

RUNNING LEGENDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH GRETE WAITZ

By DON SIKORSKI
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There once was a time that women runners were forced to break social barriers and battle discrimination in order to prove that they were capable of competing in road races alongside their male counterparts. Grete Waitz, who turned 50 years old this month, was at the very forefront of that movement. Born in Oslo, Norway in 1953, a young Grete Anderson, inspired by the story of Wilma Rudolph, began her athletic career with 400 and 800 meter races, winning national junior titles in races considered to be long distance races for women at that time. In 1972, she earned a place on Norway's Olympic Team at 1500 meters at the age of 18. From there, Waitz continued to excel in the sport, becoming an international track star and twice setting a world record at 3,000 meters during the 1970's and turning that track ability into a superb cross-country career, earning five worlds XC titles in 7 years. But it was a trip to the United States that changed her career and altered the path of women's distance running.

Today, Grete Waitz is retired. In 1990, after an extraordinary career filled with national class victories, world records, and major championships, Waitz graciously walked away from competition in a sport that she not only excelled at, but pioneered. Although that decision to retire was permanent, it wasn't the first time that Waitz had planned on retiring. In 1978, at the recommendation of her husband Jack, the couple decided to take a trip to America. There was an event, the New York City Marathon, in which Waitz planned of participating in her farewell to the sport. With world class speed but a long training run of only 12 miles under her belt, Waitz boldly moved to the front of the women's race wearing bid #1173, and the rest is history. Despite her thoughts during the late miles ("I was really struggling and told myself that I'm never doing this again"), the results speak for themselves: a victory in a world record time of 2 hours, 32 minutes, a 29.8 seconds. Waitz would soon forget those words and return to New York a year later and win again, this time more prepared and with a seeded number, and broke her own world record, finishing 104th overall in 2:27:33 to become the first woman to run ever under 2 hours and 30 minutes in the marathon. Waitz lowered her own world's best again in 1980, running 2:25:42. They would be 3 of her 9 victories in the Big Apple. Even the Yankees don't win that often. And who could forget the moment of Waitz crossing the finish line of the 1992 New York City Marathon with the late Fred Lebow, the marathon's Race Director who in his courageous battle with brain cancer fulfilled a promise to finish the very same race that he had brought to national prominence. Waitz ran by his side every step of the way; a retired Olympic marathoner with a 2:24 best spending over 5½ hours on the very same streets that she had become a legend. It would be one of many outstanding contributions that Grete Waitz would make to the sport.

Today, Waitz and her husband split their residences between Norway and Gainesville, Florida. She runs about 35-40 miles per week and cross trains to "stay in shape". As far as her retirement from competition, Waitz walked away with no regrets. "I took a long time to make my decision; I wanted to make sure," said Waitz of her decision to stop racing. "After it was over, I felt relieved but also felt some uncertainty. I had been running and racing for so long. But I soon realized that I had more than two legs to stand on". Waitz's refreshing attitude about moving forward with her life incorporates all of the positive aspects of the sport while replacing the years of pounding, fatigue, and pressure to succeed. Waitz's continued involvement with running and physical fitness is as ambitious as her competitive career. She developed the Grete Waitz run in Norway (an all-women's race that attracts thousands of runners each year), is the spokeswoman for the J.P. Morgan Chase Corporate Challenge Run, and is the Chairwoman for the New York City Marathon Women's Foundation, an organization that helps inner city kids in New York City get involved with running. "I got used to not running 100 miles per week, but I kept all of the good things and left the pressure behind."

Despite her amazing accomplishments, Waitz remains one of the sports most respected and modest competitors. In addition to her New York victories, Waitz's credentials also include a total of five Olympic teams, a win in the first ever Women's World Marathon Championship race in 1983, and a silver medal in the 1984 Olympic Marathon. However, she cites her longevity and quality of her race efforts as her greatest accomplishments. She consistently ran world class times on the track, the roads, cross-country, and at the marathon distance while holding down a full-time job as high school teacher. And Waitz was proud in victory and modest in defeat. Favored to win the first ever Olympic Women's Marathon, Waitz was upstaged by an outstanding effort from Joan Benoit. Waitz and Benoit have continued their close friendship since their competitive days, with Grete being the godmother of Benoit's youngest child. "If I was going to lose an Olympic Gold Medal, I couldn't have lost to a nicer person," said Waitz of her historic race with Benoit.

Grete Waitz will follow her appearance at the Mystic Places Marathon with a return visit to New York and the 2003 ING New York City Marathon, celebrating the 25th anniversary of his first marathon. I don't know of a more deserving person of recognition for her contributions to the sport than Grete Waitz. Reflecting back on her training regime, Waitz feels that as a competitive distance runner, she often fell into the trap that many runners do. "I was stubborn and was often too hard on myself", she rationalizes. "Most competitive runners probably do too much and we feel like we are invincible, which leads to injury." On the flip side, she often works with beginner runners who set their expectations too high, not realizing the amount of dedication required to run competitive times. Her advice for newcomers? "Running should become a long term thing. Make it a part of your lifestyle. Running is a great activity," says Waitz. "I still get the same satisfaction of accomplishment no matter how fast I run. Don't expect to enjoy every run, but enjoy what running does for you". Grete Waitz is one of the nicest people that I have had the honor to speak with. And no one has done more for the sport of running than Grete Waitz.

Racing Roundup

Eric Blake, the 1996 State Open XC Champion from Lyman Memorial, won the 2003 Steamtown (PA) Marathon and qualified for the Olympic Trials by virtue of his 2:21 finish in his marathon debut.

This Month in History

October 31st, 1997 – Norwich Free Academy earns 3rd place finishes in both the Boys and the Girls race at the CIAC Cross-Country State Open Championship at Manchester's Wickham Park. The Wildcats, led by Molly Burnett's 6th place finish, finish with 159 points behind champion E.O. Smith (77) and runner-up New Milford (150). Fitch's Jessica Schenk, 35th a year ago as a freshman, wins the first of her three consecutive state open titles, crossing the finish line in 15:15 and leading the Falcons to a 9th place team finish. Runner-up Megan Coombs of Griswold finishes only 2 seconds back, while local runners Heather Edwards of Killingly (16th), East Lyme's Dorothy Beinhoff (17th), and Sarah Hackett of St. Bernard (18th) also earned All-State honors. In the Boys competition, Ridgefield's Matt Gioffre is the overall winner in 15:58, outrunning Ren Provey of Fairfield (16:04) and Xavier's Neal D'Amato (16:07). Fairfield Prep's winning team total of 65 points is well ahead of runner-up Xavier (127). NFA, led by Julian Callender (12th), Chris Andrew (22nd), and Tim Simkowski (28th), earns 142 points for 3rd place. St. Bernard junior Daryl Giard is the top local runner, finishing 11th overall, with Fitch posting a strong 5th place score, led by All-State performers Steve Taylor (15th) and Ben Smith (20th). NFA's Andrew would go on to finish 4th as a junior and win the Open in a photo finish with Xavier's Tyler Cardinal in 1999.

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