

How a great marathoner — Joan Benoit Samuelson — keeps going at age 60

By **Marlene Cimon** December 16

In the summer of 1984, American Joan Benoit Samuelson, at age 27, won a gold medal in the inaugural women's Olympic marathon, running a time of 2 hours 24 minutes 52 seconds. A year earlier, in 1983, she ran a women's world record in the Boston Marathon, finishing in 2:22:43, regarded at the time as an astonishing performance. It was a mark that stood for 11 years.

Known as a gutsy competitor, she ran the 1984 Olympic marathon trials race just 17 days after undergoing arthroscopic knee surgery and is proud that she has never dropped out of any race, including a marathon.

Samuelson has set numerous records during a long running career, and she continues to do so at the masters (older-than-40) level. Her next goal: to run a marathon in less than three hours after she turns 60 in May. She recently spoke to The Washington Post about continuing to run, and stay fit, as you age.

How do you stay competitive and inspired after all these years?

Balance is critically important. Balance in life, balance in diet, balance in everything. I always think of the mind/body/spirit triad and try to make sure those components of my life are all in balance. It's easy to go overboard in any one area.

Has your training changed as you have gotten older?

I used to run a lot of double workouts — morning and evening — but now I only do single workouts, except on rare occasions. In the winter, I'll go for a run every day, but I also cross-country ski to maintain my upper body strength rather than lift weights. Cross-country skiing also strengthens my legs and gets my heart rate up.

In recent years, I've been running about half to two-thirds of the mileage I ran when I was on top of my game, although I still go for a long run once a week of 13 to 15 miles when I'm not training for a specific marathon.

Trying to maintain a certain amount of speed in my training is what I find the most challenging, so I play games on the road — for example, racing cars from behind and ahead of me to specific landmarks such as utility poles, fire hydrants, trees, etc.

I also do a lot of gardening, kayaking and downhill skiing so that I am constantly using my upper body — much more so than when I was younger. I also do yoga, and I swim in the ocean after my runs. It's all part of keeping a balance in my life.

Do you find yourself more vulnerable to injury now?

I don't recover as quickly as I used to from harder workouts. I think it's easier for me to overtrain now compared to when I was younger. I've gone over the edge a couple of times when I have pushed myself and gotten injured, or become overly fatigued.

What gets you out the door and on the roads every day?

I love being outdoors. That's why I've always trained well — and with focus — in Maine, where I live. I'm most comfortable here. I'm close to nature and the things I love. I motivate myself using what I like to call storytelling. I try to come up with a story, usually a goal that motivates me to go out — for example, running sub-2:50 marathons at the age of 50 and beyond, or trying to run within 30 minutes of my Olympic time 30 years later.

In 2013, I ran Boston. I was trying to run within 30 minutes of my time 30 years earlier, which I did, running 2:50:29. Then in 2014, I ran it with our two children. I never thought that I would be running marathons when our children became of age to run marathons, nor did I think they would want to run marathons. I came in at 2:52:10. Anders [her son] ran 2:50:01 and beat me. Then I waited for Abby [her daughter], who came in 3:15:49. All of that was about the storytelling, the narratives I make up that keep me going.

What's the next story that you're telling yourself?

Running a sub-3-hour marathon after my 60th birthday.

Are you okay with running the times you are running now? How does it feel when you think about your earlier performances?

It's mind-boggling when I think about what I used to do. So instead, I look forward. It's one race at a time. If it comes, it comes. If it doesn't, at least I've tried. If I am fortunate enough to break three hours at 60, I will definitely back away from competitive marathons. I may run them with other people, or for other reasons, but not for time. I've never run a marathon in the state of Maine, and my career won't stop until I do.

How many marathons have you run?

I have no idea! I lost count after becoming a mother. Probably close to 50.

Do you see the day when you will stop running?

I'm not going to become a hobbled runner out there still trying to run marathons. When I stop running marathons, I hope to run shorter distances.

Today, my running is all about passion and balance and storytelling. Those drive my love for the sport and my desire to keep going. Once something becomes such a part of you, as running has for me, it's there for life.

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