

The Running Life: History Girls

Women runners who changed the world

By Candace Karu

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One recent Sunday, during a rain-soaked run, I passed a group of high school runners. The pack of boys and girls was strung out along the road, chatting amiably. It never gets old, seeing happy, fit young runners, training hard at times when most of their peers are still in bed. And for me, who grew up in an era when the things that teenage boys and girls did together did not involve sports, it just tickles me that the culture can change; things can get better.

After finishing that run, drenched and cold, I decided to take a real vacation day, no email, no phones, no trips to the market. I grabbed the next book on deck and vowed to read it cover to cover. Lucky for me that book was *Marathon Woman* by Kathrine Switzer. Kathrine, the first woman to complete the Boston Marathon as a registered runner, has written a memoir about her life as a runner and as an advocate and activist for women's running.

Born in 1947, Kathy Switzer, as she was known then, came of age in a time and place ripe for revolution. Gender stereotypes were being challenged in the home, in business, and in sports. The times were changing and changing fast, and feisty, tenacious women like Kathrine Switzer were the agents provocateurs. During the first running boom of the late '60s and early '70s, overwhelmingly populated by very fast, very fierce, very male runners, a handful of female athletes endured ridicule, social ostracism, and verbal abuse so they, too, could be a part of the action.

It isn't easy for young runners to imagine the climate of the running community in the late '60s. Even older runners who came late to the sport have a hard time fully understanding just how much has changed since the 1967 Boston Marathon, when Jock Semple, in a moment captured on film and seen around the world, tried to rip Kathrine's number off her sweatshirt and push her off the course. Because she signed up as K.V. Switzer, the Boston Athletic Association was unaware that they had registered a woman. When Semple saw her from the press truck, his legendary temper got the best of him. His assault on Kathrine was swift and extreme. Only a body block by her beefy boyfriend allowed Kathrine to continue.

Kathrine Switzer's memoir is a testimony to her unwavering determination, her unflagging energy, and her unfailing, and often unwarranted, optimism. These characteristics served her running as well as they served her impressive professional career, a career devoted to giving women around the world access to athletic opportunities. Fighting for and winning her own place at the table wasn't enough. Kathrine wanted other women to experience the satisfaction and confidence that comes with a strong, fit body, the fulfillment that only racing and competition can confer. Throughout her career in public relations and marketing, she persevered in a long and often frustrating quest to have the women's marathon included in the Olympic Games. Her persistence was rewarded in 1984 when 49 women from 28 countries gathered to run the marathon for the first time. Over 2 billion people around the world watched as Joan Benoit, from Cape Elizabeth, Maine, came through the tunnel and into the Olympic Stadium.

[I read Switzer's book the same week that Joan Benoit Samuelson turned 50. Earlier in the month, Joanie's husband Scott sent her friends a letter explaining how we could help commemorate her milestone year. Because Joanie is an avid gardener, Scott sent each of us two blank, white seed envelopes and asked us to decorate them and fill them with a thought or token in honor of her birthday. He gathered the envelopes and put them into a binder to give her in lieu of the party she was decidedly against. The seed packets reflected not only Joanie's love of gardening but also her work planting the seeds of women's running. Like Kathrine Switzer, Joanie has spent a career promoting opportunities for women who want to run. She has been a tireless ambassador, and, with quiet, authoritative persistence, has created a secure environment for female athletes around the world.](#)

[Any woman who has ever run a marathon, any girl who has joined the track team, any runner who has lined up with hundreds or thousands of men and women at the start of a race owes a debt of gratitude to women like Kathrine and Joanie, women like Grete Waitz, Roberta Gibb, Anne Audain, Nina Kuscsik, Joyce Smith, and other trailblazers of women's running and racing. And as stymied as these women were by the predominantly male running establishment, in fairness it must be said that they were encouraged by many of the male runners they met on the roads and in races. Starting out as lone voices in their communities, through hard work and stubborn dedication, they announced to the world that women's running was a cause worth fighting for.](#)

[It's easy for me to tell you how much I love to run. What is more complicated, harder to pin down, is the richness that running brings to my life. My fitness has allowed me to embrace and love this imperfect body in spite of a culture that tells me perfection is young and tall and impossibly slender. The confidence I get from racing spills over to other areas, giving me strength in realms well beyond the physical. Running has given shape to my social network and tied me closer to my family, my friends, and my community. Kathrine Switzer's book reminded me how deeply grateful I am to those women and men who fought valiantly so that I could live the running life.](#)

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