

KATHRINE SWITZER, MARATHON WOMAN

THE FIRST WOMAN TO RUN IN THE BOSTON MARATHON IN 1967



I had the privilege of interviewing Kathrine Switzer, who made history when she officially became the first woman to register and run in the Boston Marathon in 1967. Since then she has gone on to break barriers for women, using her Boston experience to champion and campaign for women whilst also creating positive and social change to empower women. Amongst many of Kathrine's many achievements, she was

inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in October 2011 for creating positive global social change.

Her inspiring, authentic and high-energy delivery of creating success in a difficult environment, turning negatives into opportunities, and fearlessly implementing social and cultural change has made many positive differences in lives and businesses.

ESTHER: Kathrine, I usually ask my guests in a nutshell, a peanut shell or a coconut shell who is Kathrine Switzer?

KATHRINE: Well, Kathrine Switzer is the first woman to officially register and run the Boston Marathon in 1967 when I was attacked by an official, two miles into the race, who tried to throw me out of the race, because I was a woman. He ripped off my bib numbers. I was radicalized by the experience that no matter what, I would finish that race to prove that women could do and deserved to be in running. It was formerly a men's-only race up to that point, but it was not written anywhere, you were just supposed to understand these things and so effectively by registering, I challenged the rules. But I love to say that sometimes the worst things in your life can become the best things in your life, because, by the time I finished that race through a lot of pressure, I had a life dream of creating opportunities for women. I knew women would want to run in the field if they only had a chance and from that came a whole lifetime of race organization, of being one of the leaders to get the women's marathon into the Olympic Games; to continue with my own running, to do broadcasting and to author three books. Right now I'm leading a whole new movement of empowerment called 261 Fearless, which is also active in the UK. 261 Fearless is named after the bib number that the official tried to pull off me. Women everywhere were saying that that number made them feel fearless. Therefore, my goal, my legacy, is to create empowerment through the simple act of putting one foot in front of another.

ESTHER: Kathrine, I'd like to go back a little bit, to before the time when you made that incredible stand and in a sense, made history. One of the reasons I feel you were so indomitable was to do with your upbringing. It seems your parents instilled a sense of 'I CAN' in you. Can you share about your parents' ethos of life, because, I believe that was pivotal in terms of the stand that you eventually made.

KATHRINE: I have wonderful parents. I often say if every girl had parents like mine they would grow up empowered; it makes all the difference in the world. I wish that everyone reading, no matter what it will take, will take their kids, their friends, their grandchildren or neighbor's kids and give them a sense of 'hey you can do this, we believe in you, you're a great kid.'

My Family were religious persecutes; Protestants in a Catholic world; we emigrated to the United States back in 1723. It's a long time ago and it was hard work, i.e farming and digging out a life of success and trying and prevailing. So I grew up on stories like that, but my father and mother were really adamant that I was bought up in the same way as my brother. My father was the one who saw an insecure twelve year old who wanted to make the field hockey team in high school and said, 'listen, all you have to do is to run a mile a day, and you will make that team.' So I started running a mile a day and that changed my life. I made the field hockey team, but more importantly, I grew up from the age of twelve with a sense of empowerment, somehow realizing that if I just ran every day, I'd have that magic and that stayed with me all my life.

ESTHER: Wow! So what made you want to run in the marathon in the first place?

KATHRINE: When I first heard about 26 miles, three hundred and eighty five yards, I was already running up to three miles a day. I was fascinated with the fact that the longer I ran, the better I felt and that it seemed that some days I could run forever. So when I saw that people were running 26 miles, I didn't distinguish it as just being for men, and I wanted to run as well. I knew it would be a great challenge. It was like mountain climbing. Luckily enough for me I was at the University Syracuse in New York where one of the men's voluntary coaches was an ex marathoner and he was really old..in his fifties. (Laughter)
He told me stories about marathoning and he didn't realize that he was really psyching me up to keep trying. I proposed to him that I would run the Boston marathon and he said, "Oh no, no, a woman can't run that!" and I said, "what are talking about?" So, it was a challenge to prove to him that I could run the distance and we did, one day in practice. We ran 31 miles and he almost fainted but by then he was convinced. So many people, men especially, in terms of women's achievement, once they see a woman do something remarkable, they become almost evangelists in supporting them.
He was then the one who said "Okay, you have earned this, but you have to sign up for Boston. You have to do this legally; you're a member of The Athletic Federation you just can't go up there and jump in the race." Other women had run marathons, this is one important point to make, but not a lot had run. There are up to six that made history if I can recall; even a woman in Boston, who just jumped out of bushes but my coach didn't agree with that and suggested I register as he'd checked the rule book and it didn't say that women were not allowed and it didn't say that it was a men's only race. So off we went and the rest is history.

ESTHER: How did that particular incident change your life? How did people see Kathrine after that race?

KATHRINE: Well, it was really interesting, because at the end of the race, I was loved by people and I was hated by people. I got bags of mail that said I was going to fry in hell and I was doing a terrible thing and I got bags of mail that were marriage proposals.
So it was an absolutely polarizing experience; but for me, how Kathrine Switzer's life changed.
First of all, I believe that running is transformational especially for women. It gives us creativity, enlightenment, courage and I believed that after I finished that marathon nothing could be harder in life after that experience. In my life now, nothing is difficult; nothing is harder than being a twenty year old girl, facing an enraged official under the world press, who is tackling me and then going on to finish the race. It changed everything in my life. It gave me courage to take on new things, but mostly, I was seeing that women could actually excel at distance

