

FITNESS

# Running up that hill

Running pioneer Kathrine Switzer was the first woman to complete a marathon, despite being told women weren't capable of competing. Fifty years later she is still a force of empowerment. By Sophie Tedmanson.

**W**hen Kathrine Switzer set out to run her first marathon she didn't mean to start a running revolution, she simply wanted to prove the boys wrong.

Switzer was a 20-year-old journalism student in 1967 and the first woman to join her university track and field running team. During training, her coach would entertain her with tales of running the Boston Marathon – one of the world's most famous and prestigious long-distance races in the world. Back then, women were considered physically incapable of running 42 kilometres and were therefore not eligible to enter the marathon. Switzer was determined to change that.

It was snowing in April 1967 when Switzer lined up with her coach and then-boyfriend to start the Boston Marathon. While women were technically not allowed to enter, she had entered under her initials K V Switzer, but did not try to hide the fact she was a woman: she wore lipstick and earrings. The marathon began well, but about five kilometres in, race manager Jock Semple famously leapt off a media bus monitoring the runners and lunged at Switzer, trying to rip the bib – number 261 – off her chest and push her off the course. The images of Semple attacking the lone woman on the course went global, exposing the ugly sexism in sport and turning Switzer into an equality icon for female athletes.

Switzer later recalled the incident in her memoir, *Marathon Woman*: “A big man, a huge man with bared teeth, was set to pounce, and before I could react he grabbed my shoulder and flung me back, screaming: ‘Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!’”

Switzer still vividly remembers that moment five decades ago. “I remember it very clearly,” she tells *Vogue*. “I remember how scared and terrified I was. I remember because he came out of the blue it was a combination of feeling scared but also feeling deeply embarrassed. It was in front of so many people ... you feel like an idiot. You're both burning-hot mad and humiliated, and you are disappointed and don't quite know what to do. So all of those things hit me at once. But also I was very scared because he was out of control and cursing at me and pushing me.

“I was also worried that I had stepped into a really important sports event and done something wrong. It's like being in a bad dream, that you've done something wrong. But then, of course, my boyfriend hit [Semple] and that's when I got really scared, because I thought he had seriously hurt him. Then my coach said: ‘Run like hell’, so down the street we went.”

Despite the emotion and adrenaline of the situation, Switzer channelled her anger into her legs and made it to the finish line an impressive four hours and 20 minutes later, by which time she had not



Kathrine Switzer running in the Boston Marathon in 1967 and being accosted by Jock Semple, who objected to a woman competing in the race.

only changed her life but also changed the course of history for women running long distance. Semple later publicly reconciled with Switzer.

Switzer says standing up for her rights as a woman was primarily what kept her going: “When you have an adrenaline rush like that you lose your energy and we went into a deep trough for about six miles, but then we climbed out of it. That's one of the things that really impresses me about human physiology – that you can do that.

“I mean, honestly, I wanted to step off the course and go home to my mum and go to sleep. I wanted it all to go away. But I couldn't, I had to finish the race. Because I knew if I didn't then nobody would believe women could do it, and it would really set us back.”

The race made her an instant celebrity, something Switzer harnessed to benefit female sportswomen worldwide: she campaigned for women to be allowed to officially enter the Boston Marathon (which was approved in 1972), created the Avon International Running Circuit women-only events in the late 70s, and thanks largely to her influence, in 1984 women were finally allowed to run the marathon in the Olympics for the first time. Personally she has since run scores of marathons, including the New York Marathon in 1974, which she won, and last April, to celebrate 50 years of the iconic moment in these images, Switzer returned to Boston to run the marathon again – at the



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age of 70 – and followed that up by running the New York Marathon six months later, also run by model Karlie Kloss.

During both marathons last year Switzer was surrounded by groups of women who have joined her not-for-profit charity 261 Fearless (named after her original Boston bib number). The organisation, says Switzer, is a global running community encouraging women to be empowered and support each other through running. She describes it as a “social revolution” that has scores of members and clubs worldwide and the support of an international sponsorship with Adidas, and continues to grow. Prior to Christmas she hosted a training camp in New Zealand (where she lives half the year when not in her native New York) and there are plans to expand 261 Fearless to Australia this year.

“We're creating a community of women that are non-judgmental and doing it safely, so they will run all their lives and so that they know that they can communicate with their sisters all around the world,” she says. “So it's really not just about running on a Saturday morning and grabbing coffee, although sometimes that's what we do. The nice thing about marathons for those who can run them is they are a really great, awesome, community



builder. We are finding that there's a great passion in us getting together and having fun in a big city and running a big race and not being competitive necessarily, but willing to put ourselves on the line in terms of physical fitness – it's an effort; marathons are hard!

“It's also fearless for women helping a woman who is fearful about taking the next step. You can tell a person to get their sneakers and go for a run and they won't do it by themselves, but if they have a buddy with them for a while then they will,” she says. “It's so hard in so many countries to convince women that it's okay to go out and do this. They are still under the impression it's not the right thing to do, that it's not appropriate, that it's conspicuous, that it's not what a woman does. But once they get with a group they are having fun and that's one reason why 261 Fearless is really terrific, because it's actually a lot of fun.”

Switzer says despite her age she still enjoys running marathons and has many more on her bucket list, starting with London. “There are more on my bucket list, but I've been too busy. So I got thinking: ‘Well, if are you going to do them, you'd better get going.’” *Vogue's Sophie Tedmanson will run the 2018 Boston Marathon in April with 261 Fearless. For more information, go to [www.261fearless.org](http://www.261fearless.org).*

**“THERE'S A GREAT PASSION IN US GETTING TOGETHER”**