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Out of the Kitchen and Into the Streets

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La course de fond chez la femme: un phénomène social durant les années 70.

When I was growing up in the Sixties, I never dreamed that I would become involved in a sport. Sports were reserved for those lucky enough to be born talented—or male.

Things have changed. Now it is not only possible for women to be engaged in sport and exercise, but we are seeing an activity—running—that is attracting the traditionally most 'unlikely' candidates—the overweight, mothers and older women.

Women have been running for years in Canada, in small numbers in track and cross-country, mostly in schools. However, until the last five years, they have been kept from running distances much over one mile by social convention, psychological barriers and even economic pressures. Now thousands are running daily distances from one mile to ten and women are beginning to enter races in ever increasing numbers.

Who are all these women who are running for fitness, for personal development, for a challenge, for time to themselves? Most recreational women runners come from backgrounds devoid of previous athletic experience. Like most women, they have had few chances to participate in athletics, unless they were very talented. Running is appealing as an inexpensive, self-reliant and easily accessible form of recreation. Exercise is attracting thousands of previously relatively sedentary and 'non-athletic' women, including many mothers.

There is also a trend among older women to begin running. The first Canadian women masters (over 35 years) race was held in September 1979 in Toronto. While it attracted only 38 women, it was the first of its kind and heralded a greater recognition of the need for opportunities for older women to compete against both

themselves and each other.

Races, which were oriented to competitive running in the 1960s, drew only small numbers of women and often had no women's divisions. In contrast, today, races often draw participants numbering in the thousands. The majority of these are still men, but the percentage of women is growing. The Toronto Star Trek (20 km), which attracted 2500 participants, was 13 per cent female in 1979. The Toronto Diet Pepsi Fun Run (10 km) had 2097 finishers in 1979, 20 per cent of whom were women. Participation in marathon running¹ is also growing. In 1978, 234 Canadian women ran marathons in Canada and the U.S.²

Before the birth of the feminist movement in the late Sixties and early Seventies, it was believed that women were physically weak creatures who could easily do damage to their reproductive

systems if they engaged in strenuous physical activity. Races over 400 metres for women were cancelled after the 1928 Olympics when the women arrived at the finish line of the 800 metre race in a 'state of great distress.' (They were not resumed until 1960. Currently, the longest women's race in the Olympics is 1500 metres, added in 1972.)

Not only were women considered weak, but those who were active were assumed to be 'less than real women.' This is evidenced by the demand since 1968 for all female Olympic competitors to undergo sex-identifying tests, and by the fear many women had of being labelled unfeminine or lesbian if they participated in physical sports. The Women's Movement began to break down these myths of female weakness. Women were no longer content to watch men run. They began to do it themselves.

The practical barriers women still face include difficulties in scheduling time due to family, child care and job pressures; fear of harassment from men (both verbal and physical); and finding transportation to run in safer or more scenic areas.

Psychological barriers range from embarrassment at being seen running in daylight hours (particularly if one is overweight or older) to guilt at choosing a run over housework or husband.

With these barriers, why has running become so popular among women? A U.S. study by the Harvard Business School showed a growth of 30 to 40 per cent among women runners in 1978, with a corresponding growth of only 10 per cent among men. Comparable statistics have not yet been gathered in Canada, but these probably reflect the trend here. In a 1976 Statistics Canada study, 1 million women (compared to 1.5 million men) ran or jogged at least once in the month preceding the study.

This growth can be attributed to several factors. First, as mentioned, there has been the tremendous impact of the Women's Movement on both the individual woman and society at large. Federal and provincial governments have initiated or supported many programs aimed at getting people exercising.³ The 1976 Olympics, held in Canada, inspired many women to begin running, and Olympic-calibre athletes like Abby Hoffman, Diane Jones Konihowski and Debbie Van Kickibelt have been models for many women. As the opportunities have grown to run with others, to race and to meet other women who share in the same activity, so too have the num-

bers of women participating increased.

A development of the last two years has enabled hundreds of women to run together—women-only races. Sponsored mostly by large cosmetics companies, these 10 and 20 km races have attracted up to 1800 women at a time. Limiting races to women has allowed better competition among the lead runners (they can see who they are racing against) and offers a supportive women-oriented atmosphere. Community-based organizations such as the Women Teachers of Etobicoke in Ontario are beginning to organize their own races, recognizing the need to keep profit-making motives from dominating women's racing.

As well as being interested in racing opportunities, many women are getting together to share information, give mutual support and meet other women runners. They are forming clubs in cities from Toronto to Vancouver in order to meet these needs. Toronto Women Running, the country's oldest and largest women's running club, is organizing a Canadian branch of the North American Network of Women Runners to promote women's running and the growth of women's running clubs. Clubs, Y's and individual women are taking action on such issues as safety on the streets and the exploitation of women's running by large corporations as well as lobbying for a woman's marathon in the Olympics and workplace support of running and other fitness programs.

The growth of these initiatives points towards a new level of involvement by women. In the last few years, this has mainly centred around the fitness runner—with a positive, anyone-can-do-it approach. Now many of these fitness runners are becoming interested in developing their potential to run faster and longer distances. Long distance coaching, particularly by and for women, is still very difficult to come by. These new racers are beginning to pose questions that need to be answered. Now that it's becoming acceptable for women to run for fun and fitness, what happens as we want to develop our competitive spirit? Will this remain a 'man's domain'? Will the gap between women's and men's times continue to decrease as rapidly as it has in recent years?

This decade has seen the development of programs, clubs and opportunities for women who would like to run for their own fitness and pleasure. Those who want to run for competition present the challenge for the next few years. When no woman is laughed at or harassed when

running on the streets, when every woman has the time and opportunity to develop her own physical potential and when coaching, racing and scholarships are as available to women as they are to men, then women's running will have come of age.

Notes

1. A marathon race is 42 km or 26 miles and 385 yards long.
2. Eleanor Thomas, *1979 Canadian Marathon Annual* (Ottawa: E. Thomas, Canadian Marathon Annual, 1979).
3. According to the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, in 1974 women aged 15-29 showed the poorest level of cardio-respiratory fitness of any Canadian group.

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Booklets

Breaking the Barriers A Women's Approach to Running, by Ellen Agger and Dorothy Kidd, with an introduction by Abby Hoffman.

Women's Running, by Ellen Agger.

Poster

Run For Yourself (includes a listing of women's running clubs across Canada).

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