

Sunday, July 21, 2017 | Section: Chicago's best sports section, as judged by the Associated Press Sports Editors

**RUNNING**



BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY

Kathrine Switzer (261) is chased by a race official trying to pull her off the 1967 Boston Marathon course.

**Q&A KATHRINE SWITZER**

# Evolving role

Legendary runner broke barrier, now works to inspire others

By SHANNON RYAN

She didn't know it at the time, but a photograph of Kathrine Switzer running in the 1967 Boston Marathon would become an iconic image for sports and women's equality.

The image showed Switzer, No. 261, in the middle of several men, as a race official attempts to pull her off the course. Switzer's boyfriend, however, shoved the official out of the way, and she ran on to the finish.

Since then, Switzer has devoted her life to motivating and empowering women in sports. In 2015, she founded 261 Fearless, a global nonprofit organization that encourages women through running.

She is in Chicago this weekend to participate in the Humana Rock 'N' Roll Marathon Series. Switzer, 72, plans to run the 5-kilometer race Saturday, then encourage runners in Sunday's 10-kilometer and half-marathon races.

She said she will "take selfies, give hugs" and encourage Chicago women to form running clubs, especially for seniors.

Switzer, who won the New York City Marathon in 1974 and is inducted in the National Women's Hall of Fame, will return to Chicago on Aug. 10 to headline the "Empowering Girls for Life" convention with former softball stars Jennie Finch and Natasha Watley.

Switzer spoke to the Tribune about her years in running. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**When you make these appearances, what is your message?**

The message has changed over the years. I'm still a great proponent of pushing women's equality. But now I'm working with Humana, and I enjoy it so much, trying to encourage people to stay active as they age. I got involved with Humana when I ran the Boston Marathon in 2017 for the 50th anniversary. I'm extremely grateful for my health.

I'm realizing the more active you can stay, the more healthy you're going to be. Running, stretching and movement and socialization creates what Humana and I call whole-person health.

People talk about older people now the way they talked about "you women" 50 years ago. "You look silly doing it. You're going to fall down and hurt yourself. You're too weak. You're too fragile." The opposite is the case. The more you move, the more active you are, the stronger you become, the healthier you become.

**What is it like hearing from women you've inspired to run?**

It is extremely validating to hear that. I feel very maternal toward these women. I didn't have children of my own. I was so career-focused and sports-focused. By the time I married the right guy, I was 40. When they come up and say, "You changed my life, running has saved me, I left a bad relationship, I've run my whole life," it validates me. All of us feel great when we change someone's life. If I can continue to do that, I'm honored and



ELISE AMENDOLA/AP

Kathrine Switzer, the first official woman entrant in the Boston Marathon 50 years ago, wears the same bib number at the race in 2017.

privileged to be able to do that.

**How do you mark the progress and the continued need for equality in women's sports?**

Of course, looking over the last 52 years since I first ran the Boston Marathon, I see a light year of change. Do we have a long way to go? Yes. That's why I formed 261 Fearless. We've made incredible progress in the United States and now Europe and Canada, but most of the women in the world still live in a very fearful situation. We have a long way to go socially and of course with sports. But look at the progress we've made. If we continue to make the progress we've made in the last 50 years, the next 50 years will be tremendous.

It's not just sports. Look what's happening in politics. Business. The world is totally acknowledging diversity, inclusion and equality are good for business. We realize they're good for sports too.

Look at the popularity of the women in World Cup soccer. It was fantastic to see those stadiums full. But we need to see those stadiums full every week. People are engaging more and more and loving women's soccer just as they now have embraced women's tennis. It will come. Look at all the little girls and the role models they have. They have something to aspire to.

**Can you relate to Serena Williams' recent statement about fighting for equality while competing?**

I can totally relate to that. That is also a driver for me. The more I see places we need to work to fight for that equality, I find that incredibly motivating. It's probably one of the reasons she wants to continue to play. It's a higher purpose. What a role model she is by being a mom too. She's knocking a lot of myths on the head.

I remember many times warming up for a race and I didn't want to be there, I was

tired or whatever. But I knew I always needed to be there and do my best because if people look up to you and are a role model, you need to be there and make it happen.

**Did you realize your participation in the Boston Marathon would be such a big moment? When did you realize it was?**

The ramifications continue even today. I knew something big was going to happen that night, not at the time, but that night driving back from the race. I saw the newspapers in a cafe. We stopped at midnight to get coffee and ice cream to try to stay awake as we drove back to Syracuse. That's when I saw the newspapers, front and back, and I realized, "Oh, my gosh, this is going to be really big. This is probably going to change my life, and it's definitely going to change women's sports."

But it was (labeled as) a really negative incident. People pilloried me for being "just a jogger" for "invading the male space." That just fueled me even more to go on.

Would I have ever realized that picture would become one of the iconic photos not just of women's sports but of women's rights? It's quite phenomenal. I'm grateful for it, if you want to know the truth. It's a vehicle to show social injustice, inequality, but also triumph and persistence and determination. I'm pleased it turned out the way it did. Sometimes the worst things in life become the best things. But at the time it was terrible.

**How much do you run now?**

I still declare myself a marathon runner. Unfortunately I fell after the London Marathon (in the spring) and pulled a muscle in my hip. I'm not quite there. I'll be doing the 5K with Humana on Saturday, but definitely I'm a marathon runner. I need Chicago and Tokyo to get the "big six."

I had hoped to do it this year. Next year, you're going to see me in Chicago.