

Marathon struggle of runner who changed athletics

First woman to finish Boston Marathon reruns race 50 years on - and nearly as fast

Alexandra Topping

A runner who saw off furious race officials in 1967 to become the first woman to finish the Boston Marathon has repeated the feat 50 years after first completing the course.

Kathrine Switzer, 70, became a hero of the women's rights movement after she officially completed the all-male race. Registering as KV Switzer, her gender went unnoticed by officials at the starting line-up, but a few miles into the race she was attacked by an angry official who tried to pull her off the course - creating an enduring image of feminist history.

With help from her boyfriend, who pushed the official away from her as she ran, Switzer managed to evade him and finished the race in 4hr 20min.

On Monday, the veteran ran it again - finishing just under 25 minutes slower at 4hr 44min 31sec.

In a sign of how times have changed, Switzer was cheered by crowds, and fired the starting gun for the women's elite runners' race.

Switzer told CNN that running in the two races 50 years apart was "like night and day". Describing hearing her name called out by supporters, she said: "I've got to tell you it was one of the most



A race official, Jock Semple, tries to pull Kathrine Switzer out of the 1967 Boston Marathon but is pushed away by her boyfriend. Photographs: Paul J Connell/Getty

gratifying emotional experiences I've ever had ... a wonderful moment."

She wore her old number, 261, which as a mark of honour was retired by race organisers after she crossed the finish line. The Boston Marathon has retired only one other number in its history: 61, in recognition of the 61 races started by the athlete Johnny Kelley.

In her memoir, *Marathon Woman*, Switzer recalled the moment she was attacked. "I jerked my head around quickly and looked square into the most vicious face I'd ever seen," she wrote.

"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!'"

"I knew if I dropped out 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

Age brings its own reward

Road racing might seem like a young person's game. But tell that to 83-year-old Katherine Beiers, who finished the Boston Marathon on Monday. Or Kenneth Jones, lining up to start Sunday's London Marathon. He's also 83 - and has competed in every one since it was first run in 1981. Or to the 6,263 over-50s who completed London last year.

Of course it is impossible to defy the ageing process. Science suggests that whichever sport you choose, there is a similar pattern, with a gradual decline in the 30s, getting steeper with each succeeding decade. For a typical adult, each decade past their 30s brings on average a 9% decrease in aerobic fitness and a loss of 10% muscle.

However, research also suggests the decline in endurance - as opposed to speed - is less steep. Social media site Strava revealed that the fastest age group for London Marathon competitors among their users last year was 35-44, followed by the 45-54 group.

More experienced athletes are often better at holding their chosen pace for the entire race.

Study after study also shows the multiple benefits of aerobic, weight-bearing exercise into older age - and that, far from ruining your knees, as many fear, running may actually help protect them. A study of nearly 75,000 runners and 15,000 walkers published in 2013 found the runners were less likely to develop osteoarthritis.

Kathrine Switzer, left, ran this year's Boston Marathon 25 minutes slower than she did 50 years ago. However, it was only in 1975, when she ran 2hr 51min - ranking her sixth fastest in the world at that time - that she showed her true speed. This year's time was nearly two hours slower, at 4hr 44min and 31sec. But if Switzer's time is entered into an age-grading calculator - which works out your time relative to your age and gender - she scores 72%. The equivalent marathon time for a 30-year-old man would be 2hrs 49min. And there aren't many who can do that.

Kate Carter

that women were barging into events where they had no ability."

That year, another woman tried to race the marathon by jumping out of a bush, but Switzer was the only one to be officially registered.

Switzer said the transformation of her experience of the marathon mimicked the social revolution in women's sport. Women were finally allowed to enter the Boston Marathon in 1972, and to compete in the Olympics at the distance

The number given to Switzer in 1967 and again on Monday. The Boston Marathon organisers have now retired the number in her honour

in 1984. Now 58% of marathon runners in the US are women.

Switzer has entered more than 30 marathons, winning in New York in 1974 in 3hr 07min 29sec, and worked as a TV commentator. She founded the women's running club 261 Fearless, named after her Boston Marathon number.

It is no surprise to Switzer that women embrace the "sense of empowerment" from running. "We have come a light year. But we have a long way to go."



Apology after 10.1