Roberta Gibb and Kathrine Switzer: Pioneers of The Boston Marathon

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In 2018, more than 11,000 women ran the Boston Athletic Association Marathon.  

But it wasn't always this way. For the first 70 years of the Boston Marathon, women were prohibited from running distances further than 1.5 miles. Women were considered "too fragile" to participate in a race with extreme distances such as 26.2 miles. Women were allowed to run up to 1.5 miles and participate in track and field races in the Olympic Games but were never encouraged to run more than that, much less a marathon, at 26.2 miles. At that time, it was considered justifiable for women to be prohibited from running long distance. Society believed that if women ran farther than 1.5 miles, they would grow a mustache, get big legs, and their uteruses would fall out, creating a false fear for women. Though a few women had been reported to run marathons in Greece, France, England, and New Zealand, they never drew attention to themselves.

Roberta “Bobbi” Gibb and Kathrine Switzer made a statement by running the full Boston Marathon. They proved that women can run, and should have the right to run. At the time, there were no outlets for women to run long distance. Due to that, women who wanted to compete in a marathon had to compete illegally. Kathrine and Bobbi were

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5MAKERS, director. Kathrine Switzer: First Woman to Enter the Boston Marathon. Performance by Kathrine Switzer, YouTube, YouTube, 15 May 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOGXvBAmTsY&t=110s
able to break down these barriers and triumphed over adversity. They showed that women not only can run, but are just as capable as men. Bobbi and Kathrine’s historic races inspired more women to run long distances.

Roberta “Bobbi” Gibb was born on November 2nd, 1942 in Winchester, Massachusetts, where she loved to run as a child. She would run for more than an hour straight some days with the neighborhood dogs, racing through the woods. As she got older she continued to have a passion for the sport. She ran cross country with the team at Tufts University. One day in 1965, Bobbi got to see the Boston Marathon in person. She watched and cheered on the men. “I fell in love with it,” Bobbi recalls in an interview, “I wasn’t thinking whether they were man or woman.”

In 1966, Bobbi Gibb sent a letter to the Boston Athletic Association, the BAA, requesting an application for the next Boston Marathon. The letter she received back stated that the Boston Marathon was a men’s event, and that women were not physiologically capable of running 26.2 miles, furthermore, the Boston Marathon did not want to take on the medical liability.

In Bobbi’s book she remembers what she thought when she read the letter. “Women are not allowed to run! This is an outrage! It’s supposed to be open to any person in the world. That’s what they said. Any person. Women, evidently, are not persons!” Bobbi Gibb decided to run the Marathon even if it was illegal. She continued

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10 Ibid
to train daily. In April she rode a bus from her home in California to Massachusetts. Bobbi bought a pair of men’s running shoes only a few days before the race because women’s running shoes did not exist and the shoes in which she trained were too heavy for a race of that caliber.\(^\text{11}\)

April 19, 1966 became the first day a woman ran the full Boston Marathon. Bobbi had trained many years for that day. She thought, “This is the day I’m going to change the way people think about women.”\(^\text{12}\) Bobbi suited up for the big day. She put on her brother’s too-big Bermuda shorts and tied a brown string around the belt loops to make a belt. Underneath she wore her black tank-top swimsuit, which she always ran in, and a large, loose, dark blue, hooded sweatshirt to conceal her feminine figure. Bobbi and her mother drove to the start.\(^\text{13}\) Before the race started, Bobbi found an alley where she could run to warm-up. She pulled her hood over her long blonde hair and ducked into some bushes near the starting line. When the starting gun went off, Bobbi waited until about half the men ran past then she darted out of the bushes and joined the men running.\(^\text{14}\) The new shoes Bobbi was wearing were stiff and tight; she didn't know you were supposed to break in running shoes.\(^\text{15}\) Before Bobbi was even able to run five miles she started to hear men behind her talking about her.\(^\text{16}\)


\(^{12}\) Ibid

\(^{13}\) Gibb, Bobbi. Wind in the Fire: a Personal Journey. y42k.Com, 2016


\(^{15}\) Ibid

“Wow!” a runner exclaimed, “I wish my wife would run.”\textsuperscript{17} Bobbi looked back at them and smiled.\textsuperscript{18}

“A woman's running!” The news of Bobbi running in the race spread quickly. She told the other runners she planned to run the whole way and they supported her goal.\textsuperscript{19} Bobbi got too hot wearing her sweatshirt. She told the men by whom she was running how she feared the race officials would try to throw her out if they saw she was a woman. They all told her confidently that they would make sure she kept running and that they wouldn't let the officials throw her out. Bobbi took off her sweatshirt and tossed it to the side. Now she could run as herself without a disguise.\textsuperscript{20} John Duncan "Jock" Semple\textsuperscript{21} and Will Cloney, the race officials, were much farther ahead of her, following what they thought was the lead story of the day. Because of that, Bobbi was able to run without getting taken out of the race by the directors.\textsuperscript{22} In Ashland Massachusetts, about four miles into the race, a reporter saw Bobbi and knew her story was important. She told him her name, her parents names, and her hometown. Soon the news of Bobbi running was broadcast on the radio: “A girl is running the Boston Marathon!”\textsuperscript{23} Race officials made no attempt to stop Bobbi as she ran past the checkpoints.\textsuperscript{24} Bobbi passed by Wellesley College and received the most support from the spectators

\textsuperscript{18} Higdon, Hal. “Sex and Sub-Terrrr-Fudge, Chapter 7.” Boston: a Century of Running, by Hal Higdon, Rodale Press, 1995, pp. 121–137
\textsuperscript{19} Gibb, Bobbi. Wind in the Fire: a Personal Journey. y42k.Com, 2016
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid
\textsuperscript{21} Cope, Myron. “ANGRY OVERSEER OF THE MARATHON.” Sports Illustrated, 22 Apr. 1968
\textsuperscript{22} Gibb, Bobbi. Wind in the Fire: a Personal Journey. y42k.Com, 2016
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid
\textsuperscript{24} Higdon, Hal. “Sex and Sub-Terrrr-Fudge, Chapter 7.” Boston: a Century of Running, by Hal Higdon, Rodale Press, 1995, pp. 121–137
there. When the women saw Bobbi along the course “the intensity of their screaming increased several decibels.”

Bobbi had less than five miles left. She was almost done with the Marathon, but at this point she was getting sore and tired. She dragged on for the next few miles. Simply passing by a landmark seemed to take eons.\textsuperscript{25} Bobbi turned left onto Boylston Street for the final sprint of the Marathon. Thousands of people were screaming and cheering. Press busses were following her. She picked up her pace and sprinted across the finish line with a time of 3 hours and 20 minutes, faster than two-thirds of the other racers.\textsuperscript{26} When she finished, skeptics believed it was impossible for a woman to run 26.2 miles, but when enough people admitted they saw her through the whole length of the course, they began to believe.\textsuperscript{27} Even Jock Semple, a Boston Marathon official, later wrote that he saw Bobbi running. Because she was not wearing a number, she wasn't technically cheating, therefore, Jock did nothing to stop her.\textsuperscript{28} Roberta Gibb, at the age of twenty-three, had made history.

The next day newspapers were full of pictures of Bobbi and her story. One headline read “Blonde Chases Men in Boston Marathon”.\textsuperscript{29} Another article congratulated Bobbi and wrote that they supported her.\textsuperscript{30} The fact that Bobbi ran the full marathon proved that women could run and she inspired more women to run. She showed that

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid
\textsuperscript{27} Higdon, Hal. “Sex and Sub-Terrr-Fudge, Chapter 7.” Boston: a Century of Running, by Hal Higdon, Rodale Press, 1995, pp. 121–137
\textsuperscript{29}“Blonde Chases Men In Boston Marathon.” Pasadena Independent, 20 Apr. 1966, p. 39
\textsuperscript{30}“Fitchburg Sentinel.” Fitchburg Sentinel, 22 Apr. 1966, p. 6
women were capable of what was once thought impossible. The next year, 1967, Bobbi was joined in running the Marathon by another woman, Kathrine V. Switzer.

Kathrine Virginia Switzer ran in the Boston Marathon in 1967. Unlike Bobbi Gibb, Kathrine was able to enter the race legally, but the officials didn't know she was female. Kathrine had been running with the men's cross country team at Syracuse University. She trained with Arnie Briggs, who would tell Kathrine about the Boston Marathon. When she told him she wanted to run it, he told her no woman could run a marathon, they were too weak and fragile. Yet, he said if Kathrine ran the marathon distance in practice, he would take her to Boston. When Kathrine proved she could run the distance, Kathrine and Arnie looked in the rule book. There were no specific rules against women running the Marathon. Because of that, Arnie Briggs got entry forms for the Boston Marathon. When Kathrine wrote her name she signed it K.V. Switzer, how she claimed she always signed her name. She never specified on the form whether she was a man or woman. Luckily, race officials didn't take action.

Kathrine lined up and prepared to run the Marathon. “I had my makeup on” Kathrine admitted. “I wasn't trying to disguise the fact that I was a girl. But it was cold and drizzly, so I had the hood of my sweatshirt pulled over my head.” Her official race number, 261, was pinned on the front of her sweatshirt. Kathrine was accompanied by Arnie Briggs, Tom Miller (her boyfriend), and John Leonard.

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When Switzer was near the starting pen she was concerned that the officials would take her out of the race, but the starting line proved to be the easiest part. Switzer even remembers officials pushed her into the starting pen.\textsuperscript{35}

The gun went off and she began running. Kathrine was no longer wearing her hooded sweatshirt. When she passed the town of Ashland, only a few miles into the race, press busses started following her. The photographers started taking pictures of her. Kathrine admits that she was smiling for the pictures and enjoyed being the center of attention. Little did she know that race officials Clooney and Semple were in a bus right behind the press buses.\textsuperscript{36} Because Bobbi Gibb had run the year before, people were expecting more women to run. One of the reporters yelled back at Jock Semple. “Hey, Jock, it’s a girl. And holy smokes, she’s wearing one of your numbers.”\textsuperscript{37}

Officials looked up her number, the name it was registered under was K. Switzer. The reporters started to tease Jock about how a girl could enter the race. Semple and Cloney told the driver to stop when they got near Kathrine.\textsuperscript{38} They jumped off the bus and started chasing her, screaming, “Get out of my race!”\textsuperscript{39} A reporter saw the photo opportunity and started taking pictures of the event. He took three pictures that became legendary (see Appendix A). The pictures depicted Jock Semple trying to physically force Kathrine off the course. In response, Kathrine and her team fought him off.

\textsuperscript{36} Higdon, Hal. “Sex and Sub-Terrrr-Fudge, Chapter 7.” Boston: a Century of Running, by Hal Higdon, Rodale Press, 1995, pp. 121–137
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid
Semple was trying to take her number off her shirt. Then Miller, who was also a football player, heroically pushed Semple away from Kathrine and sent him stumbling off the road.40 “I tripped over my shoelace the instant before he hit me.” Semple later claimed.41

Kathrine continued the race and finished, but was given an unofficial time. Kathrine believed her time was near 4 hours and 20 minutes, about an hour behind Bobbi Gibb’s previous time.42

The next day, newspapers were filled with the pictures of Kathrine and Semple during the race and she received instant fame. Headlines read “Girl Runners Spice BAA,”43 “Girls Steal Spotlight in Marathon Show,”44 and “Lady With Desire to Run Crashes Marathon”45 Kathrine and Bobbi not only proved to the media that it was possible for a woman to run, but they had to convince their own friends and family. When Bobbi told her parents she wanted to run, her dad said she was delusional.46 When Kathrine told Tom Miller she was going to run a marathon, he decided to run it too. Not to support her, but because he believed that if a woman could run it, so could he.47

The following year more women ran the Marathon. Bobbi Gibb, Nina Kuscik and Marjorie Fish raced in 1968. That was the last consecutive year that Bobbi Gibb ran the

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43“Girl Runners Spice BAA.” The Fitchburg Sentinel, 20 Apr. 1967, p. 10
44“Girls Steal Spotlight in Marathon Show.” The Times Record, 20 Apr. 1967, p. 39
Boston Marathon, though she continued to run often. In 1969 Sara Mae Berman decided to run the Marathon along with Elaine Pederson and Nina Kuscik.\textsuperscript{48} For the next few years, more than one woman ran in each Marathon, including Kathrine Switzer who ran again in 1970 with four other women. In 1972, the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) repealed the rule against women running in marathons. Finally, in 1972, six years after Bobbi’s first Marathon, the Boston Athletic Association made it legal for women to run the Boston Marathon. That year eight women legally ran the Boston Marathon and all eight finished.\textsuperscript{49}

Kathrine made it her mission to help women through running and she created the “261 Fearless” organization, 261 being the number she wore during her first time running the Boston Marathon. Kathrine spoke out about sexism in running and helped many women gain the opportunity to run.\textsuperscript{50} By doing so, she had a positive influence on legalizing women’s participation in marathons and running in the Olympics.

Now more than 11,000 women run the Boston Marathon each year, with 96.4% of the women finishing in 2018.\textsuperscript{51} Currently, almost fifty-percent of the competitors in the Boston Marathon are women, compared to less than sixty-five years ago, when only one woman ran the race. Both Bobbi and Kathrine continued to race. Bobbi ran the Boston Marathon in 1983,\textsuperscript{52} and Kathrine ran on the 50th anniversary of her first

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid
Marathon in 2017 at age seventy.\textsuperscript{53} Kathrine has run thirty-nine marathons since then, and is still running.\textsuperscript{54} Because of Bobbi Gibb and Kathrine Switzer’s examples, women were inspired to run long distances and stand up for what they believed in. Roberta Gibb and Kathrine Switzer triumphed over hardship and prejudice, and in doing so, they empowered and inspired women everywhere.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Switzer, Kathrine. “FAQs.” Kathrine Switzer - Marathon Woman, Oct. 2016, kathrineswitzer.com/faqs/
\end{itemize}
The photo series that changed the Boston Marathon. On the far left shows Jock Semple (wearing the dark jacket) chasing Kathrine Switzer. The middle shows Tom Miller (wearing shorts) pushing Jock away from Kathrine (wearing number 261). Far right depicts Jock Semple stumbling off the road.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES:


Bobbi Gibb talked about what was happening during the 1966 Boston Marathon and what she was thinking about when she decided to run. This gave me insight on how even a women who knew she was capable of running was still having doubts about running the Boston Marathon.


This book includes Jock Semple’s side of the 1967 Boston Marathon and what he believed about women running long distance. This helped me see how Jock’s perspective on Kathrine Switzer and women running. Along with what he thought about the incident with Kathrine Switzer during the 1967 Boston Marathon.


This included an interview of Kathrine Switzer and John Leonard. Kathrine told about how Arnie Briggs reacted when she told him she wanted to run the Boston Marathon. It also included a video of Jock Semple chasing after Kathrine, giving me more insight to what it was like. This helped me learn how strong the prejudice was against women running.


This article wrote how they congratulated Bobbi after running the 1966 Boston Marathon. This helped me see how Bobbi was encouraged after running in the Boston Marathon and people were not only skeptical but were supportive of Bobbi.


Quotes and stories from while Bobbi Gibb was running the Boston Marathon and immediate aftermath after she finished the race. This helped me learn her perspective on the Boston Marathon and her experiences during the race.

Kathrine Switzer shares her experience before, during, and after the 1967 Boston Marathon. She tells about what society falsely believed about women running long distance. This interview helped me learn more on Kathrines perspective of when Jock Semple was chasing her.

“Muscle-Tired, Footsore Housewife Says She DID Run in the Marathon.” The Bridgeport Telegram, 21 Apr. 1966

This article showed the more skeptical side of the news about the 1966 Boston Marathon. This newspaper article helped me see how it took work to prove that Bobbi ran the Marathon.


Kathrine told about the 1967 Boston Marathon. She talked about how women were seen at the time. This helped me learn more about her perspective while running and what it was like as a young women in the 1960’s.


Bobbi Gibb shares what the letter she received from Will Cloney said when she requested to enter the Boston Marathon in 1966. This helped me see what it was like for Bobbi and her experience during the 1966 Boston Marathon.


Kathrine wrote about her experiences running, and what she is currently doing in running. She shared her experiences during the race and what she is doing today, which gave me insight to what she believes about the Boston Marathon and women running.


This book shows Kathrines background in running the 1967 Boston Marathon and her efforts to empower women through running. This helped me learn what it was really like for Kathrine while she was training and running the 1967 Boston Marathon.
Trask, Harry. WHO SAYS CHIVALRY IS DEAD? Boston Herald, 1967

This legendary photo series changed sports history and were printed all around the United States. Kathrine became famous overnight. These pictures showed me what happened when Jock Semple was chasing Kathrine, more than just the stories of what happened.

SECONDARY SOURCES:


Statistics from the 2018 Boston Marathon. This helped me see how the Boston marathon has changed since Bobbi and Kathrines race.


This newspaper headline was from immediately after Bobbi ran in 1966. This showed how she was seen in the press when she first ran the Marathon.


Jock Semples full name. Though he is known mostly known as “Jock” his full name is John Duncan Semple.

“Girl Runners Spice BAA.” The Fitchburg Sentinel, 20 Apr. 1967, p. 10

Headline from 1967 after Katherine ran for the first time. This source helped me see what the press thought immediately after Kathrine ran the Marathon in 1967.

“Girls Steal Spotlight in Marathon Show.” The Times Record, 20 Apr. 1967, p. 39

Headline from 1967 after Kathrine ran for the first time. This headline helped me learn what the press said directly after Kathrine ran the Boston Marathon for the first time.


Stories from Kathrine, Bobbi and when the Boston Marathon legalized women running in the Boston Marathon. This was very helpful in my research because it shared stories from several female runners as they ran and prepared for the Boston Marathon.

The history of the start of the Boston Marathon. This helped me get insight on what the first Boston Marathon was like and how its changed over time.


This showed how women were seen as “too fragile” to run long distance. This article helped me see more on how women were seen in sports when Kathrine and Bobbi first ran.


Headline from 1967 after Katherine ran for the first time. This article helped me see what the press thought immediately after Kathrine raced in the Boston Marathon in 1967.


Information on when Kathrine ran the Boston Marathon in 2017. This showed how Kathrine continues to run and empower women, even more than 50 years after her first participation in the Boston Marathon.