

Bev McKay

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In 1983, a 22-year-old woman named Bev McKay became the fastest Manitoba woman to complete the full Manitoba Marathon, with a time of 2:45:30.

Thirty-three years later, she still holds that record. Not bad for her first marathon. (Yes, that's right — her first.)

She's surprised to hear from me when I call her in Halifax. "Someone wants to talk to me about my marathon," I hear her tell her husband with a laugh.

It's a legacy that's followed her, her name reprinted over and over again in Manitoba Marathon coverage every June because no Manitoba woman has been able to catch her, although competitors will try Sunday.

"I'm proud that it's still me," she says of her record. "But I'm sorry no one has broken it."

McKay also ran in the Olympic trials in Ottawa in 1984, hoping to secure a place on the team that would represent Canada at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. She placed 13th and didn't make the team, but the date was significant: the 1984 Summer Olympics were the first that held a women's marathon. It was the first year a young female runner such as McKay, who fell in love with distance running in high school, could have a shot at competing at the Olympic level.

It only took 88 years; the first men's Olympic marathon was held in 1896.

It was a long-held belief that women were "not physiologically able to run a marathon," lest our uteri fall out of our bodies and onto the road.

It was still a belief in 1966, when Bobbi Gibb hid in some bushes, jumped into the Boston Marathon, and become the first woman to run in (and finish) it.

And it was still a belief in 1967, when another interloper made history at the Boston Marathon. Kathrine Switzer became the first woman to race in Boston as an official numbered entry — but only because she entered under the gender-neutral K.V. Switzer. Women weren't officially allowed to race in the Boston Marathon until 1972.

Women have run in the Manitoba Marathon since its inception in 1979, but the culture has shifted around women and running in the last couple of

decades. Women are now outpacing men when it comes to marathon and race participation; a 2014 Running USA report said 61 per cent of half-marathon finishers in the U.S. were women. That's more than one million women.

As well, highly visible athletes, such as Canadian marathoners Lanni Marchant and Krista DuChene, are proof positive that "you run like a girl" is, indeed, a compliment.

Put another way, women are making up for lost time.

Though she was running at a time when women were fairly new to distance running, McKay says she was never made to feel less because she was a girl. "I could do the thing, so I did," she says, simply. "But I quite enjoyed beating men and boys in races."

When she was in her early 20s, she participated in a just-for-fun track race in Australia. Organizers thought she was younger than she was and put her with 17-year-old boys. "I could really hear the pain of them when I ran by on the track — like, all these young Australian males just crushed," she says with a laugh.

The Olympic trial in Ottawa was the last marathon McKay ever ran — injuries, motherhood, and a few years of under-employment made it impossible to commit to the rigorous training schedule. But she was instrumental in inspiring another young Manitoba woman to lace up her runners: her younger sister Cathy.

Cathy, now 51, and her sister had the same high school track coach, who Cathy says taught her a lot. "I ran, but not to the extent she did," Cathy says. "(Bev) was a quiet runner. She would show up at races, and no one would know who she was. She'd do very well, and then humbly go away. And that's the way she liked it. She might even kill me if she reads this article," she laughs.

For her part, Cathy mostly ran to keep fit in her 20s and 30s. When she was 39, she decided she wanted to run a marathon by 40. "I just Googled running groups," she said.

She was inspired, not discouraged, by the faster women. She wanted to run alongside them. "Runners, to me, are very humble, no matter what their time was — you all went through the same pain. I'm more appreciative of what I've done now that I'm not in it. When I look back I think, 'Who was the person who did all that?'"

Cathy has run 12 full marathons. She has qualified for Boston nine times and has run it twice.

She's noticed, anecdotally, that more women are running. "I see a huge boom in that. The women ratio in a lot of races is 49 per cent and it's creeping up every year.

It catches on." She says that's due to a few reasons, including the fact that there are more races to participate in, including charity and fun runs.

Kathy Wiens, 59, is the director of the Manitoba Runners' Association, a non-profit organization that advocates for road running. She has run 13 full marathons, including Boston, New York and Chicago. She got into running when she moved back to Winnipeg as a means to meet people. "I think with running that's a big part of the draw, the social aspect." She, too, has seen more women out on the road, but notes the association's race series still has more participation from men. She's noticed women tend to gravitate toward endurance as opposed to speed.

"There were a lot of things that were said in the '70s and early '80s about how women couldn't run because physically it would be really bad for them, it would have terrible consequences, they wouldn't be able to bear children," she says. "What's funny, as they've done more research over the years, they've discovered that women are better suited to long-distance stuff — like ultra marathons. Fat reserves, the ability to handle pain, all those things have made women better for longer distances."

Wiens also credits programs, such as those by the Running Room, with making running more accessible to everyone, not just women. "That's why so many more people are running half-marathons and marathons in Canada."

Bev doesn't run much these days due to a back injury, but she keenly remembers what she loved about it.

"The sense of fitness and power and speed," she says. "When you're travelling, you can see so much more of a city if you go out for a run. I've really enjoyed that over the years."