

Joan Benoit Samuelson

No Guts, No Glory

Joan Benoit Samuelson is one of the all-time greatest marathoners the world has ever seen. Her dedication and courageous running took her to the top of the running world, making history in the process. Joan took to long distance running to help recover from a broken leg suffered while skiing.

At Bowdoin College, she excelled in athletics for two years and then transferred to North Carolina State to focus on running, earning All-America honors. She entered the 1979 Boston Marathon as a relative unknown. She won the race in 2:35:15, taking eight minutes off the course record. She repeated that success with a record-setting victory again in 1983, taking more than two minutes off the world's best time.

In the months leading up to the 1984 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials, Joan was hampered by a knee injury. With just 17 days to go before the Olympic Trials race, Joan visited an orthopedic surgeon, who advised her to have an arthroscopic procedure to release the plica, a small band of tissue that was causing her knee to lock. Joan took his advice, had the surgery and the day after surgery immediately got back into training, working out on a hand ergometer (moving pedals with your hands and arms). Amazingly, just 17 days later, Joan made the U.S. Olympic marathon team.

History was made at the 1984 Olympic Games hosted by Los Angeles. It was the first ever women's Olympic Marathon. Women had come a long way since 1928, when it was deemed too exhaustive for women to run over 200 meters in a race. The field included marathon legends Grete Waitz, Rosa Mota, and Ingrid Kristianson. Few of the Olympic runners knew who Joan was, so when she went to the lead early, they didn't worry about her and hung back. In the hot and smoggy conditions, the small runner with a big heart and desire continued to pound out mile after mile and won the first Olympic women's marathon in a time of 2:24:52, more than a minute ahead of her rivals.

Joan has continued to be a role model for women's running. She has written books and is a motivational speaker and a coach. She still runs competitively and for fun. At the age of 50 she ran the 2008 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials in 2:48:08, making her the only woman to run sub-2:50 marathons over five decades.

A pioneer in women's distance running, Joan qualified for seven Olympic Marathon Trials. She is an inspiration to women and runners throughout the world that with dreams and dedication, challenging goals can be achieved.

Questions for Thought:

1. How did Joan handle her injuries?
2. Although not the race favorite, how did Joan approach the Olympic Marathon in 1984?
3. How can you run with guts to achieve the glory?