

Track and Field



Women's Marathon



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Racing for Distance

While individual stars from different countries still grab the headlines, there is a universality among women that anybody can compete in a marathon and 1,169 of them proved this fact by running in the 1978 New York distance event. What's more, 796 finished the gruelling 26-mile, 385-yard run that first became symbolic in 490 B.C. when a Greek messenger sped from Marathon to Athens to announce the Athenian victory over the Persians.

The women come from every walk of life and many travel the marathon circuit that extends from Boston to Fukuokua, Japan. Fred Lebow, president of the New York Road Runners Club, says he receives telephone calls from travel agents in London, Paris, Tokyo and Rome seeking accommodations for foreign women who wish to compete in the tough New York Marathon. His problem is keeping the entry list to manageable proportions. Usually, the field is filled about four months prior to the October race.

Many women prepare for the arduous and often agonizing distance race by running up to 90 miles a week in a training program designed to maximize their strength for the endurance test. Then there are the professionally trained

women who use the Olympics as a base for approaching the marathon. Grete Waitz, a Norwegian school teacher, is a 1,500-meter Olympian who never ran a marathon before the 1978 New York event. She prepared for the race by winning the 1978 International Cross-Country Championship in Glasgow and used the knowledge of conserving her strength over a long distance to capture the run around New York in a world record time of 2 hours, 32 minutes and 30 seconds. En route to her triumph, Waitz beat former world holder Christa Vahlensieck of West Germany; Miki Gorman, New York winner in 1976 and 1977; Marty Cooksey, who won the 1978 Atlanta International Marathon, and Gayle Barron and Penny DeMoss, the first and second women in the Boston Marathon that year.

Marathon running also has become a family affair, with both parents and often one or two siblings running the route. Sue and Pete Peterson of Laguna Beach, Calif., have competed in 38 long distance events and probably are the best known husband-wife team on the circuit. Sue was third in the 1978 New York race and finished fourth in the women's bracket at Boston in 1979.