

Marathon struggle of runner who changed athletics

First woman to finish Boston Marathon reruns race 50 years on – and nearly as fast

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A runner who saw off furious race officials in 1967 to become the first woman to finish the Boston Marathon has repeated the feat 50 years after first completing the course.



A race official, Jock Semple, tries to pull Kathrine Switzer out of the 1967 Boston Marathon but is pushed away by her boyfriend. Photograph: Paul J Connell/Getty

Kathrine Switzer, 70, became a hero of the women's rights movement after she officially completed the all-male race. Registering as KV Switzer, her gender went unnoticed by officials at the starting line-up, but a few miles into the race she was attacked by an angry official who tried to pull her off the course – creating an enduring image of feminist history.

With help from her boyfriend, who pushed the official away from her as she ran, Switzer managed to evade him and finished the race in 4hr 20min. On Monday, the veteran ran it again – finishing just under 25 minutes slower at 4hr 44min 31sec.

In a sign of how times have changed, Switzer was cheered by crowds, and fired the starting gun for the women's elite runners' race.

Switzer told CNN that running in the two races 50 years apart was "like night and day". Describing hearing her name called out by supporters, she said: "I've got to tell you it was one of the most

gratifying emotional experiences I've ever had ... a wonderful moment."

She wore her old number, 261, which as a mark of honour was retired by race organisers after she crossed the finish line. The Boston Marathon has retired only one other number in its history: 61, in recognition of the 61 races started by the athlete Johnny Kelley.

In her memoir, *Marathon Woman*, Switzer recalled the moment she was attacked. "I jerked my head around quickly and looked square into the most vicious face I'd ever seen," she wrote.

"A big man, a huge man, with bared teeth was set to pounce, and before I could react he grabbed my shoulder and flung me back, screaming: 'Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!'

"I knew if I dropped out no one would believe women could run distances and deserved to be in the Boston Marathon. They would just think that I was a clown, and that women were barging into events where they had no ability."

That year, another woman tried to race the marathon by jumping out of a bush, but Switzer was the only one to be officially registered.

Switzer said the transformation of her experience of the marathon mimicked the social revolution in women's sport. Women were finally allowed to enter the Boston Marathon in 1972, and to compete in the Olympics at the distance in 1984. Now 58% of marathon runners in the US are women.

Switzer has entered more than 30 marathons, winning in New York in 1974 in 3hr 07min 29sec, and worked as a TV commentator. She founded the women's running club 261 Fearless, named after her Boston Marathon number.

It is no surprise to Switzer that women embrace the "sense of empowerment" from running. "We have come a light year. But we have a long way to go."