

The Olympic Marathon

By Jacqueline Hansen

For the past ten years, people who have wanted to see Olympic distance running competition opened to women runners have been frustrated by the "women-are-too-frail-to-run-long-distances" mentality of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Activists sardonically observed that the IOC was made up of "81 old men who probably couldn't keep up with Grete Waitz for a city block if their pensions depended on it"; but that provided small comfort. The IOC seemed unmoved by the fact that there are now women who can run 1500 and 3000 meters faster than the male Olympic champions ran in the 1920s and 30s, or that the leading female marathoners are now producing times that would have been good enough to win Olympic medals (against male competition) in the 1940s and 50s.

As recently as last summer, there seemed little hope that a breakthrough would come in time for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Around the beginning of the new year, however, it was becoming evident that the

movement for Olympic parity was not to be denied—it was only a matter of when. On February 20, the Executive Board of the IOC convened in Los Angeles to discuss, among other subjects, the "programme" for 1984. Three days later, the IOC announced that a women's marathon had been approved for '84.

The struggle goes all the way back to the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, when a woman named Melpomene scandalized the athletic establishment by "crashing" the all-male marathon. In the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, the IAAF honored its agreement with the Feminine Sportive Foundation International to stage four women's events, including the 800 meters. Unfortunately, when the experiment was over, the members of IOC were more impressed by the fact that only six of the eight finalists had finished, than by the fact that all six had broken the existing world record. It is now obvious that the competitors were inadequately trained: virtually all finished in a state of collapse. But in the minds of the IOC observers, lack of

preparation was easily confused with lack of innate ability. Shortly thereafter, the highly influential U.S. contingent (USOC) noted in its report of the 1928 Games that *the sport governing bodies of America have not encouraged competitions for women in the half-mile or similar distances and would not do so in the future.* The IAAF adopted the U.S. position, and the 800 meters was expunged from subsequent Olympic Games until 1964.

Olympics or no Olympics, however, women demonstrated a continuing interest in long distance running, as demonstrated again and again by the performances of individuals who were willing to defy tradition (and often the rules) to run in events considered the exclusive domain of men (see sidebar). In 1968, the sporting world was astonished by a report from Canada that a 15-year-old girl named Maureen Wilton had finished an otherwise all-male marathon in 3 hours and 15 minutes. Perhaps the only person (other than Wilton herself) who was *not* astonished was a German doctor of sportsmedicine, Ernst van Aaken. In his home town of Waldniel, West

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**Hey, lady, you can't run in this—uh—
and the winner is...**



is Now Open to Women

Germany, between 1953 and 1959, he had trained a procession of outstanding female middle-distance runners on consistent programs of 20 to 30 kilometers (12 to 18 miles) a day. Rather than being surprised by Wilton's performance, he promptly announced that any of his 800-meter runners could match it. A few weeks later, he backed his claim by arranging a "demonstration" for the press. His point was made when Anni Ped-Ernkamp set a new world "best" with a time of 3:07:26.

After that, the women's marathon movement picked up momentum, spurred by the U.S. and by the efforts—competitive and political—of such pioneers as Nina Kuscsik and Sara Mae Berman, and by corporate sponsors of women's races such as Avon, Bonne Bell, L'Eggs, and Twentieth Century Fox.

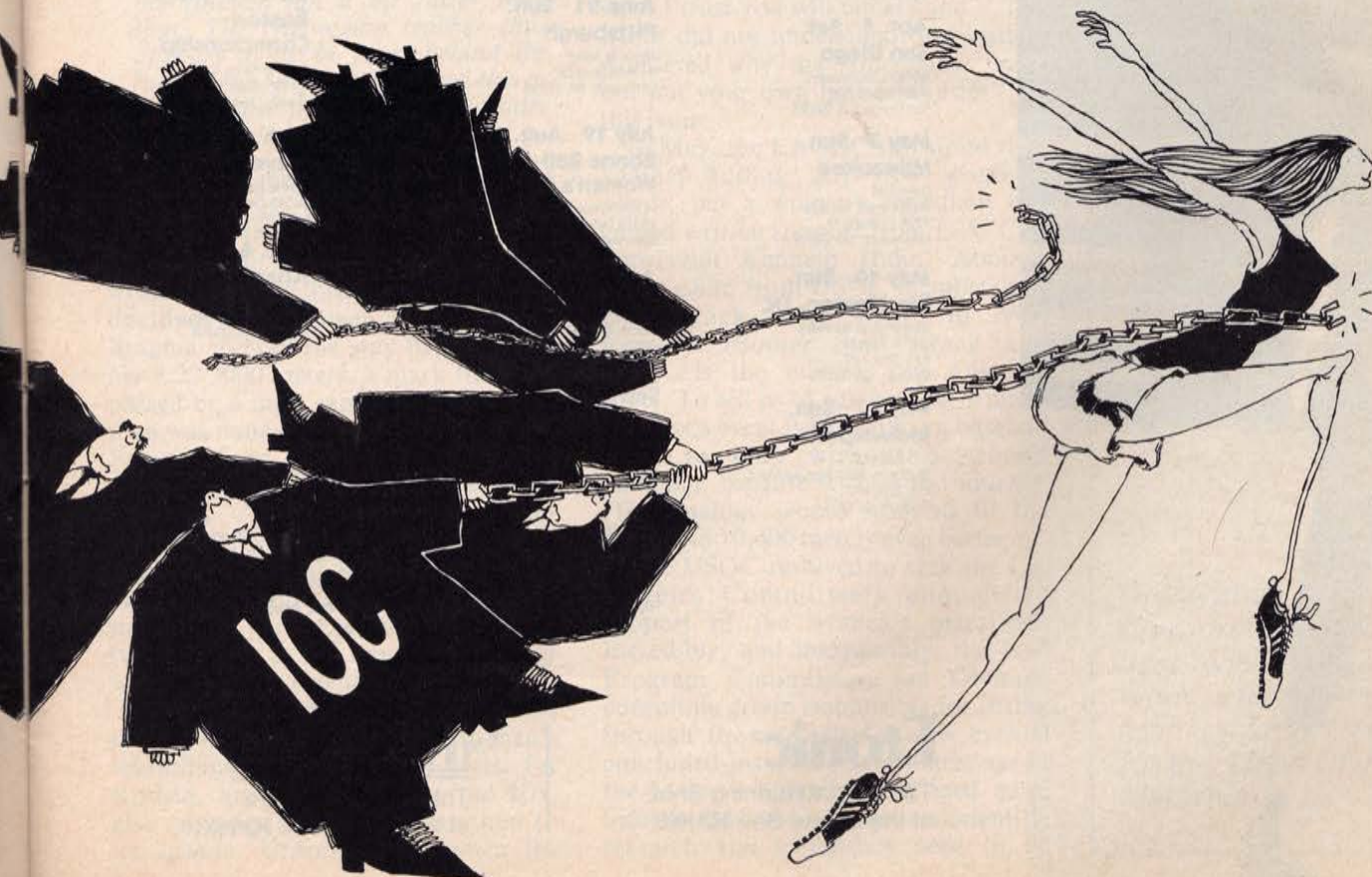
However, the booming growth of women's marathoning—not only in the U.S. but throughout the world—apparently did not impress the IAAF and IOC potentates. Consequently, some of the more "activist" women runners—including myself—began to

augment athletic achievements with political tactics in attempts to gain official recognition. With the patience of Job, Nina Kuscsik and others tediously guided petitions and proposals through proper channels until, at long last, the Amateur Athletic Union was persuaded to encourage the USOC to present a proposal to the IOC that a women's marathon be considered for inclusion at the 1980 Olympics. Unfortunately, the proposal for a 26-mile race had little chance of acceptance in view of the fact that the IOC had just rejected a similar proposal for a women's 3000 meters on the grounds that women have an inherent female physical inability to withstand the rigors of racing *two miles!*

The response to this injustice was an intensification of efforts on a number of fronts. Pam Magee of Nike Sportshoes wrote an open letter to the IOC, which was published as an advertisement chiding that august body for its intransigence. The running community's enthusiastic response to the letter resulted in the formation of the International Runners Committee (IRC), which set as its first objective

the inclusion of a full program of distance events in the 1984 Olympics. Meanwhile, Avon's sponsorship of a women's marathon championship, plus the burgeoning popularity of women's races sponsored by Bonne Bell, L'Eggs, and others, lent a growing legitimacy to women's running in the public view. The opinions of van Aaken were widely disseminated by Dr. Joan Uillyot (herself a marathoner) and other authors. One of the most galvanizing factors was the sudden appearance of Grete Waitz on the international sporting scene. With her electric performances in the 1979 and 1980 New York Marathons, Waitz brought women's long distance running to a standard that even the most chauvinistic IOC member could not ignore.

A major stumbling block for the movement was the IOC's demand for proof that women's marathoning was an accepted sport around the *world*, and was not just an American phenomenon (even Waitz had to come to the U.S. to make her mark at first). As if in answer to this demand, the year 1979 brought a proliferation of in-



ternational competitions. In Waldniel (van Aaken's home town), 250 women from 25 nations came together for a world championship which was won by 41-year-old Joyce Smith of England in 2:36:27. In Los Angeles, Twentieth Century Fox staged an all-women's marathon over the same course used in the 1932 Olympic Games. And in Tokyo, 20 women from nine countries on five continents broke three hours for a marathon won (again) by Joyce Smith in 2:37:48.

Even more significant than the good performances, was the fact that the Tokyo race was the first women-only marathon ever sanctioned by the IAAF. President Adriaan Paulen, himself, was present that day to declare his endorsement of the women's marathon. 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 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, he pointed out, and by more than that at the 400, 800, and 1500. "It's in the distance events," he wrote, "that the 'history gap' becomes decidedly narrower." Lyudmila Bragina showed the way in 1976 with her 8:27 3000 meters, a mark first surpassed by a male runner in 1926. That man was none other than the legendary Paavo Nurmi, whose best 1500 time has also been bettered by a woman, Olympic champion, Tatyana Kazankina). Quercetani concluded, "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."

In March, 1979, the IAAF decided that all international events with men's marathons will also have races for women, and proposed that the IOC also consider adding the marathon to its agenda. Unfortunately, when the



Grete Waitz, the world's best female distance runner, can now look forward to Olympic competition in her own event. /Ken Lee/

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 "have not put your own house in order" on this 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 L.A. 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 basemen, because it costs too much." (The analogy would seem to fit the 5,000 and 10,000 meters even better.)

The USOC resolved to seek the Los Angeles Committee'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 meetings 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. They recognized the 5,000 and 10,000 meters as official world record distances. They established that the IAAF World Championships in Helsinki in 1983 will include a women's marathon. The 3000m and 400m hurdles were added to the Olympic program as new women's events. Telegrams flew back and forth from the IRC on the unresolved question of the marathon. Whether it was jeopardized by a backlash of officials angered over the U.S. boycott, or because more important matters took precedence, remains to be seen; 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, almost a century after the idea was first proposed by the Greek runner Melpomene, the Executive Board of the IOC made it official. □



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