

Track and Field



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A Lucky Break

Among theatrical people, the phrase "to break a leg" is an expression used to convey good luck on opening night. At the time she broke her own leg, literally, Joan Benoit had no reason to believe it would result in good fortune, but the bad break eventually led her to set an American women's record for the marathon. While she still was a high school student in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, Benoit broke a leg skiing. At the time, she had done some competitive sprinting and long jumping, but she was told that running longer distances would build the atrophied muscles. The trim, young New Englander couldn't have done a better job following her doctor's orders, and in 1978 she registered her first big victory by winning a 10,000 meter race in Boston.

It was the following year, however, that she earned international recognition by being the female winner in the Boston Marathon. Although it was only the second time she ever ran the 26 mile 385 yard distance, Benoit's time of 2 hours 35 minutes 15 seconds established an American women's record and was the third fastest ever turned in by a member of her sex.

"I just did what my legs told me to do,"

said Benoit, then a 21-year-old senior at Bowdoin College, where she majored in history and environmental studies. "I don't remember the last two miles at all."

Benoit, who wore a Boston Red Sox cap that someone passed to her during the race, said she didn't even think she would be able to finish, yet she crossed the line 3 minutes and 7 seconds ahead of Patti Lyons, the runner-up.

Like most socially aware women of her time, Benoit has a cause, and she took advantage of her newly won prominence to call for the addition of longer races for women in the Olympics. Noting that the longest Olympic distance for females is 1,500 meters, she said, "I guess this proves what we know in our little hearts, that we can do anything that a man can do."

Benoit had a chance to take her case to the White House when she was invited to attend a state dinner with President Carter following her marathon success.

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Born May 16, 1957, in Cape Elizabeth, Me.
