Roberta Gibb and Kathrine Switzer: Pioneers of The
Boston Marathon

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Historical Paper

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In 2018, more than 11,000 women ran the Boston Athletic Association Marathon. But it wasn't always this way, and 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. The first Boston Marathon was held on April 19, 1897. John J. McDermott, one of the 15 people to run that year, finished first and became very well known for long-distance running. 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 1.5 miles, much less a marathon, at 26.2 miles. At that time, it was considered justifiable for women to be prohibited from running further than 1.5 miles. Women just did not run. Some women had been reported to run marathons in Athens, France, England, and New Zealand, and several women would run a few miles in the Boston Marathon with the men, but they never tried to make a statement.

Roberta “Bobbi” Gibb and Kathrine Switzer “K. V. Switzer” made a statement by running the full Boston Marathon. They proved that women can run, and should have the right to run. Kathrine and Bobbi were able to help break down these barriers and

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triumphed by how they showed that women not only can run but are just as capable as men. Bobbi and Kathrine’s historic race inspired more women to run long distances.

Roberta “Bobbi” Gibb was born on November 2nd, 1942 in Winchester, Massachusetts. During her childhood, she loved running. She would run for more than an hour straight some days with her 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. 6 One day in 1965, Bobbi got to see the Boston Marathon in person. She watched and cheered on the men. “I just fell in love with the Marathon,” Bobbi recalls, “It never crossed my mind whether there were women running or whether I might be the first, but I decided to run the next years race.” 7

In 1966 Bobbi Gibb sent a letter to the Boston Athletic Association, the BAA, and requested an application to the next Boston Marathon. She waited for a few days and was ecstatic when she saw the reply in the mail. Bobbi included the letter in her book:

Dear Miss Burgay (Bobbi’s married name),

We have received your request for an application for the Boston Marathon and regret that we will not be able to send you an application. Women are not physiologically able to run twenty-six miles and we would not want to take on the medical liability. Furthermore, the Boston Marathon is a men's division event. The rules of International Sports and the Amateur Athletic Union, do not allow women to run more than the sanctioned one and a half miles.

7 Ibid
Bobbi read the letter over again. “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 regardless of if it would be a legal entry or not. She continued to train daily. In April she rode a bus from California to Massachusetts. Bobbi bought a pair of men’s running shoes for 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.

April 19, 1966 became the first day a woman would run the Boston Marathon. Bobbi had been training her whole life for that day. “This is the day I’m going to change the way people think about women.” 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, what she always ran in, and a large, loose, dark blue, hooded sweatshirt to conceal her feminine figure. She ate breakfast and asked her parents to drive her to the starting line. Her father refused. He did not believe Bobbi could run the Marathon and didn’t want her to get hurt. Bobbi begged and pleaded with her mother. “Mom, don’t you see. This is so important. I have

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9 Ibid
11 Ibid
to run. I’ve trained two years for this.”

Her mother agreed. Bobbi and her mother drove to the start. Bobbi said goodbye and ran out to prepare for the race. Gibb found a little hollow near the starting pen where she could hide until the race began. The race started in one hour. Bobbi found an alley and ran back and forth for 45 minutes 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, she darted out of the bushes and joined the men running. The new shoes Bobbi was wearing were stiff and tight, she didn't know you were supposed to break in running shoes. Before Bobbi was even able to run 5 miles she started to hear men behind her talking about her.

“Is that a girl?”

“It sure looks like one.”

“A woman running?”

“Wow,” another runner exclaimed, “I wish my wife would run.” Then a runner finally asked her a question. Bobbi turned around and smiled at him. They were all excited “It is a girl!”

“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.

Bobbi got too hot wearing her sweatshirt. She told the men how she feared the race

12 Ibid
13 Ibid
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{18} John Duncan "Jock" Semple\textsuperscript{19} and Will Cloney, the race officials that Bobbi knew would try to stop her, were much farther ahead of her, following what they thought was the lead story of the day.\textsuperscript{20} In Ashland Massachusetts, about four miles into the race, a reporter saw Bobbi and knew her story was important so he asked her questions. She told them 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{21}

Race officials made no attempt to stop Bobbi as she ran past the checkpoints.\textsuperscript{22} Bobbi passed by Wellesley College and received the most support from the spectators there. "The women were ecstatic" Bobbi recalls. "They were screaming." When the women saw Bobbi along the course “the intensity of their screaming increased several decibels.”

Bobbi had less than 5 miles left, she was almost done with the Marathon, but at this point she was getting sore and tired. She drug on for the next few miles and stated that just simply passing by a landmark seemed to take eons.\textsuperscript{23} Bobbi turned left onto Boylston Street for the final sprint of the Marathon. Thousands of people were

\begin{footnotes}
\item[18] Ibid
\item[21] Ibid
\item[23] Ibid
\end{footnotes}
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{24} 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{25} Roberta Gibb, at the age of 23, 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{26} Yet, the fact that Bobbi ran proved that women could run and she inspired more women to run. She showed that women were capable of what was thought impossible. In 1967, Bobbi was joined in 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. Her friend, Arnie Briggs, whom she trained with, sent in a request for a few entry forms for Boston, one for each person in their team of four. When Kathrine wrote her name she signed it K.V. Switzer, how she always signed her name.\textsuperscript{27} She never specified on the form whether she was a man or woman. Luckily, race officials didn't notice.

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

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Higdon, Hal. “Sex and Sub-Terrrr-Fudge, Chapter 7.” Boston: a Century of Running, by Hal Higdon, Rodale Press, 1995, pp. 121–137
  \item \textsuperscript{26} “Blonde Chases Men In Boston Marathon.” \textit{Pasadena Independent}, 20 Apr. 1966, p. 39.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Higdon, Hal. “Sex and Sub-Terrrr-Fudge, Chapter 7.” Boston: a Century of Running, by Hal Higdon, Rodale Press, 1995, pp. 121–137
\end{itemize}
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.

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 having Will Cloney pushing her into the pen. He was so distracted by the race as a whole, that he missed the fact that she was a girl.

The gun went off and she began running. Kathrine was no longer wearing her hooded sweatshirt. When she passed 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. Because Bobbi 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.”

Officials looked up her number, the name it was registered under was K. V. 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. They jumped off the bus and started chasing her, screaming, “Get out of my race!” A reporter saw the

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29 Ibid
30 Ibid
31 Ibid
32 Ibid
photo opportunity and started taking pictures of the event. He took four pictures that became legendary. The pictures depicted Jock Semple trying to physically force Kathrine off the course. In response, Kathrine and her group fought him off. 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 tumbling off the road. “I tripped on my shoe laces.” Semple claimed later on.33

Kathrine continued the race and finished, but was given an unofficial time. Kathrine claims her time was near 4 hours and 20 minutes, about an hour behind Bobbi Gibb.34

The next day, newspapers were filled with the four pictures of Kathrine and Semple during the race and she received instant fame. Headlines read “Girl Runners Spice BAA,”35 “Girls Steal Spotlight in Marathon Show,”36 and “Lady With Desire to Run Crashes Marathon”37

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 Boston Marathon. In 1969 Sara Mae Berman decided to run the Marathon along with Elaine Pederson and Nina Kuscik.38 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

33 Ibid
35 “Girl Runners Spice BAA.” The Fitchburg Sentinel, 20 Apr. 1967, p. 10
36 “Girls Steal Spotlight in Marathon Show.” The Times Record, 20 Apr. 1967, p. 39
running in marathons. Finally, in 1972, six years after Bobbi’s first Marathon in 1966, 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.  

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 Marathon. Kathrine spoke out about segregation in running and has helped many people get the opportunity to run. Kathrine spoke out against segregation in distance running, and by doing so, made a positive impact in legalizing women’s participation in marathons in the Olympics, and in the Boston Marathon.

Now more than 11,000 women run the Boston Marathon each year, with 96.4% of the women finishing in 2018. Both Bobbi and Kathrine ran the Boston Marathon recently. Bobbi ran in 1983, and Kathrine ran on the 50th anniversary of her first Marathon in 2017 at age 70. Kathrine has already run 39 marathon races and is still running. Through Bobbi Gibb and Kathrine Switzer’s races, women were inspired to run long distance and stand up for what they believe in. They empowered and inspired women. Bobbi Gibb and Kathrine Switzer proved women can, and have the right to run.

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39 Ibid
42 Ibid
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

PRIMARY SOURCES:

  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 writing 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 her perspective on the Boston Marathon and women running.

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.

  Jock Semple's 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 see what the press thought immediately after Kathrine ran the Marathon in 1967.

  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.


This showed how women were seen as “too fragile” to run long distance. This article helped me see 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 Marathon in 1967.


Information on when Kathrine ran the Boston Marathon in 2017. This showed how Kathrine continues to run and empower women.