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## The Race for Acceptance: Female Marathon Runners' Fight for Global Equality and Inclusion

Claire Murphy

August 5th, 1984 proved to be more than just a monumental day at the Los Angeles Olympics. Not only did fifty female marathon runners from over 28 countries unite to compete for gold for the very first time, but an American, Joan Benoit Samuelson, won the world's first Olympic marathon.<sup>1</sup> Significant media coverage prior to the race led many to speculate on the outcome, with popular news outlets like the *New York Times* releasing detailed reports about the race's competitors and course descriptions in the days prior to the event. "The race will begin at 8 A.M., before smog covers the sky and before the temperature works up into the mid-80's...The course is fairly flat, with the highest point only 300 feet above sea level..." read one report.<sup>2</sup> Despite her recent recovery from knee surgery, and multiple warnings from her coach Bob Sevens to not rush her progress, Benoit Samuelson beat out all her competitors. Finishing with a record-breaking time of 2:24:43, Samuelson cemented her place in marathon history as the first woman to do so.<sup>3</sup> Benoit Samuelson later described the nerve-racking experience in her memoir. "The noise was muffled and I heard my own footfalls. I thought, 'Once you leave this tunnel, your life will be changed forever.'"<sup>4</sup> Benoit Samuelson was doing more than just changing her own life, however. By successfully finishing the Olympic marathon, she was proving to the world that women are physically capable of competing on the same level as their male counterparts.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Robinson, "Looking Back at Joan Benoit Samuelson's Olympic Marathon Win," *Runner's World*, 5 August 2019.

<sup>2</sup> "Marathon; Women's Debut Becomes a Highlight," *New York Times*, 5 August 1984, sec. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Alfano, "Joan Benoit Easily Wins Trial," *New York Times*, 13 May 1984, sec. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Benoit Samuelson, Gloria Averbuch, *Joan Samuelson's Running for Women* (PA: Rodale Press, 1995), 1-2.



Joan Benoit Samuelson entering the last stretch of the inaugural Olympic Marathon.<sup>5</sup>

Samuelson's win might have solidified women's place within the Olympic marathon, but it was made possible by the women who came before her who challenged sexist standards about competitive athletics. These notable women and their substantial efforts to defy nationally accepted rules and regulations made it possible for female long-distance runners like Samuelson to gain acknowledgement for their abilities. Roberta Gibb and Kathrine Switzer's active participation in male-only races, in addition to their increased advocacy efforts, worked to generate increased media coverage, consequently affecting both the visibility and recognition of female marathon runners. With the enlisted support of well-respected multinational corporations like Avon, female marathon runners managed to gain the awareness and attention necessary to be included in the Olympic Marathon, the pinnacle of athletic achievement.

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<sup>5</sup> *Joan Benoit Wins Women's Marathon*, 1984, in Los Angeles Herald Examiner (Los Angeles, CA: Herald Examiner Collection, 1984).

Despite female runners being prohibited from participating in publicly sanctioned marathon races until 1972, accounts of women crashing male races were recorded as early as the late 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Female runners like Ona Siporin raced (unofficially) alongside men in both short and long-distance events, demonstrating the importance of gradually entering into competitions to ease the pushback from athletic officials. Women could publicly compete in sprint-style events for decades prior to their involvement in the marathon, but Siporin notes how there were always “women who want to go further.” According to Siporin, there was never a time-period where lack of allowance was a result of general disinterest.<sup>7</sup> A Greek runner, Stamatis Rovithi, became the first woman to complete the Athens Olympic Marathon course in 1896, which demonstrated the desire for women to want to compete in longer distance races.<sup>7</sup> Justifications for exclusion primarily lay outside of female control, most notably at the hands of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU).<sup>8</sup>

Up until the late 1970s, almost all amateur sports occurring outside of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) were regulated by the AAU. This meant that the AAU created and maintained all rules established within publicly-sanctioned sports, possessing the authority to “discipline and ban athletes” who refused to comply with these rules, even when they were discriminatory.<sup>9</sup> Despite approving of and actively supporting female participation in the majority of track and field events, the AAU deemed marathon running to be outside the bounds of female capacity.

Following this declaration, officials cited three main principles for their rationale in preventing women from

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<sup>6</sup> Jaime Schultz, “Breaking into the Marathon: Women’s Distance Running as Political Activism,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (2019): 1-26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Charlie Lovett, *The Olympic Marathon: a Centennial History of the Games' Most Storied Race* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1997), 125-133.

<sup>9</sup> Schultz, “Breaking into the Marathon,” 1-26.

competing. From a medical perspective, women were “physiologically unsuited” to compete in this kind of athletic event, as it was too physically demanding of their bodies and damaging to their health.<sup>10</sup> Daniel Ferris, the AAU secretary-treasurer at the time of the 1931 U.S. marathon championship, upheld these claims when he wrote to Gazella Weinreich, an eighteen-year-old runner who attempted to compete in the race. Ferris expelled Weinreich, summarizing his rationale with the following points. First, that it “would be too much for any woman,” and lay outside the bounds of appropriate femininity.<sup>11</sup> Second, “aesthetic” considerations would mean any women competitors would be “unattractive” to the male viewer, as athletic proficiency would generate the muscular build and strength capacity meant for a man. Third, Ferris stated that from a “social” standpoint, the “qualities and behaviors” associated with physical sports contradicted the characteristics of true “femininity.”<sup>12</sup> His reasoning was echoed by many athletics officials and much of the medical establishment.

Many female runners were also told to avoid long-distance races because they would exert too much damage on their ovaries. Dr. Frederick Rand Rogers of the New York State Department of Health and Physical Education published a statement in 1929 supporting this theory. He expressed the belief that female long-distance runners would develop “wholly masculine physiques and behavior traits,” and this inhibited their ability to conceive.<sup>13</sup> Women were also viewed as incapable of the discipline, dedication, and sacrifice necessary to be successful. Expert physicians, medical professionals, and the larger public continued to propagate these ideologies in the years leading up to female participation in the marathon, despite increased backlash. During

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Agee Races Across Finish Line First in A.A.U. Marathon,” *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 1931, sec 11.

<sup>12</sup> Schultz, “Breaking into the Marathon,” 1-26.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Rand Rogers, “Olympics for Girls?” *School and Society* (1929): 194.

the mid-twentieth century, female runners were told they must accept the limitations of their gender and to stop making a fuss about it.<sup>14</sup> Fortunately, for the sake of female marathon running and the future of female athletics, many women ignored and defied these official declarations.

Roberta “Bobbi” Gibb refused to comply with official guidelines when told she could not participate in the 1966 Boston Marathon, one of the most challenging and arduous races available to long-distance runners. Following a request for permission, Boston Athletic Association (BAA) president Will Cloney wrote back barring Gibb from competing. Gibb recalls Cloney stating that “women were not physiologically capable of running twenty-six miles,” and the association could not be liable for this decision.<sup>15</sup> Anything outside of the distance of one and half miles was strictly prohibited by the AAU.<sup>16</sup> In this moment, Gibb had an important decision to make, one that would ultimately pave the way for future female runners. In her 2016 autobiography, Gibb reflected:

At that moment, I knew that I was running for much more than my own personal challenge. I was running to change the way people think. There existed a false belief that was keeping half the world’s population from experiencing all of life. And I believed that if everyone, man and woman, could find the peace and wholeness I found in running, the world would be a better, happier, healthier place.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Vincent Serravallo, “Class and Gender in Recreational Marathon Running,” *Race, Gender, & Class* (2000): 96.

<sup>15</sup> Bobbi Gibb, “To Boston with Love: The Story of the First Woman to Run the Boston Marathon,” (California: Y42K Publishing Services, 2000; CreateSpace Publishing Services, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Ailsa Ross, “The Woman Who Crashed the Boston Marathon,” *JSTOR Daily* (2018): 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Gibb, *To Boston with Love*, 20.

Dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and hiding in a bush alongside the starting line, Gibb defied official protocol and entered the Boston Marathon among a sea of male participants. To Gibb's surprise, she ran the race without interruption and is remembered as the first woman to do so despite her efforts remaining unofficial in the eyes of the AAU.<sup>18</sup> Public encouragement and widespread media coverage of the event led Cloney to publicly repudiate the historic moment, denying its significance. In a *Sports Illustrated* article published shortly after the event, Cloney stated that “Mrs. Bingay (Gibb) did not run in the Boston Marathon,” but instead “covered the same route as the official race while it was in progress. No girl has ever run in the Boston Marathon.”<sup>19</sup> The following year Gibb ran again (still unofficially), this time with different intentions. Rather than racing for gender equality, Gibb was recorded by a *Boston Globe* reporter as stating that she was participating “to share the feelings of joy I get while running.”<sup>20</sup> Gibb’s mother spoke with a *New York Times* journalist after the race, claiming that Gibb did not “want to break any barriers...she’s not interested in competing against men.”<sup>21</sup> This seemed to reflect a change in attitude, perhaps as a result of the repeated dismissal of her athletic abilities and achievements by race officials. Gibb’s commentary was not the main focal point of the 1967 Boston Marathon race, however. Another female runner, by the name of Kathrine Switzer, remained at the forefront of public discussion for her revolutionary efforts to register and compete as an official entrant under the name of K. Switzer.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Schultz, “Breaking into the Marathon,” 1-26.

<sup>19</sup> “A Game Girl in a Man’s Game,” *Sports Illustrated*, 2 May 1966, sec. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Bob Sales, “Lady Runner No Crusader,” *Boston Globe*, 18 April 1967, sec. 47.

<sup>21</sup> “Two Girls in Marathon Don’t Have a Lovely Leg to Stand On,” *New York Times*, 20 April 1967, sec. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Pamela Cooper, “Marathon Women and the Corporation,” *Journal of Women's History* 7 (1995): 1–15.

Kathrine Switzer walked up to the official starting line on Wednesday, April 19th, 1967 with a purpose. Unlike Gibb, Switzer entered with a registered race number (261) attached to her shirt. Her coach, Arnie Briggs, advised Switzer to use initials on her race application and picked up her bib number to avoid suspicion. Switzer raced in the Boston Marathon alongside her boyfriend, Thomas Miller, and another friend from Syracuse University. Despite her initial efforts to remain hidden among other competitors, officials quickly gathered word of Switzer's participation and rushed onto the course to expel her. Captured by photographers in what is now considered to be one of the most infamous moments in sports history, Switzer was physically assaulted by race officials Will Cloney and Jock Semple as they tried to pull her off the course.<sup>23</sup> Switzer later recounted the experience in her autobiography, *Marathon Woman*:



Suddenly, a man with an overcoat and felt hat was in the middle of the road shaking his finger at me; he said something to me as I passed and reached out for my hand, catching my glove instead and pulling it off...Moments later, I heard the scraping noise of leather shoes coming up fast behind me, an alien and alarming sound amid the muted thump-thumping of the rubber running shoes... ‘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 (91).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Lovett, *Olympic Marathon*, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Kathrine Switzer, *Marathon Woman: Running the Race to Revolutionize Women's Sports* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017), 91.



Harry Trask's infamous photos of Switzer being pulled off course by race officials.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the turbulent events that took place that day, Switzer was able to complete the marathon with a recorded time of four hours and twenty minutes.<sup>26</sup> In the days following the event, Switzer received a formal letter from the AAU expelling her from membership on the grounds that she had run more than the allowed distance approved for women and had “fraudulently entered the race by signing the entry form” with her personal initials.<sup>27</sup> Switzer's AAU membership may have been terminated as a result of her illegal participation in the race, but it was the AAU who suffered as a result of the outcome.

Widespread media circulation of photos from the race worked to call national attention to the issue of gender discrimination within long-distance running. Notable newspapers like the *New York Times* got a hold of the story and ran it as front-page news: “Lady With Desire to Run Crashed Marathon; Officials at Boston Shaken When Entry 261 Started Race.”<sup>28</sup> Newspaper headlines throughout Boston published Switzer's dramatic story, and the event soon became sensationalized with Switzer appearing on popular talk shows like the *Tonight Show*

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<sup>25</sup> Cloney and Semple. H. Trask, “Who Says Chivalry is Dead?,” (1967), in *Marathon Woman*, (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2017), 149.

<sup>26</sup> Schultz, *Going the Distance*, 72–88.

<sup>27</sup> Switzer, *Marathon Woman*, 34.

<sup>28</sup> “Lady With Desire to Run Crashed Marathon; Officials at Boston Shaken When Entry 261 Started Race,” *New York Times*, 23 April 1967, sec. 4.

with *Johnny Carson* in the days following.<sup>29</sup> This form of coverage also proved a vital element in the fight for equality. Not only did it call attention to the discriminatory rules and regulations set forth by the AAU and BAA, but it opened the door for increased visibility, attention, and political activism for female marathon running. With Gibb and Switzer now at the forefront of the public's awareness, enough momentum was generated to start a new movement, one that would inspire future women to join the cause and fight for equality within long-distance racing.<sup>30</sup>

The 1970s were a revolutionary period in many ways for female marathon running. Not only were more women competing in marathon races across the country (with the numbers nearly quadrupling from 1970 -1971), but women were running consistently faster than ever before.<sup>31</sup> In August of 1971, Adrienne Beames, a runner from Australia, broke the three-hour barrier with a time of 2:46:30. This proved to the world (and to the AAU) that women were indeed physically capable of this kind of challenge and official rules needed to change.<sup>32</sup> Organizations like the Road Runners Club of America (RRCA) and Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) became vital resources for women in their efforts to gain equality. Sponsored by the RRCA, the American National Women's Marathon Championship was the very first official U.S. marathon that allowed women to compete and was held in Atlantic City, New Jersey.<sup>33</sup> Although the race remained outside of "legitimately sanctioned" marathons, it embodied the growing movement that was occurring across the globe to make, as one *Sports Illustrated* journalists reported, female runners "unofficially official."<sup>34</sup> It also worked to send a strong message to the AAU, adding pressure to the longstanding

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<sup>29</sup> Schultz, *Going the Distance*, 72–88.

<sup>30</sup> Schultz, *Breaking into the Marathon*, 1-26.

<sup>31</sup> Schultz, *Going the Distance*, 72–88

<sup>32</sup> Lovett, *Olympic Marathon*, 125-133.

<sup>33</sup> Schultz, *Going the Distance*, 72–88.

<sup>34</sup> Pat Tarnawsky, "Female Long Distance Restrictions Rigid," *Track and Field News*, Nov. 1971, sec. 22.

oppressive policies they mandated. Hitting a breaking point in 1972 as a result of increased financial threats and legislative action, the AAU yielded on their previous policies and allowed women to compete in Boston, though specific stipulations remained. Female runners had to begin from a separate starting line and needed to meet the male qualifying requirement of three hours and thirty minutes.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, this inclusion marked a turning point in women's marathon running. Switzer noted the importance of this moment in her autobiography, *Marathon Woman*. "Giving women permission (endorsement) to participate alongside men threw thousands of years of preconceptions about female weakness out the window...if women could run a marathon, they can do anything."<sup>36</sup>

Political activism, and the extensive media coverage that followed, proved to be the nail in the AAU's coffin for divided marathons. After Nina Kuscsik finished first among female racers in Boston, she filed a lawsuit along with other races against the AAU and staged a sit-in at the start of the 1972 New York City Marathon. Several female runners refused to start at the mandated female time of ten minutes prior to the men and held up signs depicted by a *New York Times* reporter stating, "Hey AAU. This is 1972. Wake Up!"<sup>37</sup> Refusing to begin before the men, female runners waited for the starting gun to go off and then proceeded to join the male racers, sixty of which signed their petition condemning the AAU.<sup>37</sup> With lawsuits filed and increased scrutiny gathering among the public and media officials, the AAU decided to retract their gender segregation policies and officially allow women to compete alongside men in all publicly sanctioned marathon events.<sup>38</sup> 1974 marked the first year in sports history that the AAU would sponsor a publicly sanctioned marathon race:

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<sup>35</sup> Schultz, *Breaking into the Marathon*, 1-26

<sup>36</sup> Switzer, *Marathon Woman*, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Gerald Eskenazi, "In New York's Marathon, They Also Run Who Only Sit and Wait," *New York Times*, 2 Oct. 1972, sec. 39.

<sup>38</sup> Schultz, *Breaking into the Marathon*, 1-26.

the National Marathon Championship for Women.<sup>39</sup> The path to the Olympics seemed within sight, but the women runners still needed to generate a greater amount of global attention and publicity. According to Switzer, the IOC mandated that in order for an “event to qualify for Olympic inclusion it must be practiced in at least twenty-five countries and on three continents.”<sup>40</sup> As Switzer noted, “We needed more numbers. We needed more events. If we had the events, we’d have the numbers. We needed the Dream Race.”<sup>41</sup> Little did Switzer know however, a partnership with Avon Cosmetics would prove to be the ticket into the Olympics.

At the peak of the women’s marathon movement, Avon Products, Inc. was one of the most popular cosmetic companies in the world. Their corporate network spanned the globe, reaching dozens of countries across several continents. Valued at over \$1.4 billion, Avon employed more than twenty-six thousand employees, making them one of the largest and most profitable beauty corporations on the market.<sup>42</sup> Executive vice president of Avon, Mark Williams (in a promotional attempt to reach a new demographic of athletes), approached Switzer to gauge her interest in organizing a women's marathon sponsored by Avon. Switzer would be a key piece in the promotional campaign, as she directly led the Women’s Sports Foundation at the time. Recognizing a potential opportunity to generate IOC recognition, Switzer proposed a different plan: The Avon International Running Circuit. The circuit would be a collection of female marathon races across the globe that would generate widespread attention and recognition.<sup>43</sup>

The races would provide women with “the opportunity to

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<sup>39</sup> Lovett, *Olympic Marathon*, 125- 133

<sup>40</sup> Switzer, *Marathon Woman*, 178.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>42</sup> Pamela Cooper, “Marathon Women and the Corporation,” *Journal of Women's History* 7, (1995): 1–15.

<sup>43</sup> Schultz, *Going the Distance*, 72–88.

participate in something appealing, accessible, and intimidating,” while at the same time incorporating Avon’s global network by hosting races in every country that included an Avon branch. Switzer envisioned that each Avon-sponsored race winner would be sent to the Avon International Marathon Championship, a global event designed to generate significant attention for both the Avon brand and female marathon running. More importantly, it would allow the IOC to see that female marathon running had reached a larger audience and therefore could be a contender for the Olympics.<sup>44</sup> While Switzer knew it was a long shot, corporate executives approved of the global marketing idea, and the first Avon International Marathon Championship was held in Atlanta, Georgia in 1978. The event included 152 runners traveling from more than eight countries. The following race took place in Waldniel, West Germany with 262 runners representing twenty-four countries.<sup>45</sup> Soon Avon branches across the globe were vying to host their own races, with popular brands like Nike sponsoring promotional campaigns targeting the IOC with slogans that read, “WE THINK IT’S TIME THE IOC STOPPED RUNNING AWAY FROM WOMEN RUNNERS.” Nike also established the International Runners’ Committee (IRC) to “increase competitive opportunities for runners worldwide.”<sup>46</sup> With the third International Marathon Championship held in London in the days following the end of the Moscow Olympics, advocates for the women’s marathon had one last opportunity to be considered for inclusion before a final decision was made about the 1984 Olympics. London proved to be successful, with twenty-seven countries represented from over five continents, “exceeding the IOC’s formal requirements for new events.” As Switzer notes, “London was the proof. They can’t refuse us now.”<sup>47</sup>

February 23rd, 1981 marked a historic day in female sports

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<sup>44</sup> Switzer, *Marathon Woman*, 178.

<sup>45</sup> Schultz, *Going the Distance*, 72–88.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Switzer, *Marathon Woman*, 381.

history. Many female runners across the world waited anxiously for the IOC's final decision regarding female inclusion in the Olympic marathon. Switzer, who delegated to the Executive Board of the IOC on behalf of the female running community in the days prior, remained hopeful about the decision. At 6:30 p.m. the Executive Board announced the approval for inclusion of the women's marathon, negating a previous rule that required decisions to be made four years in advance of the games. The event would be officially included in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, thoroughly cementing women's permanent place within the marathon and signaling to the public that women belong in competitive athletics.<sup>48</sup>

The world of female marathon racing was forever changed by the actions of several remarkable women, exemplified by the efforts of Roberta Gibb and Kathrine Switzer when they decided to defy official rule and crash the all-male Boston Marathon in 1966 and 1967. However, it was more than these moments alone that generated change. The momentum that came from these actions spurred a global movement, one that put female long-distance runners at the forefront of media and public attention. This movement, along with the tireless advocacy efforts for female inclusion and corporate support from globally recognized brands like Avon, solidified women marathon runners' place at the 1984 Summer Olympics. The newfound visibility and awareness generated for female runners would have a larger and much longer lasting impact than expected. As a result of these events, the world began to change the way they viewed women, but more importantly, female athletes. No longer would they be considered the weak and dainty racers they once were. When given the opportunity and global platform, female marathon runners proved that they possessed the capabilities to compete alongside men, and should be viewed as equal within professional athletics.

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<sup>48</sup> Lovett, *Olympic Marathon*, 132.

**Author Bio:**

Claire Murphy is a senior at Santa Clara University studying History, Communications (with a Journalism emphasis), and Philosophy. While she is passionate about both media literacy and investigative writing, her interests also include studying the intersections between research, historical analysis, and women's history. Apart from academic writing, Claire enjoys working as the MarCom Specialist at Santa Clara's Alumni Association, news reporting for the student-run paper, *The Santa Clara*, and playing ultimate frisbee with friends on Santa Clara's club team, Rage.