

## CONSIDER THIS

by Jacqueline Hansen

# The Second Women's Revolution

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**T**he first women's running revolution opened long distances to them. This began in the 1960s and finally ended with acceptance of the marathon as an Olympic event. This act of the IOC has set off a second revolution—this one in world time standards.

We in the U.S. have seen a preview of what is now happening worldwide. The Boston Marathon accepted women for the first time in 1972. When I ran my first marathon that year, I represented the beginning of a transition from the "old" (jogger-grown-strong) to the "new" (fast-track-athlete-going-longer) marathoner. Lining up that day, I remember a self-defined "LSD type" pointing to me and exclaiming, "It's all over for us now that you track types are getting into distance running!"

My first five marathons brought five- to 10-minute improvements each time, including two world records. I never enjoyed such success on the track. In spite of ample district and state titles, even a national collegiate mile victory, I never broke records. So naturally I was sold on going the distance.

My record stood at 2:43:54 in early 1975, then Liane Winter of West Germany lowered it by about a minute and a half at Boston. Dr. Ernst van Aaken, longtime advocate of women's distance running, was present that day. He dismissed that wind-aided, point-to-point mark as only a curiosity, then predicted that Christa Vahlensieck would quickly run 2:40 and that I would become the first woman to break that "barrier." How wonderfully correct he was! Christa did 2:40:15 the very next month, and in October I ran 2:38:19.

Dr. van Aaken hosted the International Women's Marathon Championship in 1976. I had a bad day and finished well back of the leaders. Chantal Langlace of France, having an even



worse race, comforted me with kind words: "We have both had better days before, and we will again." By May 1977, Chantal carried the title of record-holder as she broke my mark with 2:35:15.

Vahlensieck soon reclaimed the title with 2:34:47 that same year and held on to the honor until that fateful day in New York City in 1978 when the first shot of what would grow into the second revolution was fired.

**N**ew York Marathon announcer Toni Reavis, caught dumbfounded, relayed to an expectant crowd that number such-and-such

was leading the women's race at apparent record pace, but that he was embarrassed at not being given her name. Even when her identity became known, it wasn't a name associated with marathoning. She was among the best in the world at 1500 and 3000 meters, but this was her first marathon.

Before the race, Christa Vahlensieck's coach Manfred Steffny, editor of the German running publication *Spiridon*, had told me that Christa had her eye on the Norwegian entrant. Grete Waitz had run a 16-kilometer cross-country course in around 51 minutes. Though her workouts hardly ever exceeded 10 miles, they were fast miles and often done twice a day. Perhaps only Christa and Manfred were not surprised that October day when Grete Waitz broke the world record by more than two minutes with 2:32:30.

My own race that day ended when a stress fracture forced me to stop short of the finish line. As I dropped out, I was both surprised and saddened to be greeted by none other than Christa. Her race had ended in much the same manner. Later, on a field resembling a battleground after a siege, we listened to Waitz's new world record being announced. I thought Christa would cry, but she simply looked stoic. All I could think to say was, "We've both had better days..."

Grete also would have better days, and we soon realized that she led a new breed of marathoner who had taken the torch from runners like Christa and me.

Waitz ran her second marathon in 2:27:33. Roberto Quercetani, European editor of *Track and Field News* called this time "the most advanced of women's achievements. 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 trailed men by nearly 80 years at 100 meters, he pointed out, and more than that at 400, 800 and 1500. Quercetani wrote, "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 3000, a mark first surpassed by a male runner in 1926. That man, mind you, was Paavo Nurmi [whose best 1500 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."

Yet her time was only the beginning. Grete herself broke the record again in 1980—and that mark too has fallen to another converted trackster, Allison Roe.

Seven years ago when I ran the first sub-2:40 marathon for woman, I pre-

dicted that we would soon be running in the 2:20s. I wanted other women runners to realize that my achievement was not spectacular. I now say with equal certainty that women will be breaking 2:20 within three years.

**I**ronically, it is highly unlikely we'll see Grete Waitz on the Los Angeles Marathon starting line in 1984. Aside from simply wanting to retire from a long career, she still does not consider any Olympic event suitable for her. The truth is, she would shine at the 5000 and 10,000 that still have not found their way onto the Olympic agenda. She claims that she's not a marathoner, and that there are no medals waiting for her at the shorter Olympic distances.

Nor would I bet on Olympic medals for the other two of the world's current three fastest marathoners, Allison Roe or Patti Catalano. Runners who haven't yet tried the distance will be challenging them in force by 1984—particularly the East Germans and Russians. Already, Soviet "second-stringers" have had impressive first efforts of below 2:40. Zoya Ivanova took the first European Cup race in 2:38:58.

Grete broke the barriers. It is inevitable that her track colleagues must take notice and wonder what they themselves could do if they took to the roads. If the IOC does not see fit to add the 5000 and 10,000 track races, then milers will dominate the 1500 and 3000, and all others will be forced to step up to the marathon—packing the event with enough talent to force times to plummet.

Consider the potential lying in the middle-distance field. Yelena Sipatova of the Soviet Union set the world 10,000 record at 32:17.19 last year, and her countrywomen claimed 13 of the 21 fastest times.

It is impossible to predict which, if any, Americans will be in Olympic Marathon contention. From my vantage point, I don't see any potential medalists in U.S. uniforms. The second women's running revolution is indeed at hand, and it may mean the end of an era of Western dominance of an event that was born and nurtured here. □

*As president of the International Runners Committee, Jacqueline Hansen had a role in winning a place for her event on the Olympic program.*

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## NIKE/OTC MARATHON