asked if I could run on the men’s team. He told me that I couldn’t run officially because it was against NCAA rules in that conference, but he let me work out with the team.

YM: *Arnie Briggs certainly had a big impact on your life story. How would you describe him?*

KS: He was a volunteer coach. He was a mailman in Syracuse, New York, schlepping through the snow every morning. Then, in the afternoons, he would train with the men’s cross-country team. When I met him, he was about 50 years old, and he thought his running days were over. He loved the fact that a girl showed up. I would get lost on the cross-country course, so he started jogging with me. He had run

15 Boston Marathons, and he would fill the time by telling me about those experiences.

YM: *What resonates from the conversation you had with Arnie in December of ’66 about the possibility of you running the Boston Marathon?*

KS: I was tired, and we were running in the middle of a blizzard. When Arnie got into another Boston Marathon story, I said something like, “Let’s quit talking about the Marathon and just run it.” Then, he said, “Well, a woman can’t.” And I said, “What do you mean a woman can’t?” He responded, “Physiologically, a woman can’t do it. They’re too weak and fragile.” That made me really angry. We argued back and forth, and finally he said, “Prove it to me. If you show me that you can run that distance in practice, I’ll be the first person to take you to Boston.”

YM: *As you got closer to the day of the marathon, how did the thought of taking part in such a historic race make you feel?*

KS: The Boston Marathon always appealed to me because it was the last great open amateur competition in the world. I loved the idea that you could be in that race if you were reasonably capable of finishing 26 miles and willing to pay a \$2 entry fee. The idea of running the Boston Marathon in the trailing molecules of the greatest runners in history was astonishing.

YM: *What was it like to complete that first 26-mile run with Arnie?*

KS: When we ran the 26, I felt great and I asked Arnie to run another five miles

with me. When we started to do the next 5-mile loop, Arnie began fading, but I was fine. When we got done with the 31-mile run, I threw my arms around him and said, “We did it. We’re going to Boston.” He passed out at that point. When he came to, the first thing he said was, “Women have hidden potential in endurance and stamina.”

YM: *What do you make of the fact that there was nothing written on the Boston Marathon application or in their rule book about the race only being open to men?*

KS: If that was never written anywhere, how was I supposed to know that only men could run? It was just assumed that women couldn’t do it and that in a million years, they wouldn’t want to. That was ridiculous.

YM: *How did you expect to be received on the day of the race?*

KS: I was expecting an official to come up to me and say something like, “What do you think you’re doing here?” I was going to smile and say, “I’m officially registered. I paid my entry fee, and there’s nothing in the rule book to say I couldn’t be. So I’m here.”

YM: *How would you describe the atmosphere at the starting line prior to the race?*

KS: Well, it was cold and snowy, and that changed everything. I wanted to look good, but I had to wear a warm-up suit that I planned to throw away. If it had been warm, I would have been wearing shorts and a T-shirt. If that had been the case, the angry official probably would have pulled



me at the starting line. Arnie picked up our numbers and brought them out to the car. We pinned them on in the car because it was so cold. If I would have picked up the numbers myself or pinned them on outside, who knows who would have noticed me. And when we got to the starting area, it was chaos because snow was coming down, and they were in a rush to start the race. Who knows what would have happened if the weather had been better and things were more relaxed at the start.

YM: *What stands out from the incident in which the official so violently tried to pull you off the course at around the 2-mile mark?*

KS: Well, everything seemed fine when we started running. The press truck came by a little after that, and we were waving to our moms for the nightly news. Then, suddenly Jock Semple, the race official, was shaking his finger at me. I didn't know what he was doing. I stutter-stepped around him, but a few seconds later, I heard his leather shoes hitting the pavement behind me, and I knew that sound wasn't coming from another runner. I turned around, and there he was. He was ready to pounce, and he did. Thankfully, my boyfriend at the time, who ran the first

few miles of the race with me, leveled him. I kept running, but I was really scared.

YM: *Was there ever a moment in which you thought about not finishing the race?*

KS: No. There was that split second of fear when I thought I had screwed up the race. But after that, I knew I had to finish the race. I told Arnie that I would finish the race on my hands and knees if I have to. Nothing was going to stop me.

YM: *What were the next few miles like for you?*

KS: We lost a lot of our adrenaline at that moment, and we had to get that back. It took 5 or 6 miles to recoup. But then I started running stronger, even though I was nervous that something was going to happen with Jock up ahead. I was pretty sure that Jock had told the cops to pull me out. As it turned out, he did ask them to do that, but they decided against it. I recovered, and I got over the anger. From Mile 16 on, I got stronger and stronger.

YM: *What were the moments like after you crossed the finish line?*

KS: They were very anticlimactic. It was cold, and there was no crowd out there.

There were just some irascible journalists waiting for us. They began asking me really hard questions, and I just kept firing back at them.

YM: *When did you realize that what you had done would change your life and sports for women?*

KS: At first, we didn't know it was a big deal. It wasn't until we stopped in Albany at midnight and saw the newspapers that we realized that women's sports were going to change. I certainly knew that my life was going to change at that moment. But earlier in the afternoon, we were just talking about how crazy Jock Semple was.

YM: *How did your desire to run marathons become stronger after that race?*

KS: It became a cause for women, and every time I ran, I felt like I was carrying the burden of the whole female sex. Other women began running, and it became an equality statement. I got invited to a lot of races. Race directors wanted the publicity, and they wanted to say that they stood by me. We actively campaigned for women to be officially recognized as marathon finishers, and Boston finally did that in 1972. That was the first time we

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could run as athletes and not just as women waving banners as a statement for equality.

YM: *How does it make you feel knowing that you have had such an impact on the number of women who run competitively?*

KS: It makes me feel proud and very validated. The best part is that more than half of the runners in the United States are women. So many of them are running because it makes them feel empowered. And so, their lives have been changed. To me, that's the social revolution.

YM: *How would you compare winning the New York City Marathon in 1974 and running Boston in a personal record 2 hours, 51 minutes in '75 with what you did in 1967?*

KS: What I did in '67 was a breakthrough. It was a breakthrough for me personally, as well as for society. Winning New York in '74 and running Boston in my best time a year later were really important because those races established me as an athlete and not just somebody who was a fire-brand, barrier breaker, antagonist and iconoclast.

YM: *Does the difference in how you were treated in Boston this year as opposed to 1967 mirror the progress for women in our society?*

KS: Yes, I think so. To get to the finish line this year and to have a bank of journalists asking nice questions and letting me tell the story was representative of how things have changed. They understood that this was about a social revolution where women have

become empowered by the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other. It was no longer about Kathrine Switzer being attacked in the Boston Marathon.

YM: *What is the mission of your 261 Fearless foundation?*

KS: The foundation is about creating local clubs and opportunities in a non-intimidating and non-judgmental environment to have women use the vehicle of running to simply get the sense of empowerment. We already have running clubs all over the world. We have some in Albania, Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom and, of course, in the United States. ❧

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.