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Marathon Women

A critical appreciation of the first women to run a marathon

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Abstract

Women currently account for an average of around 35% of participants in the 800 or so official marathon races that are held each year (1). Yet the inclusion of women in marathon running is a relatively recent phenomenon: prior to 1972, women were almost completely excluded from participating, largely due to discriminatory rules that were enforced by the prevailing national and international athletics governing bodies. Since the modern Olympic marathon in 1896 through until 1971, women protested their exclusion from marathon races through direct action: they ran marathons officially in the rare events where they were able to, or unofficially where necessary. Based on a review of literature such as athlete biographies, press reports and records of first-hand accounts, this paper explores some of this rich-history of protest, reviewing the motivations and actions of several of the women involved, and evaluating the extent to which their actions contributed towards ending sex-discrimination in the marathon. The paper concludes that the handful of women who ran the marathon prior to 1960 had little if any impact on lessening sex-discrimination in endurance running, and that doing so does not appear to have been their primary goal. Nevertheless, they challenged popular opinion by proving that women could run long distances and, to some extent at least, brought this fact to the attention of the public. The paper further concludes that the women who ran the marathon between 1960 and 1972 increasingly and intentionally sought to end sex-discrimination in the marathon, and that their individual and collective endeavours were not only partially successful, but also remarkable and humbling, given the highly discriminatory social contexts in which they lived.

1.0: A brief history of the marathon

The origin of the marathon distance run lies in the Battle of Marathon which took place in 490 BC (2). Towards the end of the battle a Greek messenger, as one version of events has it, ran the distance from Marathon to Athens without stopping, to give news that the Greeks had defeated the Persian army. The historical accuracy of this version of events is, at best, questionable; its place in modern culture is perhaps due more to Browning's 1879 poem "Pheidippides" than any authoritative evidence (3).

The inclusion of a marathon race for the first time in the 1896 Olympic Games in Athens drew heavily on the legend of Pheidippides' glorious "long run". Spiridon Louis of Greece won Gold in that event, becoming the first Olympic marathon champion (4). There was no standardised distance for the marathon in 1896, and the distance of this first Olympic marathon course was reported to be 40km, the distance from Marathon to Athens.

In 1921 the marathon race distance became standardised by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) at 42.195km (with a 42-metre tolerance only in excess). This distance was selected based on the actual course used in the 1908 Olympic Games in London; in which competitors ran from Windsor Castle to the White City Stadium, followed by a partial lap of the stadium track leading to the finish in front of the Royal Box. (5) The first Olympic Games to feature a marathon race for women did not take place until the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, where Joan Benoit of the USA won the Gold Medal despite having undergone arthroscopic knee surgery just seventeen days earlier (6).

Since the first Olympic marathon in 1896, marathon running by amateur runners has grown in popularity, increasingly so since the early 1960s, to the extent that over 800 officially sanctioned marathon events are held around the world each year. The largest of these events include those held in New York, Chicago, Paris and London, each of which regularly attract more than 35,000 competitors, of whom an average of around 35% are women (7).

2.0: The exclusion of women from the Olympic marathon

Women were completely excluded from all Olympic events until 1900. They were excluded from all running events until the 1928 Olympic Games in which they were permitted to compete in short distance track events including the 100 metres, 4 x 100 metres relay and 800 metres, which was the maximum distance they were permitted to run. Several women were reported to have been exhausted after the 800 metre race, which led the International Olympic Committee to ban this distance from the Olympic Games once again. It was then reinstated in 1960. The maximum distance for female athletes was increased to 1500 metres in 1972, but a women's Olympic marathon was not included until the 1984 Olympic marathon in Los Angeles (8). From 1896 until 1984, therefore, women were excluded from participating in an Olympic marathon.

3.0: The exclusion of women from marathons outside of the Olympic Games

There were no marathon competitions outside of the Olympic Games before 1896; it was the 1896 Games itself that led to the inception of the first annual marathon races open to the public, including the Tour de Paris Marathon (1896), the Boston Marathon (1897 to date) and the London Polytechnic Marathon (1909 to 1996).

The regulation of public marathon races is a somewhat complicated affair; such races are subject to rules and regulations set down by their organisers, by national athletics governing bodies such as the American Athletics Association (founded in 1888) and by the International Association of Athletics Foundations (formerly the International Amateur Athletics Foundation, founded in 1912). Prior to 1972 though, the vast majority of such organisations directly or indirectly discriminated against women by preventing them from officially competing in marathons (and most shorter distance races). Examples of such discrimination are legion; for example, the American Amateur Athletics Foundation did not allow women to officially complete in marathon events until late 1971 which meant that events such as the Boston Marathon excluded women from 1897 to 1972.

The upshot of this discriminatory regulatory framework was that women were almost completely excluded from officially competing in marathon events from 1896 until 1972. However, despite these restrictions and a culture in which women were not expected to participate in endurance running, a small number of exceptional women still chose to run the marathon.

4.0: Marathon women prior to 1960

Despite being officially excluded from competing in marathon events, a handful of women chose to take part in them unofficially between 1896 and 1960. Whilst the evidence suggests that these women were motivated by personal goals, through their actions they challenged, at an individual level, the sex-discrimination that existed in marathon running.

4.1: Stamata Revithi, 1896

In 1896 Stamata Revithi, a thirty-year-old Greek woman living in poverty, walked from Marathon to Athens carrying her seventeen-month-old child. Along the way, and despite having no experience as an endurance athlete, Revithi resolved to compete in the Olympic marathon. Her objective was simply to earn some money and improve her prospects of employment.

After being refused an official race entry, Revithi ran the 40km course unofficially the day after the men's race, dressed in her underclothes and shoes (9). She was not allowed into the Panathinaiko stadium for the final lap of her own personal race, so completed the distance by running around the outside of the stadium. Despite producing evidence of her start time and completing the run in around five and a half hours, Revithi was not recorded as an official finisher. Revithi's 1896 marathon run is well-evidenced; it attracted a great deal of attention and was covered extensively in the Greek press. There are also records of another woman named only Melepomene completing the marathon distance at the same time as Revithi, but it is thought that Melepomene (the Ancient Greek muse of tragedy) was probably simply a nickname given to Revithi by the press.

Sadly, there is no evidence that Revithi's run led to an improvement in her standard of living; she won no prize money, and little is recorded of her later life. Neither did Revithi's run lead to greater participation of women in endurance running; it would be a further eighty-eight years until a women's marathon would feature at an Olympic Games. It seems incorrect though to dismiss Revithi's actions as without value: she was almost certainly the first woman to publicly demonstrate that women were physiologically and mentally capable of running the marathon distance, a fact that was not generally accepted by the world's athletics governing bodies for a further seventy-five years.

4.2: Violet Piercy, 1926

The International Association of Athletics Federations credits Violet Piercy as the first woman to complete the marathon distance for her 1926 performance when she unofficially made a solo run along London's Polytechnic Marathon route. At the time, Great Britain's Women's Amateur Athletics Association banned women from competing in races exceeding 1000 metres. Piercy ran to "...prove that Englishwomen are some good after all." (10) and her time stood as an unofficial world record for 37 years, although there is some debate as to whether she completed the full distance. It is known that Piercy wore walking shoes with a crossover strap and a heel for her run though. Her efforts earned Piercy almost instant international

fame; her run was covered extensively in the press, for example in Britain, the USA and New Zealand, and led to Piercy broadcasting a ten-minute talk to the nation on BBC radio entitled "My Run from Windsor". Piercy would go on to complete several more marathons; indeed, as an exception, she was permitted to begin ahead of the male runners in the official 1936 Polytechnic Marathon.

4.3: Arlene Pieper, 1959

Arlene Pieper completed the Pike's Peak Marathon in 1959, a race of approximately 26 miles consisting of an ascent and descent of the famous American mountain; she was accompanied by her nine-year-old daughter Kathie for the first half of the race. Pieper's motivation for completing the event was to promote a gym which she and her husband co-owned in Colorado Springs. Pieper did not realise that she was the first American woman to officially complete the marathon distance until fifty years later when she was contacted by the organisers of the 2009 Pike's Peak Marathon and invited to be the official race starter for that year. (11)

4.4: Evaluation: Marathon Women Pre-1960

Several other women are known to have completed marathons prior to 1960. For example, Marie-Louise Ledru completed the 1918 Tour de Paris Marathon, and Gazella Weinreich unofficially completed the Baltimore marathon in 1931. Others may well have completed a marathon without any official record of their efforts surviving.

All these women ran in the context of a culture in which women simply did not run long distances, either for recreation or in competition. Whilst it was deemed acceptable in the early nineteenth century for women in Great Britain to compete in long-distance walking challenges (12) and the first Ladies' Championship at Wimbledon was held in 1884, ten years after the first women's match was played in the USA (13); until the 1960s it was widely believed that women were physiologically incapable of endurance running and, were they to attempt it, the consequences might include infertility, premature ageing and even the development of facial hair (14). There is no evidence that the efforts of pioneering women marathon runners during this period led to a change in attitudes towards women who ran, or to any changes in the rules which prevented women from running long distances in competition. Indeed, making such changes does not seem to have been the primary goal of these women, with personal motivations, perhaps understandably, being more important to them. Their efforts appear to have largely been treated as publicity stunts or novelty news items by the media and, in the main, ignored by the male-dominated governing bodies which regulated athletics. There is no evidence during this period of any collective action by women to challenge sex-discrimination in the marathon.

However, it could be argued that Piercy brought the fact that women could complete marathon distance runs to public attention for the first time, as evidenced by the wide coverage her exploits received in the news media on both sides of the Atlantic. In contrast, Pieper's achievements went virtually unnoticed for fifty years, so had no effect on tackling sex-discrimination in the marathon during that time, but her rightful recognition post 2009 perhaps helps us to understand how wrong it was for women's exclusion from the marathon to endure until 1971 on the grounds that they were physiologically incapable of completing the distance, not least as the Pike's Peak marathon includes over 8,000ft of ascent.

5.0: Women running for all women: marathon women 1960 to 1971

After 1960, in America at least, there is evidence that women increasingly participated in marathons to protest sex-discrimination and that they made an important contribution towards at least starting to bring it to an end. We also see evidence of women working together to challenge sex-discrimination in the marathon. This mirrors the emergence of the broader women's liberation movement which fought to secure equal rights and a stronger role for women on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1960s and 1970s.

5.1: Mary Lepper, 1963

Along with her training partner Lyn Carman, Mary Lepper hid in bushes near to the start of the Western Hemisphere Marathon in Culver City before joining the men as the race got underway. In "Marathon Crasher", David Davis writes of how Lepper and Carman were challenged by male officials who tried to remove them from the course, and how both pressed on regardless. Having trained with her husband Bob, and being unaware of Arlene Pieper's marathon run, Lyn Carman intended to become the first woman to complete a marathon in the USA but dropped out at around the twenty-mile mark (15), leaving Lepper to finish the full distance. Lepper ran only one marathon, but Carman went on to win the Santa Barbara Marathon three times during the 1960s. It would be 2013 before Lepper received a commendation from Culver City for her remarkable achievement.

5.2: Bobbi Gibb, 1966, 1967, 1968

Bobbi Gibb completed the Boston Marathon unofficially in 1966, 1967 and 1968. Gibb was denied an official number for the 1966 event on the grounds that women were physiologically unable to run a marathon, so chose to run unofficially, hiding in a bush near to the start line until the marathon began and wearing loose clothes to blend in with the men.

In "Fire in the Wind", Gibb writes of her wish for her running to be a "catalyst for social change" and both "non-threatening" and "inspirational". She also notes the warm support she received from male runners in the 1966 event and writes of being very surprised at the strong media interest which followed her finishing the Boston marathon for the first time. Although Gibb was never permitted an official entry, and so always ran without a race number, her place as the first woman to complete the event and her participation in the 1966, 1967 and 1968 editions is now recognised in the Boston Marathon archives. (16)

5.3: Kathrine Switzer, 1967

In 1967 Kathrine Switzer entered the Boston Marathon as "K V Switzer" without making mention of the fact that she was a woman. The application form made no mention of gender, however no female competitor had ever been given a race number before Switzer was "inadvertently" issued with number 261. (17)

In "Marathon Woman" Switzer writes of her experience. In contrast to Gibb's essentially gentle approach, Switzer's was more combative; and rather than attempt to hide her gender, Switzer wore make up and fully expected to be challenged. She was not disappointed: around two miles into the race, Boston Marathon race co-director Jock Semple saw Switzer running and physically assaulted her whilst attempting to tear off her race number. Switzer's boyfriend at the time, an ex-all American football player named Tom Miller who was running with her, sent Semple flying from the course. Photographs of this dramatic encounter were widely

published and remain somewhat iconic as a symbol of women's battle for equality in marathon running.

Switzer ran on in the 1967 event to become the first "official" female finisher of the Boston marathon. After Switzer's run in 1967, no further race numbers were issued to female competitors in the Boston Marathon for another four years; females were only admitted after the US Amateur Athletics Union (US AAA) announced in 1971 that women would be officially allowed to participate in marathon races.

6.0: Evaluation: marathon women 1960 to 1971

Several more women are known to have completed marathons between 1960 and 1971, including Scotland's Dale Greig who completed the Isle of Wight marathon in 1964, running the event as a time trial and starting four minutes ahead of the male competitors to avoid infringing Great Britain's Amateur Athletics Association (AAA) rule that men and women should not race together. Anni Peddi and Monika Boers also completed a marathon in Waldneil, West Germany with the official sanction of the race organisers. As is made clear in her biography "Mighty Moe: The Untold Story of a Thirteen-Year-old Running Revolutionary" the Waldneil marathon was a direct result of Maureen Wilton astonishingly completed a low-key marathon in Toronto in what was a world-record time at the age of thirteen. Wilton's run was not recognised by the Canadian Amateur Athletic Union and is often ignored in contemporary accounts of pioneering women marathon runners. Just like those who ran before them, Greig, Peddi, Boers and Wilton brought the issue of sex-discrimination in the marathon into the national media but, despite the magnitude of their achievements, made little progress in bringing it to an end.

In contrast, Lepper, Gibb and Switzer perhaps have a much stronger claim to have challenged sex-discrimination in the marathon, with Switzer standing out as having the strongest claim of all. Indeed the Boston marathon was only the start of Switzer's campaign: despite having had her licence immediately revoked by the American Amateur Athletics Union, she continued to run marathons and to campaign for women's equality in athletics. In 1971, Switzer supported fellow athlete Nina Kuscsick in successfully lobbying the American Amateur Athletics Union to increase the maximum distance approved for women's races, which finally resulted in women being allowed to compete alongside men in marathon distance races. This quickly led to increased participation by women in marathons, a series of women only marathons and the establishment of national marathon championships for women. Switzer was also involved in successfully lobbying the International Olympic committee to include a women's marathon in the 1984 Olympic games. Over forty years later, Switzer continues to promote women's running through her "261 Foundation".

7.0: Conclusion: An end to sex-discrimination in the marathon?

Remarkable though their achievements were as pioneers of women's endurance running, challenging prevailing gender stereotypes and the rules which excluded them from competing, it would be unrealistic to conclude that the actions of pioneering women marathon runners between 1896 and 1971 ended sex-discrimination in marathon running. As has been seen, sex-discrimination certainly continued after that time. Further protests were required to enable women in America to start marathons at the same time as male competitors, for example. Perhaps more importantly, sex-discrimination in marathons continues today: not all cultures support the freedom of women to compete with men in athletic events on equal terms, or

indeed at all. Few would argue that most women in less developed economies have the same opportunities as women in highly developed economies to run for pleasure in organised marathon events either: the global average of women's income in 2020 was around \$11,000 in purchasing power parity terms, with the equivalent figure for men being almost twice as large at \$21,000. Compared to men, therefore, the world's women are far less able to afford even a pair of second-hand running shoes, let alone the significant costs involved in training for and competing in a marathon. Cultural expectations and financial limitations therefore still provide a major impediment to women participating in the marathon.

It could also be argued that factors such as the broader women's liberation movement in America and Great Britain during the 1960s posed an indirect challenge to discriminatory rules such as those enforced by the USA AAU, perhaps empowering women such as Gibb and Switzer to make their own personal challenges.

The emergence of new institutions also played a part in challenging sex-discrimination in athletics; for example, the Road Running Club of America (RRCA) was founded in 1957 with diversity, equity, and inclusion as core values. RRCA membership grew rapidly during the late 1960s and 1970s, as did the number of fully inclusive running events it organised, bringing the exclusion of women from USA AAU events into ever-sharper focus. Then again though, the RRCA had only 33,000 members by 1978; in that year, over 9,000 men and women competed on equal terms in the New York Marathon alone which suggests that, during the first twenty years of its existence, the RRCA was not fundamentally important in challenging sex-discrimination in athletics (18).

It is notable too that it was not simply the completion of marathons by women that led to an end to sex-discrimination in the marathon. Real change in this regard did not occur until four years after Switzer's 1967 Boston marathon run, with Switzer campaigning alongside other key figures including Kuschick for women's equality in athletics.

There is, perhaps, something uniquely solitary about completing a marathon. Regardless of the number of competitors and the number of those who line the way, in a very real sense one runs alone, pursuing a very individual goal. The first women who ran the marathon ran alone with their own personal goals in mind; in doing so they defied prevailing orthodoxy by proving that women had the mental and physical strength to run the distance. Decades later, Switzer and others, although often still running alone in pursuit of their own goals, were perhaps more strongly connected to the common purpose of ensuring that all women had the same opportunity as men to run whatever distance they chose. The endurance race that the first female marathon runners started is by no means over, but we are right to recognise and celebrate all that they achieved together, whilst each running her own individual race.

Footnotes

- (1) www.womensrunning.com/culture/news/marathon-study-runnerclick
- (2) www.historyextra.com/period/ancient-greece/history-marathon-greece
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- (14) www.MB-articleFINAL-JHansen.pdf (jacquelinehansen.com)
- (15) www.runnersworld.com/women/a20816157/merry-lepper-the-first-woman-marathoner/
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