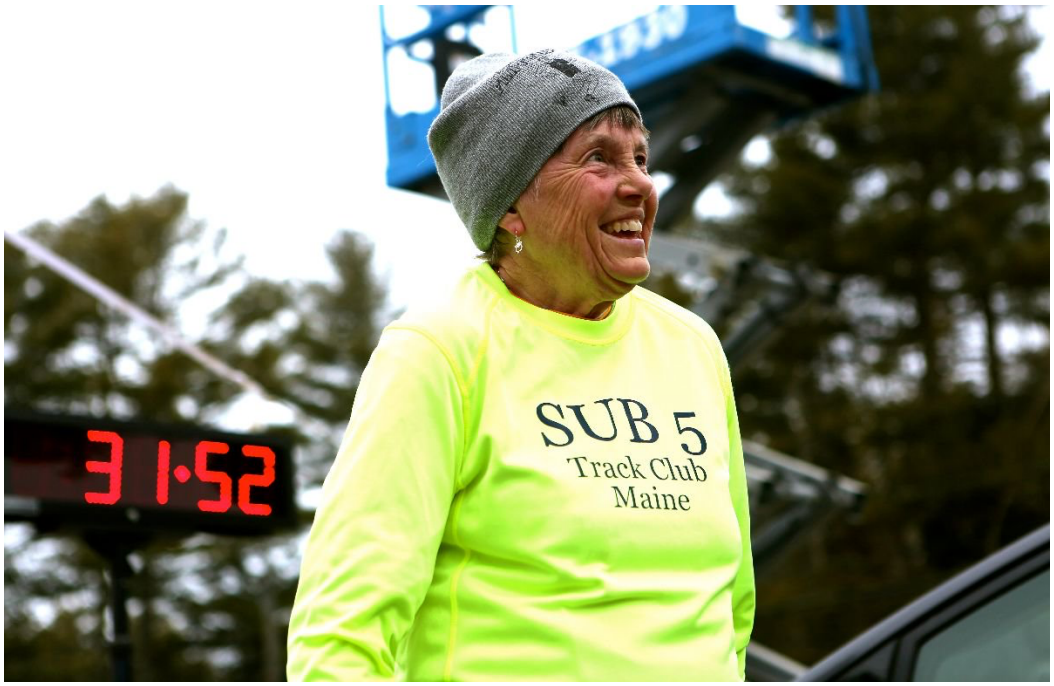

Robin Emery, 68, smiles after finishing the Lamoine Flattop 5K on March 28 at the Lamoine Consolidated School. PHOTO BY TAYLOR VORTHERMS

Part 1: Ellsworth's Robin Emery pioneered women's running

April 8, 2015 by Taylor Vortherms on Running/Cycling, Sports

BANGOR — When Robin Emery approached the sign-in table for the 1972 Bangor Labor Day Race, the four men working the desk did a double take.

No woman had ever entered the five-mile event.

"Can I run?" asked Emery, then a 25-year-old teacher at the Bryant A. Moore School in Ellsworth.

Behind those polite three words was the real question: "Will you allow a woman to compete?"

Silence ensued while the organizers of Maine's second-oldest race exchanged glances inside the old Bangor Auditorium. They huddled and whispered.

"Well, my dear," Emery mimics their patronizing tone. "You can. Just don't get in the way."

Emery, now 68 and a teacher at Ellsworth Elementary-Middle School, began her running career in a world unrecognizable to young women today. Female athletes lacked opportunities and acceptance. Sports would remain male-dominated until the late 20th century.

Emery helped bring about the shift in sports culture by challenging the barriers women faced in distance running. By age 51, she had won more than 250 races in Maine — more than any other woman in the state's history — as well as two national championships and a 10th-place finish in the world in the cross-country masters' division.

It would take the first-ever women's Olympic marathon gold medalist to end Emery's longtime winning streak in Maine.

"Robin had a huge impact on me," says the 57-year-old Cape Elizabeth native, Joan Benoit Samuelson. "She was beating me. Then, she sort of passed the baton to me."

There was no female distance runner to hand Emery that baton.

"It was ground we hadn't yet covered," Emery says. "Women get role models from other women."

Fortunately for other women, Emery discovered her love for the sport on her own. She took her first strides one evening in 1967 during her customary four-mile walk near her family's summer home in Lamoine.

"I did a lot of walking to stay fit, but it took so much time," Emery says. "One day, I just started running."

Clad in an oxford blouse, Bermuda shorts and a pair of boat shoes, the 21-year-old Emery started jogging and didn't stop until she completed the loop. Endorphins and a sense of achievement swirled together in her brain, concocting a sensation so addictive that she remained hooked on running for the next 48 years.

"I knew something that felt that good couldn't be bad for you," Emery says. "I think I was born to run."

That same year, 1967, a woman named Kathrine Switzer entered the Boston Marathon as K.V. Switzer, which officials assumed was a man's name. The oversight allowed Switzer to run the world's oldest annual marathon as the first official female competitor.

But when race manager Jock Semple spotted Switzer two miles into the course, he leaped from the press bus — furious and with his teeth bared — and tried to rip off her bib number. Switzer wrote in her book "Marathon Woman" that Semple grabbed her shoulder and flung her back while screaming, "Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!"

Switzer's boyfriend, who also was her teammate, dropped a shoulder into Semple and knocked him away. A mob of reporters closed in on Switzer when she crossed the finish line with a time of four hours and 20 minutes — nearly an hour behind the first female finisher, Roberta Gibb, who ran unregistered for the second straight year. Race director Will Cloney had denied Gibb official entry, claiming women were not physiologically able to run 26.2 miles.

"Women were running marathons all over the place and not dying," Emery says. "Finally, they were getting a little recognition that they could do it."

Photos of the attack on Switzer made national news, as did her finishing the marathon. In an era when even the Olympics forbade female runners from competing in races longer than 800 meters, Switzer's feat challenged the mainstream notion that women lacked the physical capacity to run distances.

In Maine, Emery also had begun chipping away at common

misconceptions regarding sports and their effect on female anatomy. She started at home.

"My mother always knew running was bad for me," Emery says. "Bless her heart, she was sure it would injure my female parts."

Emery's mom warned her that running could cause a woman to become infertile, grow a mustache or have her uterus fall out. She parented her daughter with the mentality that women shouldn't sweat or build muscles because, as Emery recalls, "women didn't do that kind of thing."

"It's Scarlett O'Hara versus us," Emery says, referencing the "Gone with the Wind" character known for her beauty. "Women are put up on a pedestal."

While growing up in Windber, Pa., Emery could beat most of the boys in her class in sprints when the gauntlet was thrown down on the elementary school playground. She regularly competed in pickup baseball games, so she couldn't understand why the Little League coach wouldn't let her join the team.

"I was as good as any of them," Emery says. "My brother, who was a total spaz, gets to be on the team because he's a guy, and I just had to sit there and watch him."

Emery shakes her head.

"It was painful."

Things only got more difficult for Emery when she reached high school. She says society no longer considered her a kid, but a "young lady" who should "glow," but not perspire. Girls still had no access to athletics other than cheerleading, and those who expressed interest in endurance sports were stigmatized as masculine or gay.

"When you're young, your perception of what society thinks is huge," Emery says. "A lot of women gave up. There was just too much pressure."

After her first summer spent jogging Lamoine's backcountry

roads, Emery returned to Meadville, Pa., as a junior at Allegheny College. She'd left behind Maine's tranquil landscape, but couldn't part with her new hobby. To avoid crowds in the bustling college town, Emery began running through graveyards at night or in the rain, always draped in an oversized sweatshirt to conceal her gender.

"It was hot, let me tell you," Emery says of wearing the heavy outfit on days when temperatures reached triple digits. Still, that discomfort was preferable to being recognized as a woman. She would tense at the roars of approaching cars, anticipating the jeers and hurled beer cans from the men inside.

"They didn't understand it, so they feared it," Emery says. "It's typical ignorance."

Dropping out of the race crossed Switzer's mind after Semple's assault on her in the 1967 Boston Marathon. With 24 miles still to go, anxiety and shame had replaced her adrenaline as she braced for her arrest around every corner. A press truck, with its droning engine, hovered beside her for the better half of four hours. Journalists shoved cameras in her face and asked: "What are you trying to prove?" and "When are you going to quit?"

"I knew if I quit, nobody would ever believe that women had the capability to run 26-plus miles," Switzer wrote. "If I quit, it would set women's sports back, way back, instead of forward. … If I quit, Jock Semple and all those like him would win. My fear and humiliation turned to anger."

Emery also had grown impervious to the disapproval her running so often provoked by the time she graduated from college with her degree in history. In 1968, she moved back to Maine and settled into her newly winterized summer residence in Lamoine, where she began checking the local newspapers for upcoming road races.

"It was like coming out, so to speak," Emery says. "Running is as much a part of me as sleeping and eating."

Emery remembers the amusement her presence triggered among runners at the start of her first Bangor Labor Day Race and the

silence that followed when she crossed the Bass Park finish line in 24th place among 44 competitors.

"Most of the runners didn't have a problem with it, except for the ones who didn't want to get beat by a woman," Emery says. "Then war was declared on my part."

Emery sighs wistfully.

"I loved to beat men," she whispers.

Emery's participation as the first female competitor in the race's history landed her in the next morning's issue of the *Bangor Daily News*. Several pages after a photo of four beauty pageant contestants posing in nothing but a swimsuit, sash and high heels, the sports section included a small snapshot of Emery with the caption: "First Girl Runner."

A grin stretches across Emery's face as she reflects on the blatant subtext of this news.

"Underneath, you could have added: 'Doesn't Die,'" she says. "Things began changing rapidly once men figured out we could do it and not die. They started to realize we weren't going away."

Next week: With the running boom and the women's movement both accelerating in the 1970s, female runners such as Robin Emery rushed into road racing, determined to prove they belonged. But without the proper gear or training available to them, they faced additional hurdles.

Click here for Part 2.

Bio | Latest Posts

Taylor Vortherms

Sports Editor at The Ellsworth American

Taylor Vortherms covers sports in Hancock County. The St. Louis, Missouri native recently graduated from the Missouri School of Journalism and joined *The Ellsworth American* in 2013.

LOAD COMMENTS