

Forgetting Millie Sampson: Collective Frameworks for Historical Memory

Anne-Marie Jutel [Otago Polytechnic]

Athletic feats have a curious way of belonging both to personal and collective memory, while sometimes, and sometimes not, inscribing themselves in history. We remember sporting events in terms where we were and what we were doing at the time, while statisticians, politicians, journalists and educators ensure the community basks in the reflected glory of “our” boys and what “we” did to the (fill in name of any opposing team).

Few who witnessed the event in person or on television will forget Bob Beamon’s leap into history at the Mexico City Olympics: where they were and with whom they were watching when they saw him make the beamonesque leap. How could someone stay airborne for so long? It was described and re-described by the commentators as being beyond belief. In terms of emotional impact it could be compared to the unexpected last-second goal which brought the English soccer team victory in 1966, an event which is replayed ad nauseam, with commentary commemorated both in the title of a television show and the lyrics of a song, is inscribed in the memory of even those who weren’t yet born, as a kind of false collective remembering. Similar earlier feats, announced to most by radio or newspaper – Hillary’s ascent of Everest, or Bannister’s sub-four minute mile, for example – remain a different kind of memory: not visual perhaps, but rather an “I’ll never forget what I was doing when I read (heard). . .”

Everyday history is intermingled with sporting memories, not always accurately recalled. I distinctly remember the disappearance of French navigator Alain Colas as he undertook the solitary transatlantic race, the Route du Rhum. Every noon, I listened to the news on the national radio station, France Inter. Each report started with the customary jingle, followed by a count of days since the last contact. I know exactly where I was during this time. I can see myself preparing lunch, holding my breath as I listen to the radio tracking the tragedy. But curiously, I see myself in the kitchen of my apartment on rue de l’Hippodrome where I moved in 1982. A brief internet search on Alain Colas, however, confirms that he disappeared in 1978 – an important discrepancy. How in the world can I connect these two events – me making lunch at the rue de l’Hippodrome, and the daily announcement of the search for Colas four years earlier?

It’s the France Inter jingle that provides the link. To this day, I cannot hear that jingle without thinking about

Alain Colas. Listening to the radio in my new apartment was in fact, already a throw-back. Making lunch is probably a memory from 1986, when I still lived rue de l’Hippodrome and had a year off of work to stay home with my baby girl. It was then that I could listen to the lunchtime news daily, hear the jingle and remember the Colas tragedy eight years earlier. Today, I remember myself remembering Alain Colas, the second memory replacing the first. However, nothing replaces the impact that Colas’ disappearance had on me. His disappearance changed the meaning of the radio jingle irrevocably.

Neil Garnham suggests that the power of those experiences that become engraved in our individual and collective memories may be related to the instantaneous connection between the extraordinary and the mundane; it was always lunchtime, such an ordinary event, but a lunchtime punctuated by the extraordinary: Colas’ bravery and demise. Sporting moments, be they tragedies, victories or superhuman efforts, have an important place in our collective remembering. This is due, I surmise, to three important factors. Firstly, as mentioned above, and particularly in the context of the mediatisation of sporting performance, they help define who we are. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in his seminal work on collective memory, points out that historical memory which is external to the life of the individual, brings an individual’s focus inward, “mak[ing] its imprint, nonetheless on a given day at a given time, and the sign of this imprint will remind me of the day or the time, but the imprint in and of itself is a superficial demarcation, made outside and without any relationship to my personal memory and my . . . reactions” (Halbwachs 1997: 106). Halbwachs focuses on the importance of the collective in the construction of individual memory. “the representation of things which individual memory evokes is simply a means for us to recognise the collective representation of these same things.” (86) In other words, no recollections can be said to be purely interior or individual.

Secondly, sporting moments are notable for their quantifiability: you can time them, measure them, score them, and then put them in a record book. You can compare, contrast and define thus the absolute-ness of their impact, such as the case of a 29’2 ½” long jump that stands for twenty three years?

Third and finally, and perhaps most significantly, the importance of the sporting moment is reinforced by

the role it plays in providing us with collective identity. Billig describes the sport pages and how they remind people of who they are: "On the Monday . . . a swirling flurry of flags was waving for 'us,' 'our victories' and 'our heroes.'" (Billig 1995: 120). National health is described in terms of sporting success, and the flag waving that accompanies them is a reminder of the homeland and the nation, facilitating and producing a sense of collective identity. Wars and political conflicts may serve this same purpose, but we play far more international games of football than we fight military battles.

Sporting memories are particularly pivotal in the identity of a small country such as New Zealand, where supermarket chains make their staff wear the national rugby team colour on test match days, and where a world cup rugby loss is treated as if it were a national tragedy. However, even in a country which is obsessed by sport, not all unusual, surprising or exceptional feats of prowess are retained in the collective memory.

A case in point is the women's marathon. In 1964 a young Auckland woman named Millie Sampson ran the marathon to humour a friend. With minimal preparation and marginal focus she jogged out as if on a training run, and finished by setting a world best time by almost nine minutes. It had not gone unnoticed; the biggest New Zealand newspaper duly reported her exploits on the front page two days later. But forty years later this particular event has been forgotten. Even the most zealous athletics statisticians have forgotten that the race and the record ever took place.

Contrast this with the efforts of Kathrine Switzer who finished the 1967 Boston Marathon in approximately four hours and twenty minutes, despite being physically attacked by the race organizer in the opening miles of the event. Switzer's boyfriend's efforts saved her from being ejected from the race; she went on to complete the course in a time more than one hour slower than the record achieved by Sampson three years prior. Newspapers from Boston to Los Angeles plastered Switzer's picture on their pages and the story regularly re-surfaces in running publications all over the world. Switzer's very public running of the Boston Marathon is often credited with being the catalyst for introducing women to the world of marathoning, despite the fact that she wasn't even the first woman to run in the event. Roberta Gibb had unofficially run the Boston marathon in 1966 and ran again in the 1967 race, finishing at least an hour before Switzer. Although the press picked up on her participation as well, like Sampson, her results faded from public consciousness and are rarely cited as pivotal in the acceptance and popularity of the contemporary women's event.

The argument I will make is that the recognition of the

event's significance and its consequent incorporation in the collective memory of athletic performance was not possible because a framework for remembering high-performance women marathoners was not available. A framework for memory, as described by Halbwachs, must be in line with the dominant values of the society, or its "social logic." Sampson's performances, like Gibbs' and unlike Switzer's, could not be reconciled with the dominant construction of female runners, and as a result, they have faded from our collective remembering.

Another Marathon

Kathrine Switzer was an active athletic girl who played a number of sports. On her father's advice, she took up running a mile a day in high school to condition herself for field hockey. At university, she ended up giving up her team sports, but persisting with running. In the course of her running, she encountered Arnie Briggs, a regular marathoner. He had run the Boston Marathon eighteen times, and eulogized the event. As she became fitter, running ten miles a night, she announced to Briggs that she wanted to run the Boston Marathon, 'the 'once before I die' kind of thing' as she described it later (Switzer 1978). Briggs was less than enthusiastic, suggesting that 'women can't run the marathon!' (Switzer 1993). Switzer finally convinced him to let her enter the race if she could cover the 26 miles in practice. The day of her 'test' she ran the 26 miles, and then tacked on an extra five for good measure. After the 31 mile training run Briggs, unlike Switzer, collapsed from fatigue. Convinced of her fitness and unaware that women were barred from participating in the event, Briggs entered Switzer in the Boston Marathon; she signed the form as KV Switzer, her usual signature. Her boyfriend, Thomas Miller, a hammer-thrower, decided to join Briggs and Switzer in the marathon.

Switzer started the race with heavy clothing, but as the weather cleared, she took off her hood and her heavy sweatshirt. As the press truck moved up from the back of the pack several journalists noticed Switzer and informed one of the race organisers that a woman was running. Jock Semple, the official in question, jumped off the truck and ran after Switzer, trying to rip the race number from her shirt and remove her from the race, but her boyfriend intervened and aggressively blocked Semple, in full view of the press corps, allowing Switzer to finish the event.

The next morning, pictures of the event appeared in the global media. Titles and story line focussed on the absurdity of a woman running a marathon, and on the protective role of her chivalrous male running partners. The New York Times describes Briggs 'coming to the rescue' and Miller 'throwing a block that tosses the official out of the running instead' (New York Times 20 April 1967: 55). The Otago Daily Times described

how 'three of her male team mates from the Syracuse (New York) Harriers Club formed a ring around her and she ran off with the pack'(1967: 1). The Atlanta Constitution referred to a 'human barricade' formed by team mates Arnold Briggs, Everett Rice and Thomas Miller to keep Switzer in the race (Associated Press 1967).

In response to Switzer's run, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the governing body for athletics and road running in the United States, suspended her from further competition. It based its decision on the premises that she had entered the race fraudulently, that she had run in a race with men, she had run in a race of more than 1½ miles, and she had run the Boston Marathon without a chaperone.

Millie Sampson's performance, on the other hand, while initially publicly noted, rapidly fell out of both public and specialised consciousness. It was only by accident that I found an account of a "Mrs. McKenzie" of New Zealand, whose unofficial world best time of 3:18 was noted in a history of women's running (Rhodes 1978: 247). I was neither aware of this world best performance, nor of a prominent New Zealand athlete named "Mrs. McKenzie."

I contacted Peter Heidenstrom, statistician for Athletics New Zealand, and sports writer, who had published the book *Athletes of the Century: 100 Years of New Zealand Track and Field*. He didn't remember a Mrs McKenzie, but suggested it was probably Millie Sampson, who had run a world record time at the Owairaka Marathon in December 1964. Undoubtedly, the error was the result of the conflation of the name of a prominent male marathoner from New Zealand at the time, David McKenzie, winner of the 1964 Boston Marathon.

The International Amateur Athletics Federation placed the date of her race as 21 July 1964, in their log of world best performances (Megede and Hymans 1995: 259), but there was no record of a marathon being held in New Zealand on that date, which fell on a Tuesday: not a typical day to stage a race. I contacted Millie Sampson to see if she could fill me in; she was very happy to talk about her race, but not much better at providing details. She remembered it being after cross country season, and recalls that it was reported in the newspapers, but she had lost the clipping a number of years ago.

Sampson's story was that in 1964 the New Zealand Olympic marathon runner, Ivan Keats, approached her and suggested she run a marathon. Keats' marathon club was organising a race, and as a prominent female track runner. He felt that Sampson could attract some interest to the event and the club. Moreover, Keats had heard about an unofficial world best for the distance, and believed that Sampson was not only capable of running the full length, but was possibly

able to better the existing record of 3:37 (Milvey 1977), which he thought to be ridiculously slow, "even for a woman."

Sampson reduced the world record by over seven minutes with relative ease, even taking the time to stop and eat an ice cream and a piece of chocolate six miles from the finish. But Keats' hopes that this effort would call attention to the club were not realized. Although on the Tuesday following the event the New Zealand Herald announced 'Housewife runs record marathon' (New Zealand Herald 1964) and recorded her exploit on the first page of the newspaper, all serious interest in her race quickly evaporated. No other daily paper in New Zealand covered her record, and even the specialist running magazine, *New Zealand Athlete*, made no mention of her race, at the time, or in future references to her athletic history.

How can we make sense of Millie Sampson's omission from, and Kathryn Switzer's inclusion in, memories of the women's marathon? Although Kathryn Switzer wasn't a particularly good athlete at the time, she was pretty and diminutive, and required the gallant protection of her burly boyfriend. Millie Sampson, on the other hand did not have children, wasn't married, and did not need protection. The media described her as a mother, which she was not, and focussed on her dancing and eating the night before. Some years later, she became "Mrs McKenzie, the wife of a famous New Zealand runner.

The diminution and forgetting of Sampson's achievement was repressed in the case of Robert Gibbs. Gibbs was circumspect about her performance, even though it, no less than Sampson's race, did not go unnoticed. She had, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "created a furor [sic] in 1966 – first by running, then by covering the course in 3:21.5, a good deal better than a lot of men" (*Los Angeles Times* 20 April 1967: III/2). The French newspaper *Le Monde* reported her time and place in its "Vie Sportive" pages as if it were an official result, and makes no mention of Switzer (*Le Monde* 1967:12). But when Gibbs was asked in post-race interviews if she wanted to be an official contestant, she replied casually, "It doesn't matter. It's just fun to race" (*Los Angeles Times* 1967:III/2).

Gibbs did not attach any symbolic importance to her efforts, and shied away from the limelight and suggested she knew her place as a woman. "I'm afraid people will thinking I'm butting in or something." She ventured. "I mean, I thought people enjoyed my running last year, but now I'm not so sure. I'm kind of shy by nature and I don't want to cause a furor [sic]." (*New York Times* 1967: 55) Her mother added in the same report that "Roberta doesn't want to break any barriers. She's not interested in competing against the men. She simply enjoys running with others." Gibbs saw herself as "an autonomous woman, doing some-

thing by herself, for spiritual reasons. I did it for love and not for money, which threatens lots of basic assumptions.” The media quickly let her be, she felt, because her actions did not follow what they expected: “I was not competitive. The press writes about what it can understand. It likes conflict and drama, and my run was not understandable as self-promotion”(Gibbs 2000).

Switzer's case may have been easier for the public and media to understand, or at least identify with. Firstly, it is important to recognise that the presence of the media, and notably, of photographer, Harry Trask, rendered the event particularly visible and attention-grabbing; the famous photographic sequence shows a livid man in plain clothes attacking an obviously-distressed female. The photograph offered striking evidence of masculine resentment in a the form of meet director Will Cloney's angry reaction to “American girls forc[ing] their way into something where they're neither eligible, nor wanted... All rules throughout the world bar girls from running more than a mile and a half.” (Los Angeles Times 1967: III/2).

The event constituted an incursion into the previously male domain of road running, while conferring traditional gender roles; but it also highlighted the flagrant injustice of the situation. It demanded a response, which may have been a factor in Switzer insisting upon the significance of her performance and the retention of the event in the collective, popular, and media consciousness.

Halbwachs suggests that for something to be collectively remembered there must be a seed sown to draw the many versions of an event together: “In the same way that you must introduce a catalyst into a saturated solution for it to crystallise, the seed of remembrance is required to bring the range of reports together in one consistent memory.” (Halbwachs 1990: 55) While there may be a number of potential and concurrent explanations for the crystallisation of collective memory, Switzer's personal narrative and organised response at the time of, and subsequent to, her performance is clearly a factor. The narrative Switzer adopted was one which highlighted the significance not of her performance, but of a female foray into a previously male-dominated domain.

While the newspapers focussed on the more attention-grabbing aspects of the event, particularly the attempted assault and “rescue,” Switzer herself focussed on issues of gender politics. The Los Angeles Times features two shots of Switzer being attacked by Semple, with the caption ‘Chivalry prevails’, and describing how Miller ‘comes to her rescue’ (Los Angeles Times 1967: III/2). The New York Times reported that her presence ‘delighted the male runners;’ but asked, ‘What is a girl, a former beauty contestant, doing in a marathon?’; and referred to her ‘soft brown hair and

winsome look’ and ‘her big, brown eyes.’ (New York Times 23 April 1967: 67) Two pictures of Switzer accompanied the article: one, a professional portrait of a highly made-up Switzer with a plunging neckline and dangling earrings, and the other a head shot of her in the Boston marathon. Similarly, the Globe's coverage emphasized the womanly charms, or the feminine nature of the female participants, referring to ‘pretty Kathy Switzer’ (Boston Globe 20 April 1967: 52), ‘Kathy, a fair damsel from Syracuse’ (Boston Globe 20 April 1967: 1), and ‘Bobby Lou Gibb . . . the blue-eyed blonde who [started] the whole ‘Marathon woman’ bit’(Boston Globe 20 April 1967: 52).

In contrast, Switzer wanted to “see if I'm good,” and indeed expressed strong feelings about the barriers she didn't know existed until Semple tried to oust her from the race.

I think it's time to change the rules. They are archaic. Women can run, and they can still be women and look like women. I think the AAU will begin to realize this and put in longer races for women . . . I'm glad I ran – you know, equal rights and all that (New York Times 23 April 1967: 67)

Switzer took up the challenge of overcoming this kind of gender-biased discrimination. She founded the Syracuse Track club and encouraged women to join. Using her skills in journalism and public relations, she made women's inclusion in running events her professional focus, launching the Avon women's running series and the world first all-women's marathon in London, covering women's events in Runners' World, lobbied the IOC for the inclusion of the women's marathon on the athletics programme, and broadcasting coverage of women's events. There was never any doubt in Switzer's mind about the importance of her first experience of the marathon, and she made that clear through her words and her actions (Athletics: An Interview 2003).

However a significant and memorable athletic performance, such as Bob Beamon's long-jump record, is easily inscribed and retained in the collective memory because there are frameworks present which facilitate the process, such as the carefully maintained record book. For Switzer, on the other hand, there was a substantial context to support her personal narrative and the recognition of her achievement. The performances of Sampson and Gibb, on the other hand, were denied both athletic valorisation and media attention, and were viewed as oddities, more Guinness Book of World Records feats than athletic accomplishments.

The context of Kathrine Switzer's performance, particularly the brutality of Semple's reaction to her participation, and the subsequent banning of Switzer

by the AAU, made a response possible. The “equal rights and all that” to which Switzer refers is a reflection of a growing social consciousness of women’s ability to engage in activities previously thought to be reserved for men. To some extent, the publicly-noted but rapidly-forgotten exploits of Sampson and Gibbs simply set the stage for Switzer. One way or the other it is clear that neither Sampson nor Gibb promoted the significance of their respective performances, and either as a result of, or concomitantly with this, their role in early women’s marathoning has not been commemorated to the same degree as Switzer’s. This is one of the greatest challenges facing emerging sports, and women sports in particular, given their later arrival on the public stage: to be taken seriously enough to be remembered takes a specific set of circumstances that may have little or nothing to do with the question of athletic merit.

Notes

1. According to the International Olympic Committee web site, the word “beamomnesque” was coined in response to the legendary jump, and now refers to any athletic feat so dramatically superior to those previous that it defies the imagination. (www.olympic.org/uk/athletes/heroes/bio_uk.asp?PAR_I_ID=18108 downloaded 18/12/2003)
2. According to Switzer, Miller’s decision to run was based on the stubborn idea that if she could run, then of course, he could!
3. Set by Merry Lepper in the Western hemisphere Marathon, Culver City California. Nina Kuscsik, ‘The History of Women’s Participation in the Marathon,’ in Paul Milvy, Ed. *The Marathon: Physiological, Epidemiological and Psychological Studies* New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1977 (p. 866).
4. Curiously, Millie was not a housewife, nor did she have any children, however the PA article published in the Otago Daily Times (18 August 1964) refers to her as a “Manurewa housewife and mother” and comments that she has two children (p.1).

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