



SPORT

Athletics: Trailblazer of women's distance running

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Now aged 61, Kathrine Switzer still enjoys running on the hills and tracks in Wellington, where she lives for half the year. Photo / Mark Mitchell

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By: Eugene Bingham

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KEY POINTS:

Kathrine Switzer's uterus did not fall out. Neither did her chest sprout hair.

She is a living, breathing myth-buster, still running the streets of Wellington and proving that women can run without turning into men. It's so obvious today, but 40 years ago when Switzer unwittingly became a pioneer of women's distance running such beliefs were common.

She smashed those prejudices with an incident captured in a photograph which became world famous. It shows Switzer's tall figure in a grey tracksuit bearing the number 261 in the 1967 Boston marathon. She has a look of trepidation as race organiser Jock Semple scraggs at her, enraged that a girl - a girl! - would have the temerity to run in his race.

She finished as the first woman to officially enter the marathon and the picture flashed around the world.

Switzer, 61, reveals that although the incident launched a new era of women's sport, she had not entered to make a feminist stand. "It was definitely not to make some big political statement," says Switzer, who has written a book about her career as an athlete and promoter of women's running. In fact, she says, had she known the reaction her entry would draw, she probably would not have run.

The truth is, Switzer had already made her stand months earlier, on a lonely, snow-sludged road miles from home and far from the cameras. Out in a storm one night, Switzer was listening to her running partner and marathon veteran Arnie Briggs tell yet another story about Boston. Fed up, she declared: "Oh, Arnie, let's quit talking about the Boston Marathon and run the damn thing!"

She may as well have said she wanted to fly to the moon. Back then, there were myths aplenty about what would happen to women who ran long distances.

Briggs, a gentleman always, let his chivalrous nature blind his knowledge of Switzer the runner, who was easily accomplished 16km as they happened around the hills of Virginia, where Switzer was a student at Syracuse University. In her book, Marathon Woman, Switzer recalls Briggs telling her: "Oh, a woman can't run the Boston Marathon! Women can't do that kind of distance, they can't run that long."

Switzer, who came from stubborn, pioneering stock, stopped dead in her tracks. She refused to run another step until Briggs admitted she could do it.

The photo taken on the course at Boston may represent the most famous turning point in women's running, but right there on the snowy road was when Switzer took the most important decision. If she had listened to Briggs, the famous photo would not have happened. Instead, she remained unbowed until Briggs relented, telling her that if she could prove her ability to run the marathon's 42.2km distance in training, he would take her to Boston.

The pact made, Switzer ran home, and into the history books. Her determination and stamina propelled her into the role of a running pioneer. The influential Runner's World magazine declared her one of running's "four visionaries of the 20th century", Time-Life included the images in their list of "100 photos that changed the world".

For the past 20 years, Switzer, a dual New Zealand-US citizen, has lived half the year in Wellington, the other half in New York. She shares the double-city life with her husband, Victoria University English professor Roger Robinson, a former top masters marathoner. Switzer credits Robinson as her expert, loving and loyal "unofficial" editor, bringing order to the chaos as she penned her book.

She wrote it, she says, not as a sports book but as a memoir of her place in an amazing period of sports history. The book is as much a social commentary as she delves into domesticity, two previous marriages, and dispels prejudices about women. "It's not really a book about running," says Switzer. "It's about overcoming the impossible."

If one thing comes through clearly, it's the pride she feels in creating opportunities for women runners, organising events around the world and helping deliver the votes which eventually swayed the International Olympic Committee to put the women's marathon on the event schedule in 1984.

She admits, though, that had it not been for Jock Semple and his rage, all of that might not have been possible. He did her a favour. "You probably wouldn't be doing this interview,"

she says.

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The events of that day, April 19, 1967, were, like many great historical moments, the result of a confluence of coincidences, and hard work.

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Switzer was primed to run. She had covered distances greater than the marathon's 26.2 miles in training and was strengthened by years of running. Her father had encouraged her to run from a young age, starting with a mile a day, then more. Learning to run, she says, was a revelation. "I really felt it was magic, I was so happy and powerful when I ran." It helped that she had an abundance of optimism. "My dad would say that if you took a group of kids into a room full of manure, I'd be the one who'd walk in and say: 'Where's the donkey?'"

Switzer, a journalism student, had endured an earlier blaze of publicity when she ran on her college track team, the only "girl" in the mile, a novelty which brought her to the attention of the New York Times, the Washington Post and television news.

But none of the media knew about her plan to run Boston. No one knew she was the first female to officially enter the race until after the starting gun. She had filled in her entry form as "K. V. Switzer", not for any surreptitious reasons but because that was her byline in the college newspaper.

Fortunately she had entered as part of a team with Briggs and others from her college. Individual runners had to collect their race numbers from officials themselves; but Switzer's number was picked up by her team captain, Briggs.

The weather also played its part. She had planned on running in a feminine-looking pair of shorts and top, but when the day dawned freezing and wet, she opted for a heavy tracksuit. The officials were oblivious to the presence of the interloper in their men-only race.

To this day, Switzer maintains she did not think she was acting outside of the rules: it's just that they did not exclude women, probably because race organisers had not contemplated anything as preposterous. In any event, it was not far into the race that the game was up.

A press truck was chugging past the field, making its way to the frontrunners, when one of the reporters spotted Switzer's shoulder-length hair bobbing from side to side. On board the truck, too, was Semple, a Scottish-born tough-as-nuts co-organiser of Boston. He screamed at the driver to stop and stormed after Switzer. "Get the hell out of my race and

give me those numbers!" he yelled. Switzer's teammates, including her then boyfriend, leapt to her defence, bounding to her aid. **GET NEWS UPDATES**
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They carried on, Switzer fearful that Semple would return, or, worse, the police would pull her off the course. But nothing more happened and she crossed the line in 4h 20m. They thought nothing more of the run-in with Semple until they saw the pictures splashed across all the newspapers the next day.

A kerfuffle ensued. Switzer was briefly banned by the Amateur Athletic Union, but she kept on running. If she had not been seeking to make a stand before the race, she sure was now. Switzer pushed on, entering more races considered men-only.

More than that, she had fallen in love with running - particularly the marathon. "It became the hub of my life, gave me courage and inspiration. Running gave me everything - it even eventually introduced me to the great love of my life."

She was also determined to prove herself as a runner. "After that first marathon, some people would say, 'she's not a runner, she's just a jogger'. That hurt. I wanted to become a better runner not just to silence them but to give me the credibility I needed to help be a stronger voice to get women recognised officially."

Switzer trained like a fiend, and pushed herself to win the New York City Marathon in 1974, and achieve a personal best of 2h 51m at Boston in 1975, a time which ranked her sixth in the world.

After that, her competitive running days were over. "When I did [2h 51m], the allure of 2h 40m didn't really appeal. I didn't have the talent to go under 2h 40m. It became more appealing to me to create opportunities for other women."

As a sports marketing agent for Avon, she organised international races around the world, and lobbied for IOC votes. Crucially, she organised the 1980 Avon Marathon in London, the first unofficial world championship for women.

Held on the eve of the vote for whether the women's marathon could be included in the Los Angeles Olympics, the race proved that it was a serious event. The winner was New Zealander Lorraine Moller, who became a close friend of Switzer's, and went on to seize an Olympic bronze in Barcelona.

Running remains, very much, a central part of Switzer's life. She runs about 10km almost

every day, and last month competed in an event called the Bermuda Triangle Challenge - races of a mile, 10km and half-marathon distances.

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She won her grade in the 10km, collecting a \$100 prize - her first ever cash payment in a 40-plus year running career. Mostly, though, she enjoys running anonymously through the hills and trails of Wellington from her home in Highbury.

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She is invited to speak internationally, and is planning more books. Every year, she commentates for US TV networks covering the Boston, Chicago and New York marathons. She thrills in seeing performances such as that by Paula Radcliffe, the world's best, who clinched another victory at New York in November, just nine months after giving birth to her first child.

She doesn't regret not being a runner in this era - "I couldn't compete. I don't have the wheels." But she does envy the fact that women these days can run without any limitations.

Still, Switzer can draw on a sense of pride that those women can do it because of what she did. "I have no children of my own, quite by choice. But every time I see a woman running down the street I feel maternal." Marathon Woman

Running The Race To Revolutionize Women's Sports

by Kathrine Switzer, HarperCollins, \$39.99

The Kiwi runner who led the way

Three years before Kathrine Switzer made her famous run, New Zealand's own women's marathon pioneer strode out and set a world best.

Pushed along by the men she was training with in Auckland, Millie Sampson entered the 1964 marathon at the Owairaka club - made famous by legendary coach Arthur Lydiard - and ran 3h 19m, 8m better than any woman.

In her only other marathon, Sampson ran 3h 13m on Lovelock Track at Owairaka in 1970, then the world's second-fastest time.

While Switzer encountered hostility in her first marathon, Sampson recalled this week that she was encouraged to enter the 1964 race and the only publicity she received was celebrating the fact she had set a world mark.

A story in the Herald about the event noted: "Her run was preceded by an evening in which she danced until 1am and ~~was followed by the preparation of an evening meal at her home for 11 visitors."~~

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Sampson, who turns 75 on Monday, says while the men she ran with in the 1960s - including Olympians such as Bill Baillie and Ivan Keats - encouraged her to run, like Switzer she encountered plenty of prejudice from officials.

"They all thought women couldn't run that distance," she says. "They thought we weren't up to it."

Even cross-country races were considered too much for women. Though Sampson was one of the best in the world at the event, she had to content herself with unofficial national titles from 1963-1965. After much lobbying from her and others, officials finally relented in 1966. She won that year and picked up two more titles, in 1968 and 1972.

She still fondly remembers the 1964 marathon and how she trained hard to get fit for it, running from Sandringham to Western Springs where she would bound up the Bullock Track eight times. "I'd run in the morning, run at night and work all day." These days she still works, at a drycleaners. She doesn't run any more, but takes pride in the women who follow in her footsteps.