

Jacqueline Hansen Five Years Later

Just before the 1978 New York Marathon, West Germany's Christa Vahlensieck—at that time the holder of the women's world record of 2:34:48—predicted that her stiffest competition would come from Grete Waitz, a Norwegian track ace who had never run a marathon before. The prediction was uncannily accurate, as the little-known Waitz not only beat Vahlensieck but broke her world record by over two minutes with a time of 2:32:30.

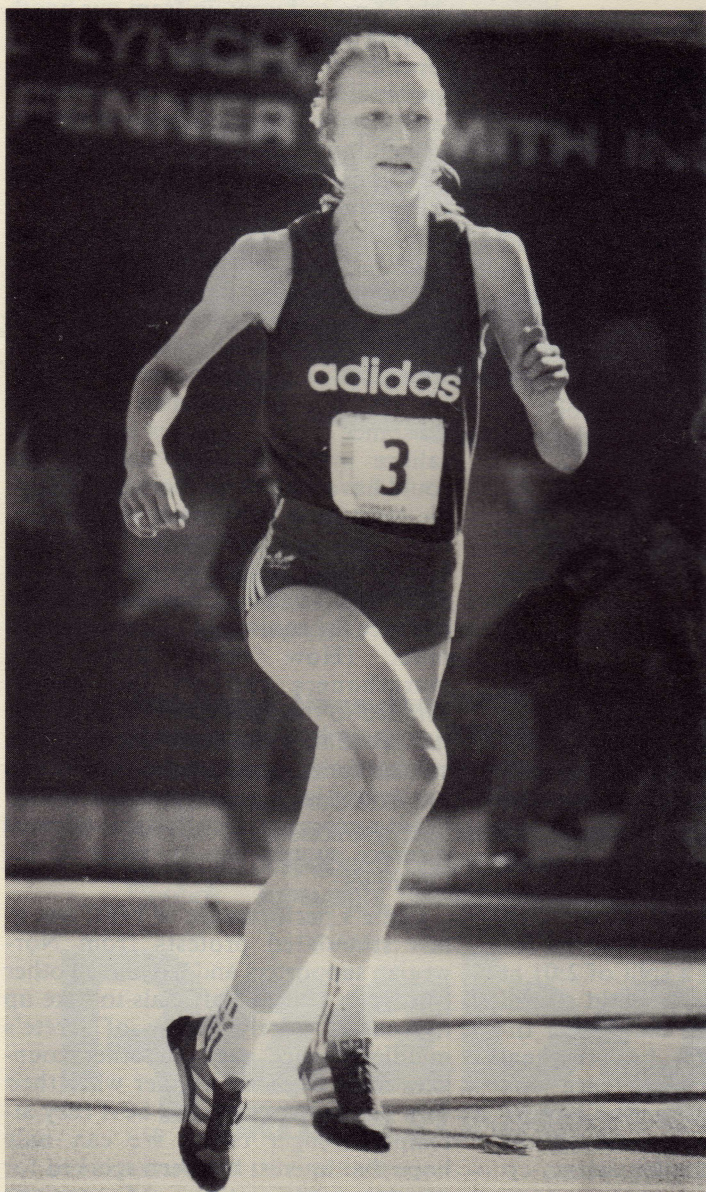
In 1979, Waitz ran her second

marathon—again in New York—and this time, despite her growing fame, produced an even greater sensation by breaking the 2:30 barrier with a brilliant 2:27:33, knocking another 4½ minutes off her own world record.

Since then, no other woman has even come close to Grete's record, although many more women have run many more quality marathons. At the 1979 Boston Marathon, Joan Benoit ran an American best time of 2:35:15, with more than 25 women following in un-

der 3 hours, and 15 under 2:50. And early this year, Benoit established herself as Waitz's nearest challenger by recording a 2:31:30 in New Zealand. But the best demonstration of the extent to which women's marathon times have improved overall was produced by the Women's International Marathon Championship in Waldniel, West Germany last September. In that race, 41-year-old Joyce Smith of England ran 2:36:27 to lead a parade of 36 runners from 13 nations under 3

*The first woman to break 2:40 in the marathon
talks about the first woman to break 2:30*



Grete Waitz, the first woman under 2:30, in a 1980 photo . . .
/Cindy Brown/



. . . and Jacqueline Hansen, the first woman under 2:40,
setting a new world record in 1975
/Dennis Markey/

hours (on the same course where, only five years earlier, Vahlensieck broke 3 hours for the first time).

With the rapid proliferation of sub-2:50 and even sub-2:40 performances, Waitz came to New York in 1979 expecting much more competition than she got (the only other sub-2:40 performer entered was Patti Lyons). Afterward, she commented that she was disappointed at the lack of attendance by America's best female runners. She was quoted as saying that "they should not be afraid to lose," and that it is the only way to learn to win. I don't think "fear" so much as conflicting interests kept the majority of top competitors away, but Grete makes a good point. She has learned by competing against the world's best on the track. As recently as the World Cup in Montreal this past August, for example, she led the 3000 meters (as defending champion) until being outkicked by a Russian in the home straight.

On October 22 in New York, Grete Waitz opened a new era in women's marathoning and hurdled a major psychological barrier. Runnerup Gillian Adams ran a 2:38:33 PR to become the 16th woman ever under 2:40—a world class performance, but a full eleven minutes behind Waitz! It was as if Bill Rodgers had run a 2:02. Perhaps the most impressive thing about Grete's performance was the way in which she ran the race: Over the second half, she was outrunning some very good male marathoners, accelerating off a first-half clocking of 1:14:51 to a 1:12:42 second half. Few men, if any, could lay claim to such relative splits. Male runnerup Kirk Pfeffer turned in splits of approximately 1:03 and 1:10. Steve Floto, who ran with the leaders at world-record pace through 8 miles, finished a short step ahead of Grete.

As the first woman to have broken another barrier, I can imagine what Grete might have been feeling. When I heard of her new record, memories of my own best marathon—the first in the world under 2:40—washed over me. Four years ago, in October 1975, I found a small, little-known race in Eugene, Oregon. The NIKE-OTC Marathon seemed attractive because of its location, the weather and the course topography. I remember thinking that it would be a good test of my conditioning. In submitting my entry, I decided to pass up the National AAU Women's Marathon Championships set for a few weeks earlier. In my judgment, my "shape" was not good



Jacqueline Hansen /M.L. Thomas/

enough for me to be running in a championship race.

So given a few weeks extra training, I went off to Eugene under no pressure and with no particular expectations but to run as best I could. Working out with some local runners a few days before the race, however, I silenced conversation with a spontaneous (and self-revealing) remark about my intended pace. When asked how fast I wanted to run, with scarcely any hesitation I replied, "As close to six minutes as I can." Because that's what it would take to break the existing record of 2:40 held by Christa Vahlensieck, I guess it was what first came to mind. But when I took time to assess the statement, I wondered at myself. Sure, I'd last run 2:43; and to date I'd always improved by leaps and bounds. But to break 2:40 . . .

We started the race, a mere 100 or so of us; and for all I know I could've been the only woman entrant. The weather was ideal, with cloud-covered skies and cool temperatures. The course (later incorporated into the 1976 Olympic Marathon Trials) was flat and wound through forests along the Willamette River at some points. Everything seemed conducive to a good performance. I passed the first mile in 6:08 and averaged 6:02/mi for the distance. Hearing a split of 2:01 at 20 miles, I knew that a world record was within reach—if I didn't die. Instead, adrenalin flowing, I ran the final 6 miles at sub-6 minute pace and finished covered with goose bumps. That performance has remained the greatest thrill of my running career.

I had a long time, more than a year and a half, to savor my new world

record of 2:38:19. During that time I took the opportunity to lobby in various ways for the "cause" of a woman's marathon in the Olympics. I spoke to anyone who would listen, runners and reporters alike. The exclusion of women distance runners in the Olympic Games had been a never-ending source of frustration to me since 1972. I wanted other women runners to realize that my achievement was not so spectacular; that we should all be running in the 2:30s; that women would—should—be running in the 2:20s within five years.

Only four years later, enter Grete Waitz. On October 22, I was 3000 miles from New York City, attending a sporting goods show in Los Angeles. At some point, an announcement was made of Rodgers' winning time. I work for a group of women runners, and a yelp of protest went up from our booth because the "winner" of a marathon depends on your point of view. We wanted to know about the *women's* race. Eventually, word came of Grete's tremendous 2:27. My skin prickled with goose bumps as it had in Eugene four years before.

But today, the ramifications of Grete's performance are more far-reaching and have a better chance of bearing fruit for the "cause." No longer is the marathon dominated by American and West German women. No longer is it dominated by strictly "distance types." Grete is an Olympic calibre middle-distance runner. She could have a berth on Norway's Olympic team as a 1500 meter competitor. But she is far better at 3000 meters—and would be better yet at 5000 and 10,000. Consider that she can race the equivalent of a 9-minute 2-mile. (How many 2:20 male marathoners can do the same?) Limited to the 1500 meters—which she has raced in 4 flat—she doesn't see a chance for a medal at the Games and has said it isn't even worth her trying. What a gross injustice that this talented *distance* runner has no place in the Olympics!

Grete's performance at NYC has at last stimulated protests from Norwegian supporters and has stirred other European athletics officials to take up the cause. Surely, many of Grete's middle-distance peers in other countries must begin to wonder what their own performances would be if they attempted longer races. We can only hope that interest has been sparked for a new generation of women marathoners. □