The Women's Marathon Movement

Or, we've run a long way, but haven't we been here before?

BY JACQUELINE HANSEN

From the onset, women distance runners have had to forge their own way, not only with very little official support but, in fact, against a great deal of institutionalized resistance. Imagine the loneliness of the long-distance runner—especially female—back in 1918, when Marie Louise Ledru competed in a marathon in France. Or in 1926, when Violet Percy of England clocked 3:40:22. And in 1951, when a "mystery woman in red" from Canada was reported to have competed in the Boston Marathon.

A milestone was reached in 1957 with the formation of the Road Runners Club of America (RRCA), a group that vowed to give women equal recognition. Not without reason have some of the largest women-only races emerged in New York City, home of the RRCA's founding.

Courtesy of Jacqueline Hansen

▲ Jacqueline Hansen participates in a 1978 Road Runners Club of America (RRCA) speaker panel. The RRCA, formed in 1957, vowed to give women runners equal recognition.

In the 1960s, an attitude echoing that of the '30s still prevailed, with this country's coaches concerned over the effect of running on a woman's "femininity" and her childbearing capabilities.

Despite the unfavorable climate of opinion, a few women dared to be different. Lyn Carman and Merry Lepper had been training for and running in road races for some time when, in 1963, they jumped into the Western Hemisphere Marathon in

Culver City, California. They sidestepped a race official who tried to stop them by declaring their right to public use of the roads. Lyn reportedly completed 20 miles of the race while Merry established a best marathon time of 3:37:07.

Also in 1963, Englishwoman Dale Greig began four minutes ahead of the field in the Isle of Wight Marathon. With an ambulance trailing her the entire route, she clocked 3:27:45, which has been claimed as the first recognized world marathon mark for women. But only two months later, that time was beaten by New Zealander Millie Sampson in the Owairaka Marathon with a 3:19:33. So much for running by women as mere play. The race was on! The women's marathon movement had begun in earnest.

Back in the States, the ever-famous—and traditionally all-male—Boston Marathon was infiltrated by one lone 23-year-old woman, Roberta Gibb, who in 1966 covered the distance in a reported unofficial time of 3:21. In 1967, she completed the Boston course in 3:27:17, a performance overshadowed by Kathrine Switzer's (4:20) well-publicized encounter and ensuing battle with the race director, Jock Semple. In 1968, Gibb ran Boston in 3:40, and Marjorie Fish ran 4:45.

Young women set the marks

Out of Canada later the same year came an amazing report. A 15-year-old girl, Maureen Wilton, finished an otherwise all-male race in 3:15. Most of the world was astonished—indeed incredulous—with the possible exception of a doctor in the field of sports medicine and longtime advocate of women's distance running. From the small town of Waldniel in West Germany, Dr. Ernst van Aaken had written, "What woman has not yet attained, she definitely will attain one day as the result of training methods specifically suited to her." In his hometown between 1953 and 1959, van Aaken had trained such women as Marianne Weiss, Margaret Bach, Josefine Bongartz, and Anni Pede-Erdkamp on consistent programs of 20 kilometers to 30 kilometers a day. Van Aaken, therefore, was little surprised at Maureen Wilton's performance. He backed his claim that any of his 800-meter runners could match it by arranging for a demonstration to satisfy the press a few weeks later. The result was yet another world best mark for Anni Pede-Erdkamp in 3:07:26. Pede-Erdkamp's record stood until 1970, when in the United States 16-year-old Caroline Walker ran 3:02:53 in the Trail's End Marathon in Oregon.

A history of women's marathoning would not be complete without the efforts of Sara Mae Berman of Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was the unofficial women's leader at the Boston Marathon in 1969, 1970, and 1971, running 3:22:46, 3:05:07, and 3:08:30 respectively. Her 1970 best stood as an unofficial course record until 1974. As an official entrant, she finished fifth in both 1972 and 1973.

In 1969 at Boston, two other women finished: Elaine Pederson in 3:45 and Nina Kuscsik in 3:48. In 1970, a total of five women competed: Berman was

Courtesy of Jacqueline Hansen

▲ Jacqueline, with Dr. Ernst van Aaken, one of the strongest advocates of women's running, in Waldniel, West Germany in 1974.

followed by Kuscsik, 3:12:16; Sandra Zerrangi, 3:30; Diane Fournier, 3:32; and Switzer, 3:34. The next year, 1971, saw only three finishers: Berman, Kuscsik, and Switzer. But all those years of persistent effort and keeping their own times finally paid off.

In 1972, women were accepted for the first time as official entrants at Boston. Eight finished: Kuscsik won in 3:10:21 followed by Pederson, 3:20; Switzer, 3:25; Pat Barrett, 3:35; Berman, 3:48; Valerie Rogosheske; Ginny Collins; and Frances Morrison.

Honoring its founding pledge to promote distance running—male or female alike—the RRCA sponsored the American National Women's Marathon Championship in October 1970. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), which so far had not officially recognized women marathoners, did not sanction this closed club race. Six women entered, and though it was run with men, all received equal consideration. That now-familiar name, Sara Mae Berman, emerged the victor. Another milestone had been reached.

The best-known marathon mark in the world for women had changed three times in 1971 alone. Beth Bonner clocked 3:01:42 and then broke the three-hour mark for a historic first with 2:55:22 at the 1971 New York City Marathon, in close competition with Nina Kuscsik. That day they clocked the two fastest female times known in the world, with Nina doing 2:56:04.

At the 1971 AAU convention, the Women's Committee increased the allowable competitive distance for women to 10 miles. Nina comments: "The committee had come full circle and now approved what it had not previously allowed."

Seriously lowering marathon times

By the year's end at the Western Hemisphere Marathon in Culver City, California, a technically illegal runner, Cheryl Bridges, slashed the women's best to 2:49:40 (the AAU had not yet recognized the marathon as a legal distance for women). Many witnesses to this feat were stunned that December day. As Cheryl's LA Track Club teammate, I went to support her effort and was so engaged that I felt compelled to return next year to the starting line and ran and won my first marathon.

In 1972, the AAU recognized women as official entrants in marathons, although the Women's Committee insisted that the women start at a separate time or place. At the 1972 New York City Marathon, when chairwoman Pat Rico tried to enforce this rule, things came to a head. Rico insisted that women start 10 minutes ahead of the men. The women participants took the position that since they were being scored and awarded prizes separately, theirs could be defined as a separate race without a head start. Ignoring the gun fired to start the women 10 minutes ahead, the women, with Nina Kuscsik on the line, forfeited those precious 10 minutes before starting to run. Kuscsik won the women's division that day in 3:18—including the 10-minute penalty imposed for rebelliousness!

At the next AAU Convention, the Women's Committee raised the limit of competition to the marathon and resolved that women could start on the same line with men. This concession was more readily made in light of the report by Ken Foreman (Seattle coach and AAU official) that potential lawsuits were in the works over discriminatory practices at the Trail's End Marathon, where women were required to provide health certificates and men were not.

The year 1972 was the first that women were recognized by Boston Marathon officials. At Boston in 1973, I scored a victory in 3:05:59. A record number of 12 women started, and despite the high temperatures, 10 finished.

Cheryl Bridges's record mark finally fell at the site at which it was set in Culver City when Miki Gorman won the 1973 Western Hemisphere Marathon in 2:46:36. Miki then set her sights on the Boston Marathon and won the 1974 women's division in a course record of 2:47:11.

The first AAU National Marathon Championships for women took place at San Mateo, California, in February 1974. Judy Ikenberry became the first officially recognized national champion with a time of 2:55:17. Forty-four of the 57 starters finished, with three runners under three hours. Eleven-year-old Mary Etta Boitano ran 3:01:13. *Nor-Cal Runner* editor Jack Leydig wrote that the "overall (men's) winner, Jim Dare, was almost overlooked by the press as he became the fourth West Valley Marathon winner in as many years. Everyone was waiting for the winner of the women's nationals!"

Dr. Ernst van Aaken, a strong advocate for women's running, hosted the first women's international marathon in his hometown of Waldniel, West Germany, in

Courtesy of Jacqueline Hansen

▲ Jacqueline won the 1973 Boston Marathon in 3:05:59. Twelve women started the race, which was the second year that Boston officially recognized women entrants.

1974. He had been arguing the case for women since the 1950s, when he fought for a German national championship in 800 meters in 1954. It took him 15 years more to implement the women's 1,500 meters in the German federation program. In 1973, he held his country's first women's marathon.

From Waldniel to Culver City

I was not chosen for the US team going to Waldniel for having missed the AAU National Championship Marathon. However, a good friend and fellow distance runner, Bruce Dern, sponsored me to run in Germany. I placed fifth overall, breaking three hours in my third marathon, and came in first American, which the Germans tallied in the US team points. Ever grateful to Bruce for that opportunity, it gave me the confidence that I could compete with the world's best. I returned home to set my next goal at Culver City in December. There, I warmed up for the race with Bruce, who boasted about his ability to pick winners and at the same time calmed my nerves from all the talk about a possible assault on the women's record that day.

Gorman's world best of 2:46:36 stood until late 1974, when Christa Vahlensiek and Chantal Langlace both completed marathons in faster times. Both, however, were victims of short courses. By the time certification was completed

Courtesy of Jacqueline Hansen

▲ The team sitting in front of van Aaken's home, where they received gifts of Brutting shoes (German made, with Arthur Lydiard's name on the model). Left to right: Ruth Anderson, Joan Ullyot, Lucy Bunz, Jochen Gossenberger (van Aaken's nephew), Ursula Detree (German runner), Marilyn Paul, Judy Ikenberry, Anni Pede-Erdkamp, and the author, behind Anni.

on Langlace's record of 2:46:24, I had bettered it with a 2:43:54 performance at the Western Hemisphere Marathon in Culver City—the third women's record to be set in that race.

The record fell again, however briefly, at Boston in 1975. Van Aaken, present that day, had as much as predicted Liane Winter's 2:42:24. He said the record would not stand long. He predicted that his other protégée, Christa Vahlensiek, would run around 2:40 flat. He further stated that, "If American Jacki Hansen found a favorable course, she would become the first woman to break 2:40." In Germany, Vahlensiek scored a 2:40:15 the very next month. And in October at the Nike-OTC Marathon in Eugene, Oregon, I ran 2:38:19 and set a world record as the first woman to run under 2:40. Van Aaken was right and was called the "Wizard of Waldniel."

In 1976, Dr. van Aaken again hosted the Women's International Marathon in Waldniel, at his own expense. Nearly 60 women participated. Kim Merritt, that year's Boston winner (2:47:10), led to nearly 40 kilometers before succumbing to Vahlensiek, who decisively won in 2:45:24.

The 1976 AAU Championships were held in Culver City. Middle-distance ace Julie Brown, making her debut at marathoning, triumphed in 2:45:32. Teenager Diane Barrett finished less than 30 seconds behind, establishing a national junior record.

The year 1976 had begun with a historic precedent when the race organizers of Sao Silvestre, the New Year's Eve midnight run in Sao Paulo, Brazil, invited women to participate for the first time in its long, prestigious history. Vahlensiek and I finished first and second, respectively. My invitation to Brazil evolved from a race in Puerto Rico six months prior. I had just won the San Juan 450 race when I met the race promoter from Brazil, who was recruiting international runners. I eagerly volunteered, and he was most embarrassed to confess that there had never been a women's division in the Sao Silvestre. I encouraged him to create one and helped him to identify a potential women's field. He went home to convince his race committee, and perhaps in honor of the upcoming International Women's Year, it complied.

Valiant efforts at 10,000

Back in the States, interest picked up at the 10-kilometer distance, most notably in the New York Mini-Marathon, where high-school miler Julie Shea led the field of 500 women with a Central Park course record of 35:58. Little opportunity, however, was given to women to contest 10 kilometers on the track until a race held at Eugene, Oregon, in conjunction with the 1976 US Olympic Marathon Trials. American women made clear to Olympic officialdom that they were perfectly capable of running long distances in competitive circumstances. Peg Neppel of Iowa State bettered the American record of Carol Cook (also of Iowa State) of 34:49.0 (1975) with 34:19.0, and Cook herself finished second in 34:42.2.

The increasing display of women marathoners racing worldwide, however, apparently did not impress potentates from the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). So political activists among women runners pursued other routes in an attempt to gain official recognition. Showing the patience of Job, Nina Kuscsik and others tediously guided petitions and proposals through proper channels until, at long last, the AAU encouraged the USOC to present a proposal to the IOC that a women's marathon be considered for inclusion in the 1980 Olympics. This proposal died in the wake of a similar modest proposal to include the 3,000 meters, which was rejected. The committee argued the age-old myth of the inherent physical inability of women to withstand the rigors of racing more than two miles, let alone a whole marathon.

In 1977, the participation of women distance runners accelerated along with the evolving social phenomenon that became known as the "running boom." What was exciting was running with over 2,000 women in the New York's Mini-Marathon that year. The marathon world record holder, Chantal Langlace (2:35:15), took part and placed a strong third in the fast 10 kilometers. Later in the year, Vahlensiek regained her hold on the marathon mark with a 2:34:47. Mer-

Courtesy of Jacqueline Hansen

▲ Left to right: Jacqueline, Cheryl Bridges, Carol Cook, and Peg Neppel compete in a 10K track race held in conjunction with the 1976 Olympic Trials in Eugene, Oregon, showing that women were capable of running long distances.

ritt broke my American record at Nike-OTC with a 2:37:57. And the number of women participating in the AAU Championships warranted a separate race, a neat production staged in Minneapolis. The new AAU marathon champion, Leal-Ann Reinhart, my teammate under the tutelage of Laszlo Tabori, ran 2:46:34.

The National Women's Conference was held in Houston in 1977 in recognition of the International Year of the Woman, in accordance with a United Nations declaration. The lofty goals of advancing women's contributions and removing sex barriers were enough to attract Leal-Ann Reinhart to attend the conference with me to seek help with our cause to advance women's distance running. The magnitude and importance of the major issues considered by the conference delegates both empowered and humbled us to the point that we began to feel fortunate to be running at all and a little selfish about our quest. However, with the determination and tenacity of the marathoners that we were, we forged ahead. We were inspired by the presence of Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Barbara Jordan, and Coretta Scott King. But it was the friendships of three women in particular that made a difference in our quest.

Peggy Kokernot was the young woman who played an integral role in the completion of a cross-country torch relay to open the conference. Her picture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and, in her words, her life changed in ways she could not have predicted. She introduced us to Mary Cullen of Houston, a runner and philanthropist whose support of the arts and athletics continues to be of influence to this day. Henley Gabeau (Gibble at the time) represented the RRCA in the coordination of the conference's torch relay. As she describes it, after meeting us in our lobbying effort for the inclusion of a women's marathon in the Olympic Games, she returned home with the mission for "the RRCA being a force in that effort." Jeff Darman, then the RRCA president, created a position for Henley as the chairwoman of the RRCA Women's Distance Committee. Both became members and tireless advocates of the International Runners Committee.

Avon steps up

At the Avon International Marathon for women in 1978, 20 qualified women with sub-2:50 performances took part in a field of 186 runners from eight countries. The high temperatures of the day and the demands of the hilly course in Atlanta slowed the performance except for neophyte champion Marty Cooksey (2:46:16). Second-place Sarolta Monspart (2:51:40) had more at stake than finishing in a good time. At home in Budapest, the Hungarian Athletic Federation had refused her permission to travel to Atlanta for the competition, so she secured it from the committee governing orienteering. Not only a world-class marathoner, Monspart was the 1972 world champion in orienteering. When her ruse was found out by the Athletics Federation, Monspart was told that she must place in the top five or never again be issued a visa to leave Hungary. She returned home inspired to organize women's marathoning there.

The Boston Marathon in 1978 boasted 227 women participants in spite of the draw of the international marathon the month before. More than 4,300 women took part in New York's 10K Mini-Marathon. And the New York City Marathon was once again the site of the AAU Championships for women. By now, the race had left the confines of Central Park and had taken to the streets of New York, touching all five boroughs of the city.

In that race, the women's marathon movement took a great leap forward. Race announcer Toni Reavis, caught dumbfounded, relayed to an expectant crowd the number of the runner who was leading the women's race in apparent record time but admitted that he was embarrassed at not being given her name. I scarcely knew the name. At least, I did not associate it with marathoning. She was among the best in the world at 1,500 meters and more so at 3,000 meters. But prior to the race, Manfred Steffny, the editor of Germany's prominent running publication *Spiridon* and Vahlensiek's coach (and himself a former Olympic marathoner), told

Courtesy of Jacqueline Hansen

◀ Grete Waitz, shown here in 1979 with Jacqueline after the Lasse Viren 20K cross-country race in Sycamore Canyon, California, ran a world best 2:27:33 at that year's New York City Marathon, which was a positive turning point in the women's movement.

me that Vahlensiek had her eye on the Norwegian entrant. Grete Waitz was the International Cross-Country Champion, and though her workouts hardly ever exceeded 10 miles, they were fast miles and often done twice a day. Christa and I talked about this as we rode out to the starting line together that fateful day. When I was forced to drop out with a broken metatarsal bone in my foot, Christa found me at the same location with a similar injury of her own. We walked back to the finish line together to watch the outcome. Perhaps only Vahlensiek and Steffny were not surprised that October day when Grete Waitz clocked 2:30:30, breaking Christa's world record. What a crime that a distance runner of such talent had no place in the upcoming Olympic Games solely because of her sex!

By 1978, activists in the movement were merging in mutual support. Going through channels had accomplished nothing, and begging for events was demeaning. By rights, the Olympic Games should have included a slate of women's distance events equal to that for men. That meant a 1,500 meters (already one of the women's events), a 5,000 meters, a 10,000 meters, and a marathon. Nothing less was fair or just, especially when top women runners, despite official obstructionism and meager competitive opportunities, had in the space of five years achieved times at these distances that most men had not matched in the first half-century of Olympic competition.

Dealing with the official bodies

On the other hand, women were put in the position of thanking the AAU (the governing body of track and field at the time, which became The Athletics Congress and eventually USA Track & Field, as it's known today) and the IAAF for their "support." At the same time, we were told to be patient, that progress takes time, and that the IOC had good reason to hold back. That "good reason" was defined in several parts, including the fact that not enough countries officially supported women's distance running. The IOC rulebook clearly noted the requirements for admitting new sports into the Olympics, but the standards for adding new events within an existing sport were vague. Rule 32 reads, "Only sports widely practiced by women in 25 countries and two continents may be included in the program of the Games of the Olympiad." Well, runners from that many nations participated in the 1979 International Marathon in Germany. Furthermore, how could any attentive observer of past Olympic Games accept this argument at face value?

Cursory research indicates that in the 1972 Games, for example, only eight countries entered teams in women's volleyball, six in men's field hockey, 16 each in water polo and team handball, and so forth, which reflected a lack of worldwide participation in these sports at the time. How many nations participated in whitewater canoeing at Munich? How many African and Arab countries, which at the time were often cast as the villainous objectors to women's distance running, supported the winter sports or yachting?

But more to the point, IAAF and IOC officialdom seemed to ignore or conveniently overlook the fact that until the 1960 Games, the marathon was more a sentimental, symbolic spectacle than a seriously contested and widely supported athletic event throughout the world. Until the 1932 Games, any nation could send an unlimited number of marathoners. In 1924 at Paris, seven Americans competed (none very well); in 1928 at Amsterdam, 25 countries together sent a total of 79 entrants.

Limited to three entries each at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, only 18 nations were represented by a total of 32 runners. In 1948 at London, 30 of 41 marathoners from only 21 nations finished. The champion's time (2:34:52) was not quite as fast as the 1977 women's best of 2:34:47. At 44 years old, Miki Gorman would have placed ahead of the ninth man in London.

The persistent concern of the IOC about the physical capability of women to withstand the stress of endurance events was, by the mid-1970s, hardly worthy of rebuttal. The empirical data to the contrary compiled by such sports medicine researchers as Dr. Ernst van Aaken, Dr. Barbara Drinkwater, Dr. Joan Ullyot, and others from hundreds of competing women marathoners became overwhelming.

Of course, some of the IOC's continued reluctance to accept women's distance events might have been a political stance for dealing with the clamor from several

other sports to be included in the Olympic program. But it would be foolish to regard this as the only factor.

Why was the IOC so reluctant?

The IOC appeared to have felt terribly threatened by the women's running movement. Perhaps beneath all of the organization's physiological and political arguments lay the cultural and psychological problems that, while less common today, have plagued the athletic establishment throughout history.

Looking at the overall picture from the perspective of more than 30 years later, it is, first of all, hard to believe that resistance to expanding women's sports existed. It was real, and it was due at best to apathy and at worst to discrimination. My outlook at the time was that "if you weren't part of the solution, then you were part of the problem." That was certainly true of persons in power at every level in the governing bodies of our sport. My favorite quote of the day was something that Dick Buerkle, a US 5,000-meter Olympian, said to me: "I cannot imagine what it must be like to fight for every event. I was born with the God-given right to run anything I want." His empathy was typical of the majority, if not all, of our male running colleagues.

In 1979, my husband, Tom Sturak, and I were founding members of an organization sponsored by Nike whose purpose was to increase competitive opportunities for runners worldwide and to help improve the administration of running. Our first objective was to seek a full program of women's distance races in the 1984 Olympic Games and in all other international championships leading up to the Los Angeles Games. The organization was named the International Runners Committee (IRC), and charter members besides myself and Tom Sturak included Joe Henderson, Eleanora Mendonca (Brazil), Joan Ullyot, Nina Kuscsik, Doris Brown Heritage, Jeff Darman, Leal-Ann Reinhart, Ken Young, Lynn Billington (England), Sarolta Monspart (Hungary), Henley Roughton Gibble, Manfred Steffny (West Germany), Arthur Lydiard (New Zealand), and Miki Gorman (Japan). When Joe Henderson stepped down from being the IRC newsletter editor, Janet Heinonen (Eugene, Oregon) joined as editor for the remainder of time the IRC was in existence.

By this year of 1979, it was clear that things were changing. In that year, there were more international marathons for women than ever before. In Waldniel, 250 women from 25 nations met for the outstanding performances of Joyce Smith and her victorious team from England. Smith, a 41-year-old mother of two daughters, was a lifelong runner with international titles at the middle distances: she ran the 1,500 meters in 4:09.4 at the 1972 Games, she earned a bronze medal in the 3,000 meters at the 1974 European Championships, and she was the international cross-country champion in 1972. Smith competed in her first marathon in the 1979

British National Women's Championships, winning in 2:41:37. This earned her a trip to Waldniel later the same year, where she impressively took the title in 2:36:27, and 36 runners from 13 countries broke three hours. Smith long remained a world-class competitor, boasting a 2:29 PR earned when she was in her 40s.

Also in 1979, 20th Century-Fox staged an all-women's marathon with Tom Sturak as race director over the same Los Angeles course on which 1932 Olympic champion Carlos Zabala ran 2:31:17. None of these women bettered Zabala's time, but they nonetheless proved they could go the distance. Beverly Shingles of New Zealand led the field of 56 to a victory in 2:56:46.

The same year, in the Tokyo Women's Marathon, 20 women from nine countries broke three hours. The Tokyo Marathon was a production that only the Japanese could mount, fashioned after the elite, all-male marathon at Fukuoka. Again, Joyce Smith confirmed herself as a top-class marathoner, taking the overall title in 2:37:48.

Finally, some recognition

More significant than the good performances was the fact that the Tokyo race was the first women's-only marathon ever sanctioned by the IAAF. President Adriaan Paulen, who was present at Tokyo, declared his endorsement in this short speech (reprinted from IAAF Bulletin 28 and reprinted in the IRC Newsletter One):

> "It is with a particular pleasure that I say these few words for this very special race, which brings to the Asian continent quite a new concept in women's athletics. Already in the USA and in Europe, the world's leading women marathon runners have gathered and surprised us all—not only by the vast number of finishers, but also by the high quality of the leading performers, many of whom would finish high up in any men's marathon race.
>
> It would appear . . . in the realm of long-distance running that our lady athletes can come closest to the performances established by their male counterparts. The days are long since past when doctors and athletic leaders were worried about the medical advisability of women athletes competing. A rich fund of practical experience is now available for women long-distance runners . . . and there are also many good running publications which give wise advice.
>
> The athletes running today, by careful preparation and gradual buildup, are therefore ready for the challenge which this summit of distance races presents. Thanks to such races as the Waldniel [Marathon] in the Federal Republic of Germany in September and this inaugural race in Tokyo, the

great impetus of women's long-distance running continues, and the movement will gather more and more support . . ."

A positive turning point in the women's movement, this speech in Tokyo had been preceded (and influenced?) by Grete Waitz's historic performance in the 1979 New York City Marathon. Calling her 2:27:33 "the most advanced of women's achievements," Roberto Quercetani, European editor for *Track and Field News*, wrote in the December issue (as adapted for IRC Newsletter One):

> "A time such as Grete's would have been good enough to earn a medal in an (all-male) Olympic Marathon as late as 1956. In terms of records, it was only in April 1935 that a male marathoner ran a bit faster than that. The Norwegian teacher thus appears to be 44 years behind the male clock. Before we regard this as a long lapse of time, let's consider the situation in other events. Women trail men by nearly 80 years at 100 meters and more than that at 400, 800 and 1,500.
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> It's in the distance events that the 'history gap' becomes decidedly narrower. Lyudmila Bragina showed the way in 1976 with her 8:27.2 3,000, a mark first surpassed by a male running in 1926. That man, mind you, was Paavo Nurmi (whose best 1,500-meter time has also been bettered by a woman, Olympic champion Tatyana Kazankina). Grete Waitz has gone further than any other woman athlete with her marathon record. That's why we referred to it as the most advanced of women's achievements in the sport."

A prediction realized

Four years after I clocked the first sub-2:40 marathon for women, my predictions for women's performances had come true. In 1975, I wanted other women runners to realize that my achievements were not so spectacular, that women would—indeed, should—be running in the 2:20s within five years.

In March 1980, the IAAF decided that all international events with men's marathons would also have races for women and proposed that the IOC also consider adding the marathon to its agenda. Unfortunately, when the IAAF asked the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) for its support, the LAOOC replied that it was reluctant to accept the "burden" created by any expansion in the number of participating athletes.

"No sport is being singled out," the LAOOC wrote. "We are simply requesting all sports to assist us by resisting expansion. I trust you will understand." The IAAF did not understand but instead wondered why the Americans "had not put their house in order" on the issue.

In May, the LAOOC still stood firm against adding any new women's events, but a women's marathon had gained written support from Los Angeles City Supervisor Kenneth Hahn. Another boost came from USOC member Bob Giegengack, who wrote in *New England Runner* that "track and field . . . is the number one Olympic sport. To tell us to run without women in a given event is like telling a baseball team to play without a second baseman because it costs too much." (The analogy seems to fit the 5,000 and 10,000 meters even better.)

The USOC resolved to seek the LAOOC's unqualified support of the women's marathon. Incredibly and inexplicably, the IOC Program Commission (an Olympic consulting group responsible for sifting through the requests for new events) concluded just prior to the meeting at the Moscow games:

"We need more information. More medico-scientific research and experience need to be achieved . . . "

Once again, it seemed that the women were out—and this at a time when demonstration sports like baseball were being considered seriously for inclusion. In Moscow, the IAAF took some firm steps forward. It recognized the 5,000 and 10,000 meters as official world-record distances. It established that the IAAF World Championships in Helsinki in 1983 would include a women's marathon. The 3,000 meters and the 400-meter hurdles were added to the Olympic program as new women's events.

Telegrams flew back and forth from the International Runners Committee on the unresolved question of the Olympic marathon. Whether it was jeopardized by a backlash of officials angered over the US boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics

Courtesy of Jacqueline Hansen

▲ Joan Benoit, Jacqueline, and Sherrill Kusner after Joan won gold in the 1984 Olympic Marathon.

or because more important matters took precedence is unclear, but the women's marathon nearly became a dead issue. It was revived by the intervention of IAAF President Paulen and the now-enthusiastic support of the LAOOC.

Shortly before the Los Angeles meeting, confronted by the inexorable fact of another world record by Grete Waitz and a growing international clamor for justice, the IOC's general membership reversed the Program Commission's recommendation, opened the matter for reconsideration, and delegated the authority to its nine-member Executive Board. In the last week of February 1981, almost a century after the idea was first proposed by a Greek runner, Melpomene, the Executive Board of the IOC made it official: the women's marathon would be added to the roster of Olympic events.