



The Otter Valley – one of the views from the marathon route

## **Devon countryside and coast path to host inaugural Women Can marathon**

A new women-only marathon has been announced for the UK in 2017 to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a famous incident which helped pave the way for women to be able to officially take part in marathons.

The Women Can marathon on 28 May 2017 is almost entirely off-road, taking in the breathtaking Otter and Sid Valleys and part of the South West Coast Path on the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site in East Devon. Largely rural, the course also includes picturesque Devon villages and the towns of Sidmouth and Ottery St Mary.

As well as the full 26.2 mile marathon, there are also relays for two or four people and the event is also open to Nordic walkers. Entries are being restricted to 300, with relay teams counting as one entry.

The idea for the marathon came from three experienced endurance runners and event organisers from East Devon, Jo Earlam, Pauline Beare and Peg Wiseman.

Jo, who's run over 50 marathons in the past decade, initially suggested the idea while planning a marathon to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her local playing field in Tipton St John, where the event starts and finishes.

“It was when I was doing some research into other milestones in 1967 that I spotted it was also the year that Kathrine Switzer ran the Boston Marathon. It was like a light bulb moment: why don't we organise a marathon on this route to mark both of these occasions?”

"I've run all of the course at some point over the years, taking in different sections of it for training," added Jo. "I've always thought that if you bolted all the bits together it would make a fantastic route for a marathon. When I measured it and found it could be done to match exactly 26.2 miles, it seemed like it was just meant to be.

"It's a challenging route, not a course to be thinking about doing a personal best, but that's not what this marathon is about. It's about being part of it, enjoying the course and the company. And I'm asking the men to show their support for us and for the message it sends out by being our marshals, our support team, manning our water stations – and yes, guys even making the tea!"

Switzer famously entered the men-only Boston Marathon in 1967 by signing her name on the entry form as KV Switzer. She managed to complete the 26.2 miles despite being manhandled by marathon officials who tried to throw her off the course. Although there were instances of women running marathons before, they were usually unofficial. The photos and resulting furore following the 1967 Boston Marathon was a major turning point in advancing women's endurance running.

"It changed everything," said Jo, "and to discover that within my lifetime it was considered that women were incapable of running a marathon came as a complete shock. I can't believe that such a belief was held until so recently. In fact the women's marathon only became an Olympic event in 1984 and it wasn't until 1972 that the Boston Marathon allowed women."

Jo, a member of Sidmouth Running Club, put the idea to Pauline and Peg, who together founded the Women's Running Network. What started as a conversation in May is now a reality.

The event is also raising awareness that there is still some distance to go when it comes to women's endurance running. Pauline, who is the Women Can race director, said: "I see Women Can as part celebration and part reflection because, for a whole number of reasons, many of them cultural, we still have a situation globally where not all women CAN run marathons. So we're highlighting that, too.

"One of the things that marathon running gives you is self-confidence and it helps people to tackle issues in their lives. I've seen this happen with a lot of women I've coached. It comes back again to this recognition of 'do you know what? I can!' Running can be that powerful and it's why there are still so many campaigns in the world to enable women to be able to run marathons."

Peg, planning assistant for Women Can, said that for her, taking up marathon running changed her life: "I only started running when I was 30. I hated running when I was at school - I think most girls do! That was in January 1983; in July 1983 I ran my first half marathon and three months after that I ran my first marathon. I thought: 'I've just discovered who I am'.

"I've stood on the starting line beside Olympic and World Champions Rosa Mota and Grete Waitz; in which other discipline can you do that? The concept behind the Women Can marathon is very close to my heart, as someone who has gone from believing endurance running was something that was beyond me to where I am today. And I think that's a story that a lot of women tell, the journey from no self-belief to self-confidence through running."

Women Can will be announcing an official charity partner soon and the team is also looking for volunteers and sponsors. Entry is £35 per person and entries go live from 28 July 2016.

[www.womencan.co.uk](http://www.womencan.co.uk)



Pauline, Peg and Jo at Tipton St John.