

Famous woman runner sprints past misconceptions

CapiLynn – Statesman Journal

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Details were distorted. Facts were fudged. For years, Kathrine Switzer was astounded by the tales she heard about that historic day, in 1967, when she became the first woman to officially enter and run the Boston Marathon.

There was the time a taxi driver in Boston, during a visit years later, spewed a recount of that race, not knowing who she was.

"It was the craziest conglomeration of events," Switzer said. "My hair was stuffed under a hat, I did it on purpose to defraud the race, I wanted to make a feminist statement."

None of which was true.

She set the record straight in "Marathon Woman," her memoir that was published last year.

"Really, I was just there to run my first marathon and prove to my coach I could do it," Switzer said last week from her home in New York City.

Proving she could run 26.2 miles, a distance many thought impossible for women at that time, changed her life and the lives of millions of other women.

For four decades she has championed women's running around the world, competing in 35 marathons, organizing 400 races in 27 countries, and lobbying to include the women's marathon in the Olympic Games in 1984.

Switzer, 61, is in Salem this week to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the women's running clinic at Gallagher Fitness Resources and the grand re-opening of the downtown store that sells running and walking shoes and apparel.

The clinic was launched in 1998, in conjunction with a women's race in Portland that was organized by Switzer, then a sports marketing whiz for Avon.

Susan Gallagher, who owns the store with husband John, organized a group of women to train for that event. Switzer came to Salem to speak to the group and later had dinner with the Gallaghers, encouraging Susan to continue what she had started.

To date, an estimated 1,800 women in the Salem area have participated in the Women's Beginning Walking and Running Clinic. It has been a success, in large part, because Switzer inspired a local woman to inspire others.

Susan Gallagher continues to be motivated by Switzer, having read "Marathon Woman" twice.

"In addition to being interesting, historical, funny and inspiring, it really reinforces for me personally that what I'm doing is a phenomenally good thing," Gallagher said.

She is excited to bring Switzer's inspiration back to Salem. The store will hold book-signing sessions Tuesday and Wednesday, and Switzer will speak at an event Wednesday night at the Reed Opera House. It will be her first West Coast speaking engagement since her book hit the shelves.

Switzer noted that her presentation, entitled "Keep Breaking Barriers!" is not just for runners, and not just for women.

"I've gotten fan mail from men who said they bought the book for their wife or daughter, but read it and were really overwhelmed that it was not a girlie book at all," Switzer said.

I haven't read the book, but through a 40-minute phone conversation, I was able to gather some of the details and facts of that fateful day, April 19, 1967.

Switzer was 20 at the time, and a student at Syracuse University. She entered the Boston Marathon under the name K.V. Switzer, not because she was trying to fool anybody, but because that's the way she had been signing her name since she was around 12.

She always wanted to be a writer, and using her initials — which stand for Kathrine Virginia — reminded her of literary greats like J.D. Salinger, E.E. Cummings and T.S. Eliot.

Switzer didn't try to conceal her identity. She was wearing a baggy grey sweatsuit because it was cold outside, not to hide her feminine figure.

"It was real clear. I was wearing lipstick and earrings," she said.

Word spread as the race started, and members of the media razzed race director Jock Semple. About two miles in, an infuriated Semple hopped off the press truck that was following the pack and went after Switzer, yelling "Get the hell out of my race" and trying to rip No. 261 from her shirt.

Her then-boyfriend, also running in the race, provided interference, allowing her to continue, and photographs of the altercation ran in newspapers around the world.

Time-Life included one of the images in its book on the "100 Photographs that Changed the World."

"Mine is next to Roger Bannister's four-minute mile," Switzer said.

Her infamous run was recorded as unofficial, with no time, but she finished in about 4 hours, 20 minutes.

More importantly, she proved a woman could run that distance, and she cracked the door open for other women to follow in her footsteps.

"For some people I was a saint," she said. "For other people I was a pariah."

Five years later, in 1972, the Boston Marathon for the first time officially welcomed women to participate.

Switzer said Semple made amends by presenting her a trophy and giving her a kiss at the starting line.

"He told me it was the end of an era," said Switzer, who long before had forgiven him. "He and I became good friends and did speaking engagements together."

Now that's a detail rarely recounted when the story is told.

"Forward This" appears Mondays and Thursdays and highlights the people, places and organizations of the Mid-Willamette Valley. To share a story, contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6710.

Book Signing

Kathrine Switzer appeared at Gallagher Fitness Resources, 135 Commercial St NE, Salem, OR, for a Book Signing 3 to 6 p.m. Tuesday, April 8th and 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesday, April 9th. Two of Switzer's books, "Marathon Woman," and "Running and Walking for Women Over 40," were available.

Speaking engagement – April 9, 2008

"Keep Breaking Barriers!" was presented by Switzer, followed by question-and-answer and book-signing sessions. 5-8pm, Trinity Ballroom, Reed Opera House, 189 Liberty St NE, Salem, OR. Cost: \$12 a person including appetizers.