Boston welcomes Kiwi runner Switzer

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Wellington runner Kathrine Switzer (L) with 261 Fearless team member Rosy Spraker at the 2017 Boston Marathon - 50 years after she was controversially disqualified.

Fifty years on from sneaking into the Boston Marathon, Wellington runner Kathrine Switzer has completed the race as a celebrated guest.

The 70-year-old lined up wearing the same bib number - 261 - that an official tried to rip from her in 1967 as women were banned from running marathons.

CNN reported that the 70-year-old "walked through water stations, stopped for pictures and interviews and still finished under qualifying time: 4:44:31 and an average mile of 10:51".

Her time yesterday was just over 24 minutes slower than her 4hr 20min finish in 1967 - when she was a 20-year-old American journalism student. Back then, she was disqualified and expelled from the Amateur Athletic Union. Yesterday she was feted at the finish-line and interviewed on a US national television network.

Photos of race official Jock Semple (who objected to a female runner in 'his race') trying to rip Switzer's number off her and manhandle her out of the race 50 years ago highlighted the issue of sexism in sport.

Switzer crossed the finish-line in full stride and was embraced by race officials before enjoying an emotional hug from her husband Roger Robinson, a former Victoria University English professor and a dedicated athlete.

She later told *CNN* in a telephone interview on Tuesday that: "What happened on the streets of Boston 50 years ago completely changed my life and changed other people's lives.

"The race today was a celebration of the past 50 years; the next 50 are going to be even better.

"I can't thank the people on the streets of Boston enough. I am so grateful for being able to run the Boston Marathon 50 years after my first one,"

"I'd like to thank the BAA [Boston Athletic Association] and everyone involved for their amazing support this entire weekend. I'd also like to send special thanks to the members of our 261 Fearless Boston Marathon team who have helped empower women globally through running."

In finishing the Boston race, Switzer - who founded the 261 Fearless charity, fulfilled a promise to her late friend, noted Wellington runner Bernie Portenski.

Switzer, who spoke at Portenski's funeral earlier this year, got typically blunt last minute riding instructions from her cancer-stricken friend, herself an international-class runner.

"One of the last things she told me was 'You'd better finish!'," Switzer told *Stuff* before leaving for Boston.

"So I guess I do it, or get carried in on my shield."

"While plenty of 70 and older women have run marathons, no woman has done one 50 years after her first, which of course is only symptomatic of how few women there were running in those days," Switzer said.

"In any case, it's not about an athletic contest, it's about celebrating an event that ignited the women's running revolution.This time I have 118 women and 7 men running with me, all in support of my charity 261 Fearless."

And whereas she had to be sneaky in 1967, this year her build up was carried out in the media spotlight.

Before leaving Wellington, she was interviewed on RNZ, and the US cameras of ESPN came to the capital to film her journey for a documentary.

"It is an honour and joy to participate in the 121st Boston Marathon," she said.

"What was a dramatic incident 50 years ago when angry race co-director Jock Semple tried to throw me off the course for being a girl, became instead a defining moment for me and women runners throughout the world.

"The result is nothing less than a social revolution; there are now more women runners in the United States than men."

After the Boston Athletic Association (BAA) realised women were intent on running marathons, it opened the race to them in 1972 - five years after Switzer's Run became nearly as famous in the city as Paul Revere's 1775 ride, warning Bostonians the British army were coming.

Boston was the first major marathon to allow women to run. Switzer, who was third in 1972, ran Boston eight times, with her personal best of 2 hours 51 minutes 37 seconds recorded in 1975.

The BAA has granted 261 Fearless a invitational bibs for the race to to be used for fundraising purposes.

Switzer was inducted into the USA National Women's Hall of Fame for creating positive social change.

In her book, Marathon Woman she outlined the dramatic events that unfolded when an enraged Semple charged at her, only to be fended away by her boyfriend, hammer thrower Tom Miller as the news cameras clicked away.

She had been spotted by the press truck around 6km into the 42.2km race.

"Photographers were taking our pictures. In fact, they were getting pretty excited to see a woman in the race, a woman wearing numbers! I could see them fumbling to look up my number and name, and then shoot again," she wrote.

"We all started to laugh and wave, it was our 'Hi-Mom-on-the-nightly-news' moment, and it was fun."

And then the fun ended. A man in an overcoat tried to grab her. And an enraged Semple arrived.

"I jerked my head around quickly and looked square into the most vicious face I'd ever seen. 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!'"

"Then he swiped down my front, trying to rip off my bib number, just as I leapt backward from him. He missed the numbers, but I was so surprised and frightened that I slightly wet my pants and turned to run."

Semple kept trying to grab her number, until Miller - a former American football player - hit him with a block.

"He landed on the roadside like a pile of wrinkled clothes. Now I felt terror. We've killed this guy Jock. It's my fault, even though hothead Tom did it. My God, we're all going to jail."

When those on the press truck treated Switzer as if she were a prankster who would give up, she was determined to carry on. She finished in blood-soaked socks in 4hr 20min, in front of about a dozen people and waiting journalists.

On the drive back to home to New York State they stopped for gas and food in Albany, where the enormity of what Switzer had done hit home.

"In the restaurant, there was only one man, sitting at the U-shaped counter, reading a newspaper," Switzer wrote.

"All over the front and back covers were our photos. We gathered around gasping as we went from page to page. Everywhere it was girl running, girl being attacked, girl being saved by boyfriend, happy bedraggled girl in bloody socks at finish."

The revolution had begun.