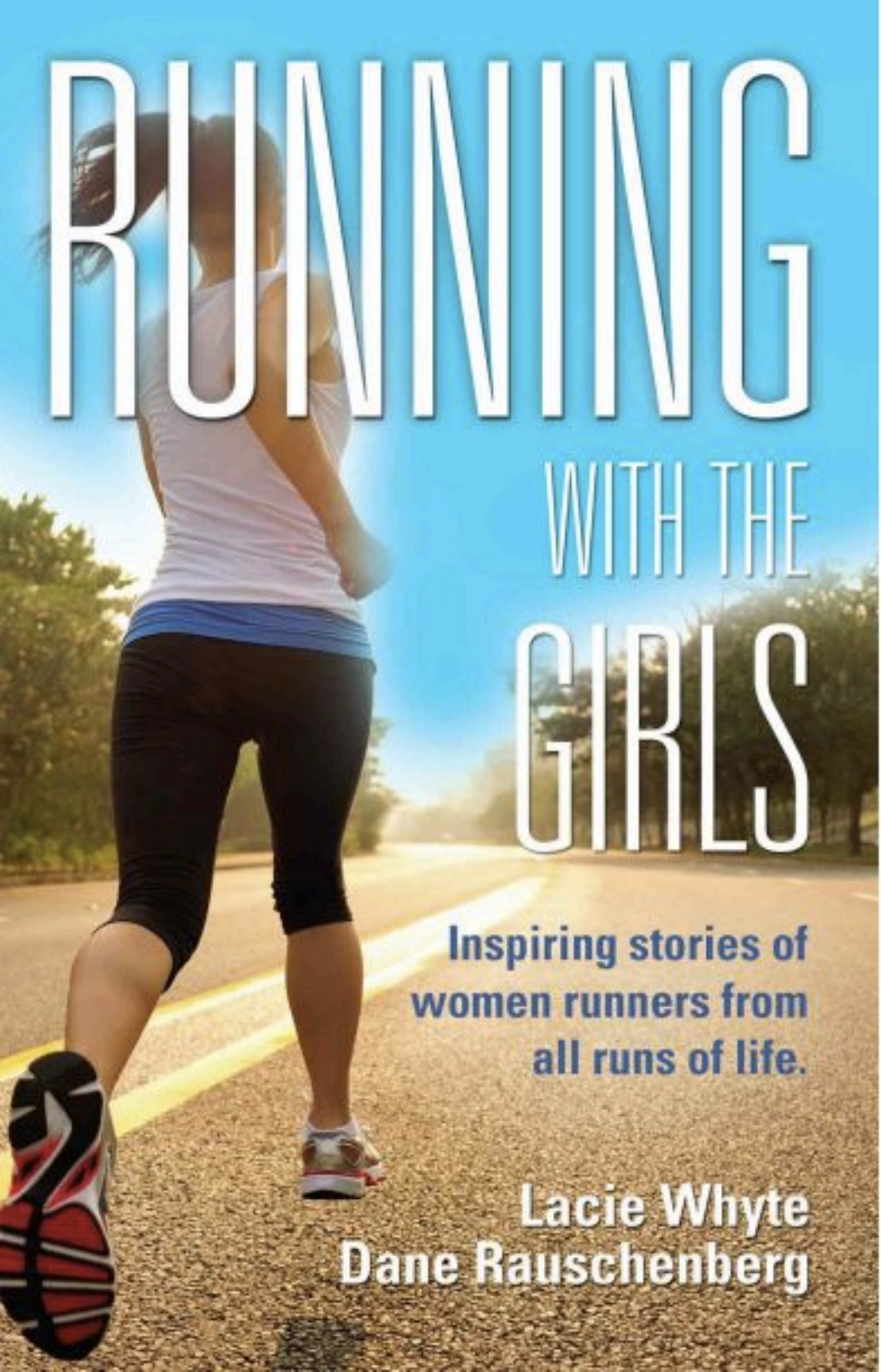
RUNNING
WITH THE
GIRLS
Inspiring stories of
women runners from
all runs of life.
Lacie Whyte
Dane Rauschenberg


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# Running With the Girls

by

Lacie Whyte
&
Dane Rauschenberg

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ISBN 978-1-63490-071-3



Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

121414

# Contents

To Hailey,

My biggest inspiration of all.

"Once I passed through that tunnel,
I knew things would never be the same."
– Joan Benoit

# 1

# History of Women's Running

If you are a woman under thirty years of age, the chances are high you are not aware of how just a few short decades ago, the opportunities to participate in many sports simply did not exist for you. This lack of knowing is a good thing. It means the work of the people who came before you was done thoroughly. If you cannot fathom not being able to play a sport simply because you had breasts, then those pioneers did not toil in vain. However, we cannot forget to remember that so much which we have today, especially in the sport of running, comes from women pioneers of this sport. Not knowing where we have come from is a not only a great disservice to ourselves but a slap in the face to those women who did what they did so we can do what we do.

As such, while this book will be sharing many wonderful stories of the women who are showing us what they can do today, it is best to start with just a skimming of the background of women's running so we know what was done to get us here.

The 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome are remembered for many things in the world of running. Most famously,

Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia won the marathon running barefoot. You can see why it took some visionaries just forty odd years to kick-start a barefoot running craze. (Intense sarcasm intended.) However, Bikila's victory there and again four years later in Mexico City (wearing shoes) helped launched what decades later would be an African dominance in the marathon. Yet, it is a lesser-known turn of events that really changed the culture of running worldwide. Women athletes, for the first time, were allowed to participate in five separate running events in the Summer Olympics. While this total was still less than the sixteen races open to men in those same Olympics, it heralded a change for women athletics of every kind.

Women have historically been seen as the more frail gender. While there are obviously differences between the two sexes, virtually all of the reasoning behind thinking women need to be coddled is either based on conjecture, falsehood or just outright sexism. However, in the world of running, it did not necessarily start out this bad.

In the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam, women raced very hard in, amongst other things, the 800-meter run for the first time in Olympic history. One would think that the fact that this happened over 80 years ago would signify people of the time were more progressive than the next several decades with regards to women's liberation. However, these efforts were not without protest by many. Also, it would be the last time for years women were allowed to do so.

Press reports of the 800-meter run claimed that many of the competitors were exhausted or failed to finish the race.

Stories were told of women collapsing at the finish line, bereft of oxygen and energy. Lolling around on the ground, some reportedly were close to death. At best having women compete in such a way was unladylike. At worst, it was a horrific display of an inferior gender. It's also too bad that such a thing never actually happened.

A thorough examination of the evidence from the day, including eyewitness accounts and newspaper reports, tell quite a different story. Nine women entered the 800-meter finals on race day. All nine not only completed the race standing up but several bettered the existing world's record. In fact, when all was said and done, none of the women were even unnaturally winded. Without a doubt there was no exhaustion or near-death displays. Any report of the frailty of female competitors was absolute malarkey. Unfortunately, there were no cell phone cameras or twitter to stem the tide of false information. The damage was done. Almost immediately women's running events of any length longer than 200 meters were removed from international competition.

It wasn't until these historic 1960 Olympics that women were once allowed to run half of a mile in competition. This ignored the fact that women had been running many miles longer on their own in training and had actually completed marathon distances themselves. Yet, this small step was at least a step forward. It laid the groundwork for where women's running would go in the near future. Well, not the near near future. But not 2037 either, thankfully.

You see in 1961, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) banned women from competing officially in all U.S. road

races. If you don't know your history, trust us in saying that the AAU was simply one of the worst things ever created (worse than Crystal Pepsi. Wait. You don't know what that is either? You kids with your Angry Birds and your Justin Bieber, I tell ya.) To put it simply, the AAU banned women from competing in any capacity, kept all male runners from making any semblance of living under the guise of "amateurism" and basically allowed stodgy old men to make backroom deals to better themselves and themselves alone. This was presumably done covered in cigar smoke, with lots of backslapping and deep-resonating evil laughter while they lit $100 bills and threw them at puppies. There is no proof of this happening but there is no proof they didn't either.

Cartoonish attempts to paint the picture of the AAU aside, it was a horrible organization. Even when statements were attempted to be made by women to show what they could do, the press would still find a way to marginalize them and sexualize them. A nineteen-year-old runner named Julia Chase entered a 6.5-mile road race in Chicopee, Massachusetts in 1961, attempting to challenge the ban. She garnered some attention for taking part in the race but was largely treated as a spectacle. One report stated: "Miss Chase said she is 5'4", weighs 118 pounds and does not know her other dimensions. (Eyewitnesses report her other dimensions are very good.)" We are not making this up. Chase ended up beating most of the men running that day. There are no confirmed reports of any of the men having their uterus fall out.

Now, any runner worth their salt, especially women runners who now get to run unfettered by any gender bias, should know who Kathrine Switzer is and her contributions

to the sport. We will get to her groundbreaking achievements soon. But this book wants to give you even more knowledge of the trailblazers out there. One in particular is Bobbi Gibb.

Bobbi simply wanted to run the Boston Marathon. She had put in the miles and the sweat for two years in order to be able to do so. In February 1966, upon sending in a letter asking for an application to the race (there were not qualifying times yet) she received a letter from the race director, Will Cloney, informing her that women were not physiologically capable of running marathon distances. Undeterred, after hiding in the bushes and jumping into the race at the start, Bobbi went on to show the ludicrous nature of that notion. Her efforts did not go unnoticed. It didn't take long for the press to pick up news of a female running in the race. With just a few hundred participants running it wasn't hard to see her. By the time Gibb reached the finish line in Boston, the Governor of Massachusetts, John Volpe, was there to shake her hand. Given she finished in 3:21:42 and ahead of two-thirds of the pack, it is a wonder the Governor even had time to make it there. Yet even this effort was considered quaint at best.

Gibb had made a statement but it was a quiet one. It was one that allowed her to get a handshake and be pleasantly ignored afterward. Her competitors on the course were almost, to the person, supportive of her efforts. The crowds went wild when she ran by. Yet, nothing of note changed for the rest of female running population. They were still ignored and marginalized. So Gibb decided to return the next year and ran again. She finished nearly an hour ahead of

Kathrine Switzer. But fortunately for all of us, Kathrine had raised the ire of Jock Semple.

Switzer ran the 1967 Boston Marathon with an official bib by registering under the name K.V. Switzer. This, according to Switzer was not a ruse to get pass the AAU ban but rather something she commonly used to sign papers. She, like Gibb, simply wanted to run the race she had trained so hard for. She had already run longer than 26.2 miles in one training session and knew it was possible. She just had to do it.

Having women showboating in the race and getting attention from the mayor like Gibb did was one thing. But a female having an official bib was far too much for Jock Semple, the curmudgeonly overseer of all things Boston Marathon. When he jumped off the press truck and tried to remove Switzer's number, he was body-blocked by Switzer's hammer-throwing college athlete boyfriend. Unlike fluff pieces told third-handedly, this entire spectacle happened right in front of the entire media. Pictures were taken and quickly made the rounds to the papers. Women's running, through the tireless efforts of so many pioneers, was finally beginning to get the attention it deserved. Well, again, "beginning" is a relative word. Switzer was banned from by the AAU. Yet given the AAU had already banned her, we are guessing this had little effect on her decision to run.

When the AAU finally progressed pass Cro-Magnon thinking and allowed women to register for marathons, they still did so in underhanded, conniving, backhanded ways (Seriously – you should hate the AAU even though it doesn't exist anymore.) Stating that women had to start at a separate

time or starting line than men, the AAU prompted the women of the 1972 New York City Marathon to protest. Sitting down at the starting line, legs crossed in defiance, they simply waited for 10 minutes until the men's gun went off. Then away they went.

As the 1970s moved on, women were not just running races, being defiant and posting “nice” times. They were running fast and hard. In 1979, Grete Waitz became the first woman in history to finish 26.2 miles in less than two and a half hours by shattering her own world record in a time of 2:27:33. Fortunately, a year later, the American College of Sports Medicine released a statement in support of the creation of the women's Olympic Marathon. It stated:

"There exists no conclusive scientific or medical evidence that long-distance running is contraindicated for the healthy, trained female athlete."

I bet Grete and the thousands of women who had been running long-distance for years were relieved to know they were not competing in some Matrix-esque world. Way to be on top of things, ACSM.

In 1984, all those women pioneers we mentioned and so many more finally broke down the Olympic walls. The Women's Marathon makes its debut in the Los Angeles Summer Olympics that year. In the midst of the Cold War, with Russia boycotting the games, it definitely did not hurt the narrative that American runner Joan Benoit took home the gold. There is no better encapsulation of what this victory would mean to the future of women’s running that what Joan said herself:

"Once I passed through that tunnel, I knew things would never be the same."

But it was not just women long-distance runners or even professionals who were vanguards of this change. In 1987, Jackie Joyner-Kersee appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated, not in some frilly or posed way, but rather while chucking a javelin with all her muscular glory. Five years later, Gail Devers helps take down the idea that women can't be athletic and feminine at the same time when she wins the 100-meter dash with a fabulously flashy manicure. Two years after that, at the age of 40, Oprah Winfrey crosses the finish line at the Marine Corps Marathon after dropping more than 80 pounds. "Running is the greatest metaphor for life," the now littler O said, "Because you get out of it what you put into it."

Now, finally, without a doubt, the tide of women runners, wearing tutus and skirts, or bun huggers and sports bras, sweating and spitting and challenging themselves, was crashing down upon the world.

No, seriously, you should still be angry with the AAU.


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