

JODI HECKEL: THE STARTING LINE

# A RESOLUTE BUNCH

Pioneer in women's running says Boston tragedy won't derail activity synonymous with freedom



Running is about freedom and fearlessness, whether you are the first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon, a woman living under oppressive conditions or a Boston Marathoner reeling from last week's bombings at the race.

Running can help people cope with adversity and even lead to social change, said Kathrine Switzer, the first official female finisher at the Boston Marathon and a guest speaker at this week's Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon.

(She will give her talk twice: at 5 and 6:30 p.m. Friday seatings of the prerace Pasta Feed for marathon participants. It will be in Gym 3 at the Activities and Recreation Center on the University of Illinois campus.)

Switzer was working as a broadcast commentator at the Boston Marathon last week, stationed on the photo bridge at the finish line. She left after working for five hours and returned to the press hotel, shortly before two bombs exploded near the finish line.

"Runners are very angry and very sad, but also very resolute — maybe more resolute than ever," Switzer said.

Runners at next year's Boston Marathon will have a strong sense of solidarity after this year's tragedy, she said, and she expects to see the same at this weekend's Illinois Marathon.

"It's not going to change the runners," she said. "It's going to make runners more resolute because running is about freedom, but it's going to be logistically and technically difficult for race organizers."

"There are going to be a lot of complications. You can't patrol 26.2 miles. The logistics have become almost nightmarish. Security is going to be a major issue."

Switzer first ran the Boston Marathon in 1967, registering under her initials, K.V. Switzer, which she typically used. No woman had officially registered and run Boston with a bib number before (although Roberta Gibb was the first woman to complete the marathon as an unofficial entrant the year before).

A race official tried to pull Switzer from the race, but her boyfriend pushed the official away; Switzer finished the marathon.

"Running was important to me, and I knew if I didn't finish that race, I would never forgive myself," she said. "And I knew people would think women couldn't do it. It would set us back so much."

That moment, and running in general, changed her life. It's given her health, travel, a career, she said, and she met her husband through running.

"Most of all, it gives me myself, my creativity, my sense of self," Switzer said. "It doesn't matter anymore if I couldn't run. It's in the heart. It's going to be there forever."

It has the power to change other lives, too, she said.

"Plenty of women begin running because they want to lose weight and take control of their bodies, but then they get a sense of empowerment, pride in themselves, and some women have never had that before," she said.

Switzer noted that running has



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**ABOVE:** Kathrine Switzer, the first official female finisher at the Boston Marathon in 1967, will be a guest speaker at this week's Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon. **BELOW:** In the 1967 Boston Marathon, a race official tried to remove Switzer from the normally all-male competition. Switzer's boyfriend intervened, allowing her to finish the marathon.



## Get to know her

Facts about Kathrine Switzer:

■ The 56-year-old has run 38 marathons, including the 1967 Boston Marathon, where she was the first woman to officially register and complete the race.

■ Switzer won the 1974 New York City Marathon and recorded her fastest marathon time in 1975 at Boston, where she finished in 2 hours, 51 minutes, 33 seconds, good for second place.

■ She's been a broadcast commentator for the Boston Marathon for 26 years.

■ Switzer helped found the Avon International Running Circuit of women's-only races, which helped convince the International Olympic Committee to add a women's marathon to the 1984 Olympic Games. On May 4, she'll run in an Avon race in Berlin, the 30th anniversary of the race that has grown to nearly 20,000 women.

■ Switzer is the author of three books: "Running and Walking for Women Over 40," "26.2 Marathon Stories," co-authored with her husband Ringer Robinson, and her memoir, "Marathon Woman." She is a columnist for Marathon & Beyond magazine, published by Jan Seeley, co-director of the Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon.

■ Earlier this year, Switzer was included in a PBS documentary called "Makers: Women Who Make America," about pioneers of women's rights, including Gloria Steinem, Sandra Day O'Connor and Hillary Clinton.

■ She plans to run the Boston Marathon in 2017, the 50th anniversary of her historic run there.

■ Switzer's family is from Illinois, and her parents met at the University of Illinois.

running — to women in countries where they are oppressed, through a program called 26.2 Fearless. The name comes from the race number Switzer was wearing in the 1967 Boston Marathon. She lectured in recent years that women around the world were wearing that number in races to represent fearlessness in the face of adversity.

"It's not about running in a way it's about changing our lives," she said. "The act of running is transformational, but also it is communication."

"When we run with others, we bare our souls when we talk. You say things you would never say to other people. You're talking about your dreams, and your emphases are spilling out."

Switzer and a partner are working to build an online community for women to safely talk with each other, just as they would if they were running together.

"Freedom begins first in the heart. If we can create a sense of freedom and hope, even in somebody who can't get out the door..." she said. "By running, you realize you can aspire to something more. If I can do that, I can do the next thing."

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changed the lives of women in some African countries — and changed their societies and future generations — as women gained prestige for their status as elite runners and earned money to provide schools and health care for their hometowns.

A week before this year's Bos-

ton Marathon, Switzer was a special guest at the first women-only Malaysia Women Marathon.

"Half the women were Muslim. Plenty of them were running in hijab, with their bodies covered," Switzer said. "They were wonderful. They totally loved running... I was so encouraged."

She noted Saudi Arabia allowed its first female athletes to compete at the London Olympics last year.

"That's a big door that needs to be pushed open, and (the Saudi athletes) opened it a crack," Switzer said.

She hopes to bring running —