

Welcome to “History on the Fly,” a podcast series offered by the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is titled *Quilt with a Story* by Lynette Miller.

Women can’t run marathons – their bodies just can’t take it! They might injure themselves and be unable to have children. We can laugh at these statements today as we watch women run in the New York and Boston marathons or in the Olympics, but this discriminatory attitude was official policy less than 25 years ago.

The women’s movement of the 1970s affected many areas of women’s lives, including sports. The passage of Title IX legislation in 1972 equalized funding for men’s and women’s sports in schools, colleges and universities, but women were still excluded from running marathons. Of course a woman could run the marathon alone, for her own satisfaction, but sports require competition, the opportunity to measure one’s self against others. Women were denied this opportunity.

In the 1960s and 1970s women began to run clandestinely in the New York and Boston marathons. They joined the race after it began and ran until officials pulled them off the course. Some women were shielded by sympathetic male runners who surrounded them and kept officials away until they reached the finish line. The New York marathon was the first to officially accept women runners in 1971 and finally, in 1984, the women’s marathon was included as an Olympic event.

The qualifying time trials for the first Olympic women’s marathon were held in Olympia, Washington on May 12, 1984. The 26.2 mile course ran from Olympia to Tumwater to Lacey and ended near Capitol Lake in Olympia. Two hundred thirty-eight runners competed to determine who would be the first American women to run in the first women’s Olympic marathon.

Hosting the Olympic time trials was a huge event for Olympia, Washington. Much bigger cities, Los Angeles, New York, Buffalo, and Kansas City, had been in contention to hold this event. From the day in December 1982 when the site selection committee chose Olympia, the community threw itself into planning this big event. Small businesses geared up to sell commemorative T-shirts to race watchers and to serve food to the press corps and other visitors.

The race went very smoothly with approximately 50,000 people watching. Before the race, the most buzz had surrounded Joan Benoit, a runner from Maine who had set a world record for the women’s marathon in 1983. In the time trials, she qualified to represent the U.S. in the 1984 Los Angeles games with a time of 2 hours, 31 minutes, 4 seconds. She won by a margin of 37 seconds over the second qualifier, Julie Brown. Both women had been expected to qualify, but the third woman, Julie Isphording, was a surprise since she had ranked 45th at the start of the race.

Of course the three women who qualified to run in the Olympic games weren’t the whole story. Among the other stories were the oldest woman in the race, a 54 year old nun from San Francisco. The youngest was a sixteen year old from New Hampshire. And two of

the runners were six months pregnant. These women and all the other runners pretty conclusively squashed the idea that women can't run marathons. To quote a headline from *The Olympian* newspaper, "Sexist myths fall by the wayside."

Many tributes were paid to the women marathon runners, among them a quilt made by the Olympia Junior Women's Club. It was displayed at the athletes' banquet at the beginning of the time trials event. Now in the collection of the Washington State Historical Society, the quilt was donated after the time trials ended. It is currently displayed at the Washington State History Museum in the *Washington's Historic Quilts* exhibit.

The quilt is comprised of 15 blocks that were made by 15 different community groups using a variety of methods. These blocks alternate with blocks of blue and white checked fabric and there is a red white and blue border around the edge of the quilt.

As you might expect, several women's groups in addition to the Junior Women's Club contributed blocks to the quilt. The Altrusa Club, Soroptimist International, the Olympia Federated Women's Club, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Temple Beth Hatfiloh Sisterhood, and the American Business Women's Association made blocks that are embroidered, pieced, or appliquéd.

Many other groups also contributed blocks to the quilt. Among them are the Sons of Norway (a fraternal organization for Norwegian Americans) who contributed an embroidered block representing a Viking ship. The Pioneer travel club of the Elks, the local Toastmaster's club, the Tumwater Council of the Boy Scouts of America, Boy Scout Troop 202 and a first grade class from Black Lake Elementary School also made blocks for the quilt.

One of the most unusual blocks is a piece of smocked fabric made by the Puget Sound Smocking Guild. Smocking is made by pleating fabric and then embroidering decorative stitches to hold the pleats in place. But perhaps the most unlikely group to contribute a block is the Capitol City Bowmen, an archery and bowhunting organization. Their block is made from the club's patch stitched to a piece of camouflage fabric. This quilt represents the Olympia community and its support for the first women marathoners.

And who was the winner of the gold medal in the first Olympic women's marathon in Los Angeles? It was Joan Benoit, the American runner from Maine. Grete Waitz of Norway took the silver medal and Rosa Mota of Portugal, the bronze. But I suspect all the women felt like winners because they were able to compete in the first Olympic woman's marathon. Since the first timed women's marathon was run in 1926, many women had struggled just to be able to compete in this event. The Nike ad on the back of the time trials program booklet said it all, "Finally."

The exhibition "Washington's Historic Quilts" will be on display at the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, WA, September 15 through December 2, 2007. Lynette

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