

19. Making It Official

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does.

Margaret Mead

Despite increasing opportunities for women distance runners on the home front, the international governing bodies were not picking up on the trend. A key turning point came at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon. Nike executives, particularly those in running promotions and specifically Rob Strasser in marketing, listened to the concerns of women distance runners, taken to them by Nike's newly assigned masters athletes representative, my husband Tom Sturak.

Early in 1979, Nike ran a magazine advertisement in several major running publications, chiding the International Olympic Committee for its rejection of women distance runners and asking for reader response. This ad campaign was the brainchild of Pam Magee, Nike women's athletic representative. Literally thousands of supportive letters were received.

Consequently, Nike began to investigate ways it could implement a long-term financial commitment in support of a strong and effective lobbying effort to help women distance runners gain entry into the Olympic Games. Meetings took place with Tom and me, Rob Strasser, Pam Magee and Nelson Farris. Joe Henderson was asked to write a preliminary proposal, then to work

with Tom and me to form a committee. We met in April 1979 to prepare a second draft of the proposal and to plan an organizational meeting.

The International Runners Committee consisted of the “movers and shakers” in the running community, with the common goal of lobbying international governing federations to include women’s distance races in the Olympic Games program. Original members of the executive board included Joe Henderson, executive director; Eleanora Mendonca (Brazil) and myself, co-presidents; Jeff Darman, Doris Brown Heritage, Nina Kuscsik, Leal-Ann Reinhart, Henley Roughton (Gabeau), Manfred Steffny (West Germany), Tom Sturak, Joan Ulliot, Ken Young, Sarolta Monspart (Hungary), Lyn Billington (England), Arthur Lydiard (New Zealand) and Miki Gorman (Japan).

The executive committee met formally for the first time in August 1979 in Montreal at the World Cup Track and Field Championships. The objectives were few, and the focus was very specific. We would push first to eliminate inequality by expanding the women’s distance running program in the Olympic Games by 1984, with particular attention to the marathon but also to adding the 3000-, 5000- and 10,000-meter races. Other objectives addressed initiatives that would support the first objective: to include the women’s and men’s marathon, 5000 and 10,000 in the World Cup and the newly proposed World Championships to begin in 1983. (The World Cup already had the 3000-meter race.)

We met next in January 1980, in San Francisco at the home of member Joan Ulliot. Guest speaker was Michael Harrigan, who previously headed the Presidential Commission on Olympic Sports, which

evolved into the Sports Act passed by Congress in 1978. He presented an historical perspective of women's involvement in Olympic sports. It was clarified that new events or changes would have to go through the IAAF's Women's Committee, then to the Technical Committee, which, if convinced, would make recommendations to the International Olympic Committee.

The IRC continued to monitor growth and progress of the women's marathon internationally. We took every opportunity possible for lobbying efforts. Doris Brown Heritage was subsequently sent to attend the next IAAF Technical Committee meeting to lobby on our behalf.

The Technical Committee did vote in favor of a women's marathon. IAAF President Adriaan Paulen personally delivered the recommendation to the IOC Program Commission (an Olympic consulting group responsible for sifting through the requests for new events). The Program Commission inexplicably concluded that "more information, more medico-scientific research and experience need to be achieved." The IRC telegraphed the IAAF to urge the IOC to overrule the Program Commission's rejection or delay final action. Paulen appealed repeatedly on behalf of women before the IOC Executive Committee.

Several factions supported the women's marathon. We hoped the Women's Committee chair, Maria Hartman, would put forward a request for inclusion of all women's distance events, but she failed to do so. As the marathon came close to a vote at meetings in Moscow in 1980, our inside information came from Robert Giegengack, member of the USOC. He informed us that because of the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, the Eastern Bloc

countries were predicted to vote against any proposal (i.e., the marathon) emanating from the West. Giegengack was instrumental in obtaining a postponement of the vote on the marathon until the committee next convened, in February 1981, in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee President Peter Ueberroth, speaking through correspondence with his committee member Dick Sargent, replied to an advance notice that the women's marathon was about to be included in the 1984 Olympic Games. He stated that he could not accommodate any additional events or athletes, refusing any expansion of the program. Harry Usher, executive vice-president and general manager of the LAOOC, insisted that the number of athletes coming to L.A. for the Games must be controlled.

This statement drew numerous protests, most notably by Robert Giegengack. In May 1980, the LAOOC still stood firm against adding any new women's events. By then, a women's marathon had gained written support from Los Angeles City Supervisor Kenneth Hahn. Another boost came from USOC member 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." Giegengack proposed a resolution that the LAOOC enthusiastically support a women's marathon if the IOC agreed to the addition of the event. The proposal was passed unanimously.

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.

At the Moscow meetings, the IAAF took some firm steps forward. It recognized 5000 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 3000 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 U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics 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 in 1981, confronted by the inexorable fact of another world record by Grete Waitz and a growing international clamor for justice, the IOC's general membership took long-awaited action. It reversed the Program Commission's recommendation not to add a marathon for women to the 1984 Games, opened the matter for reconsideration and delegated 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 in 1984.

By the time the decision came down, it was not news to any of us on the International Runners Committee, so the announcement was somewhat anticlimactic. In my mind we were already moving forward

to the next campaign – to win acceptance for the now-orphaned events, the 5000 and 10,000.



Cover of a brochure from the International Runners Committee brochure.