

# Kathrine Switzer



In 1967, irate race official Jock Semple tried forcibly to remove Kathrine Switzer from the then all-male Boston Marathon simply because she was a woman. Photo on left is Semple pursuing Switzer, middle photo is Switzer's friend hitting Semple, right photo is Semple being bounced off the racecourse. Photos courtesy AP Images.

## Marathon Woman Changes the Pace

by Bri Kilroy

**M**any runners keep their running bibs as a souvenir of their accomplishment to preserve the triumphant memory that no one can take away from them; however, that's not to say someone hasn't tried.

Kathrine Switzer was 20 years old when she entered the men's-only 1967 Boston Marathon under the name K.V. Switzer. She was two miles into the 26.2-mile run when race official Jock Semple stormed onto the course toward Switzer. He began ripping at her bib number hollering, "Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!"

Switzer began signing her name "K.V. Switzer" when she was 12 and determined to be a writer, inspired by authors like J.D. Salinger and E.E. Cummings. She was also tired of her name constantly getting misspelled. "My dad misspelled my name on my birth certificate," Switzer laughed.

She never predicted that the small abbreviation adjustment "to emulate great writers" would be the life-changing signature that granted her entrance into the Boston Marathon. There was nothing about gender on the entry form or in the rule book and Switzer wasn't aware women weren't allowed to race.

Admitting the race officials probably assumed the "K" stood for a man's name, she didn't intend to deceive them into thinking she was a man. There was no mask or Mulan-like transformation before approaching the start line. It was just Switzer, a woman who wanted to run. She even wore lipstick to the race.

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The timing of Semple's attack on Switzer and the placement of the press truck carrying media photographers captured a play-by-play of the race official clawing at Switzer as her coach, Arnie Briggs, demands he stop. Switzer's then boyfriend, Thomas Miller, bounces Semple out of the race with a powerful

body check. The photo portraying the intense moment in marathon history soon spread worldwide and earned a place in Time-Life's book, "100 Photos that Changed the World."

Switzer finished in 4 hours and 20 minutes with her bib still intact but was disqualified from the race, expelled from the Amateur Athletic Union and received negative press for entering a race intended for men only.

It was a discouraging reaction for an incredible accomplishment, but you can't expect a woman who just completed a marathon to give up when things get harsh. Switzer aimed her focus at creating opportunities for women rather than filing a lawsuit against Semple. "He was just a product of his time," Switzer said empathetically. "I knew if I could create opportunities for women, we could change his mind and others."

Shifting the longstanding belief that races longer than a mile were too strenuous for women wasn't easy. Switzer worked tirelessly to create opportunities, and many women ran the Boston Marathon unofficially to prove they could complete the challenge.

Five years of will and determination paid off when in 1972 the famous race officially accepted women

who could run the marathon in 3 hours and 30 minutes or less. Semple emerged from the product of his time, and he and Switzer eventually became good friends; an astonishing outcome based on their first interaction.

Switzer wasn't ready to retire her efforts toward social change just yet. She raced what she thought would be her last marathon in 1976 (Boston) and, with aching feet and well-earned recovery time, she focused on writing the proposal for Avon International Running Circuit, a series of races that culminate into a marathon allowing women to experience the phenomenon of international running.

**“These little girls are going to grow up running like I did with a victory under their belt that no one can take away from them.”**

“I urged myself to be a jogger,” said Switzer, feeling satisfied with her running victories of winning the 1974 New York City Marathon (3:07) and placing second in the 1975 Boston Marathon (2:51). “I had as much satisfaction from running this [Avon] program as with running.”

While writing the proposal, Switzer consulted her idea box, a shoe box containing various species of paper from napkins to loose notes that she scribbled her ideas on as soon as she returned from a run. “On long runs, I’d come up with some incredible ideas,” she said. “If I didn’t write them down immediately when I got home, they’d be gone.”

The collection of ideas was instrumental in writing the proposal and in 1984 Avon got the women’s marathon officially included in the games at the

Los Angeles Summer Olympics. Switzer wears a closet full of career hats as a writer, journalist, athlete, speaker, TV personality and author. She has written four books, including an e-book, since graduating from Syracuse University with a bachelor’s in journalism and English and a master’s in communication. It was at a book signing for her memoir, *Marathon Woman*, that her feet began itching to run marathons again.

“These women were coming up to me, 65-75 years [old], saying ‘You’re my inspiration,’” said Switzer as she listened to their personal running adventures. “I was so jealous I could scream.”

Curious if she could conquer the things these women were talking about, Switzer gave herself 18 months to train and tested her efforts in 2010 at the Motatapu Icebreaker, an off-road marathon in New Zealand. She was 62 years old.

Switzer is now 68 and describes this decade as “the greatest decade of my life.” She has run 39 marathons on courses all over the world including Kenya and Berlin and is currently training for the 2017 Boston Marathon. In the way she pursued journalism because she loved to write, she continues to race because she loves to run.

“On a long run, you lose yourself,” said Switzer. “You also outrun your frustrations; either running them out until you’re numb, or you get ideas to solve them.”

It’s a monumental event that, thanks to Switzer, has motivated many women to find fitness, relief and strength through movement. Switzer’s bib number, 261, which the race official tried to tear from her sweatshirt four decades ago, is recognized as a number meaning “fearless.” It empowers women as the symbol for the 261 Fearless Foundation, a global community of women changing the world through running, walking and supporting each other. Join the 261 mission, become an ambassador or attend an event at [www.261Fearless.org](http://www.261Fearless.org).

Switzer balances her residence between the Hudson Valley of New York where she runs on beautiful surrounding trails, and Wellington, New Zealand with her husband, Roger Robinson. She will visit Grand Rapids on November 6 for a fundraising luncheon as



Switzer in May 2011, in the apple orchards near her American home in the Hudson Valley of New York State. Photo courtesy Joan Barker Image

part of Kent County Girls on the Run’s (KCGOTR) Remarkable Speaker Series.

“I’m excited,” Switzer expressed. “These little girls are going to grow up running like I did with a victory under their belt that no one can take away from them.”

Reserve your place to hear Switzer speak and perhaps recommend where she can get a good brew here in Beer City USA (a beer is one of her favorite ways to celebrate a race). This fundraiser gives attendees the chance to support the almost 2,000 girls that participate in KCGOTR annually by signing up to volunteer or make additional contributions. Sponsorship opportunities for the event are available at [www.KCGOTR.org](http://www.KCGOTR.org).

Switzer’s story is remarkable and her creations in social change are experienced every time we women tackle a 5K or marathon with male athletes as equals. Her entire story can’t be expressed in this article, but you can fill the voids at [www.KathrineSwitzer.com](http://www.KathrineSwitzer.com). You’ll find information on her accomplishments and fascinating facts that detail everything from the history of the marathon, the events at the Boston Marathon and advice for those who want to start running.

Barriers can be broken by challenging your own. Be fearless in the spirit of Switzer and your abilities. I’ll see you on the running trails, Grand Rapids.



Bri Kilroy is a Grand Valley and AmeriCorps alumna who learned to type through vigorous Mavis Beacon trainings. She also passes as an artist, illustrator and author of this bio.

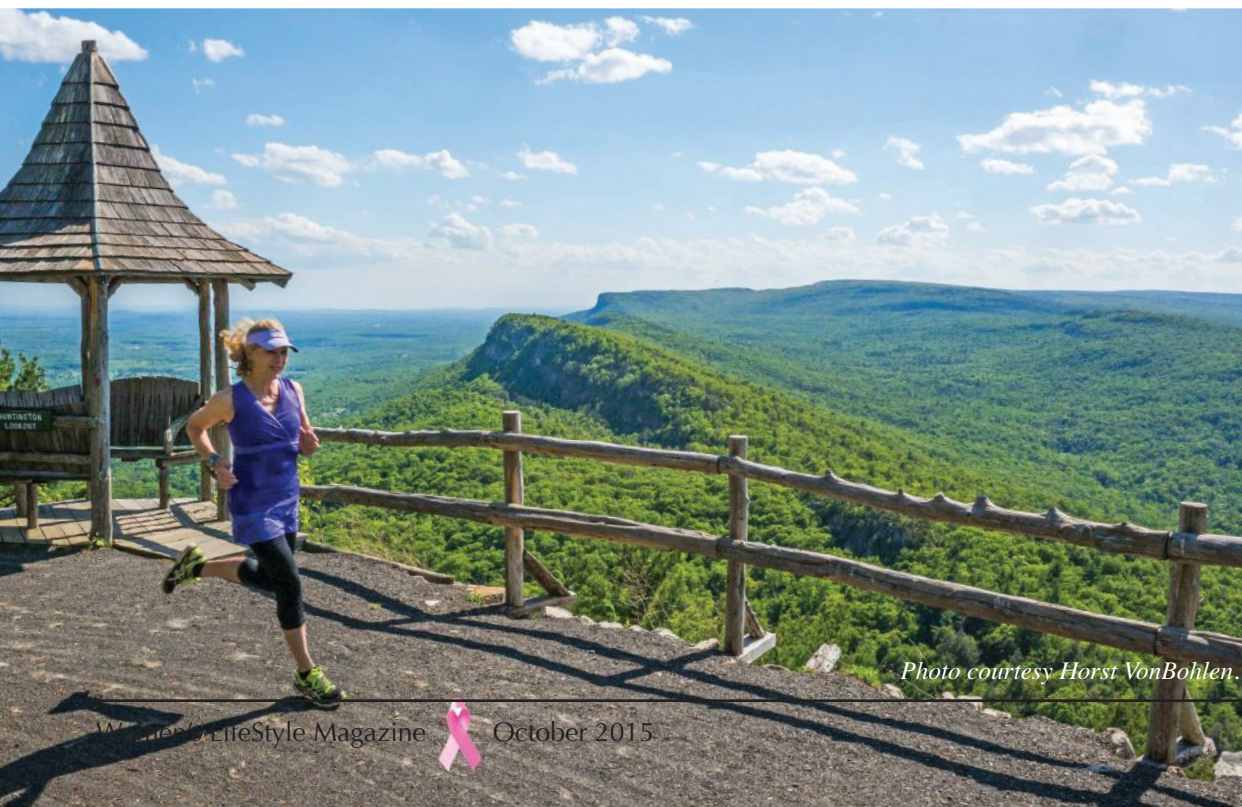


Photo courtesy Horst VonBohlen.