

# The Running Life: Sisterhood Is Powerful

## Why Women-Only Races Make Sense

By Candace Karu

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**On Sunday I took the opportunity to return to racing, such as my racing has become lately, by traveling to New York City and competing in the second annual More Marathon and Half Marathon.** The marathon requires that participants are at least 40 years old on race day. Teams of two women, one of whom must be 40 to participate, can run the half. The field this year came in at almost 3,500 women, the majority of whom came of age without the benefits imparted by Title IX. The race attracted serious athletes, neophytes, and even a contingent of walkers. Because I have participated in a number of women-only races, I thought it would be interesting to deconstruct their appeal, to understand why, or even if, this kind of racing environment is helping runners, both male and female, and improving our sport.

For those of you who have never been to a race comprised entirely of female participants, I would advise you to treat yourself to the experience the next time it presents itself. You won't be disappointed. As is the case with many events involving enthusiastic first-timers, a women-only race will remain in your memory for a very long time. And here's why.

Women-only races create a persistent atmosphere of inclusion and acceptance. For some of the participants, training for this race was their first-ever athletic endeavor. A 50-year-old newbie might be intimidated and silenced in a typical race crowd, where men are usually in the majority. Surrounded by women—high-spirited, ebullient, accepting women—however, allows this same newly minted runner to articulate her fears and questions. Over and over again at women's races, I have seen veteran runners encouraging their novice sisters; reassuring them, giving them advice, taking care of them. I can only imagine that the likelihood of women like these becoming regular runners is enormously enhanced if their first taste of racing affords them an unparalleled level of comfort.

Women-only races allow men to demonstrate their more caring and nurturing side. While there were both male and female volunteers for this race, the informal supporters of the racers were largely bearers of the Y chromosome. Men were there in force, offering solicitous encouragement, water bottles, safety pins, and Gu; waving signs; banging drums; and caring for children along the course. Clearly these are not tasks totally foreign to the menfolk. There are nurturing, caring guys at every race. It is just such a lovely thing to see women get the lion's share of attention at a road race.

Women-only races are fun. They are fun in a way that men might not fully understand. Because the atmosphere at this race was so relaxed and happy, women felt free to let go and be themselves. There was a lot more dancing to the requisite pre-race disco-era music at this event. There was endless mid- and back-of-the-pack chitchat during the race. There was hugging—lots and lots of hugging. And giggling. Don't ask. You have never seen so many women acting girlish and lighthearted in your life, a little drunk with the thrill of the day. I can easily understand how this scene might be off-putting to many male runners. Still, only the hardest heart could remain unmoved by the sight of such joyous abandon.

Women-only races honor the accomplishments of the best of our cohort. It is the rare race where the fastest woman can cross the finish line triumphant and alone, the spotlight shining only on her, the cheers only for her, the supreme moment hers alone. The years and sacrifices that it took for the winner to get to the finish line before her competition are rightfully and properly acknowledged at these races.

Women-only races make good business sense. Female participation in road racing grows every year, with some races now attracting an equal number of male and female participants. In the past few years we have even begun to see fields where women outnumber men. As a community, we should consider new women runners as the lifeblood of road racing and treat them accordingly. These races are an effective, efficient way to increase participation in all races.

When asked specifically if there should be women-only races, my male colleagues' answers ran the gamut from indifference to enthusiastic endorsement. One weighed in with a hint of amused derision. Senior Writer Roger Robinson, along with wife Kathrine Switzer, wrote a column in the April 1998 Running Times about women's running. They made a pretty compelling argument for both women- and men-only races, suggesting that there is a good way to make sense of the divisions: "Men and women race separately as part of a 'festival' of races. Each gender (and some age groups) gets the buzz and satisfaction of its own race, while all the other groups get to watch."

In an email, Roger further stated that he believes men-only races, as well as attracting the obvious sponsors—E.D. treatments and hair restoratives to suggest two—could enrich the sport. My initial response was to reject this idea out of hand. But thinking it over, it might just be an idea whose time has come. There is nothing like the thrill of a huge race, teeming with runners of every description. But women-only, and even men-only, events could be the best vehicle to attract new runners to the sport and to get more experienced runners excited about a new aspect of racing.

In the end it isn't simply about the details of the race, it's about making running and racing the richest and most rewarding experience possible for the greatest number of people.

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